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Brief Analysis Powered by The GTTAC Database

GTTAC Snapshot



About GTTAC

The Global Terrorism Trends and Analysis Center (GTTAC) was created by Development Services Group, Inc., and our partner TraCCC of George Mason University to support our work for the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Counterterrorism (No. GS10F-0166K. 19AQMM18F2561). The GTTAC Record of Incidents Database (GRID) collects and classifies opensource data on terrorism incidents globally and is used to support the development of the Annex of Statistical Information for the Country Reports on Terrorism. Data used in this report are from the GRID. Views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the United States government.

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The Growing Threat of UAVs: A Global Analysis

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), commonly known as drones, increasingly are being employed for both military and civilian purposes. However, their dual-use nature also renders them susceptible to exploitation for malicious intents by terrorist organizations and nonstate militant groups.

Commercial UAVs can be weaponized for destructive purposes, disrupting air traffic and public events, facilitating smuggling across borders and into prisons, and enabling surveillance for malign purposes. Nonstate violent groups have exploited these technologies, utilizing civilian drones for attacks on critical infrastructure and individuals. On October 7, 2023, Hamas used weaponized commercial drones to attack Israeli observation towers and weapons systems.

The GRID database reveals a concerning trend of increasing UAV-related attacks between 2018 and December 2023. The data highlight that: highlight that:

- UAV attacks were concentrated in the Middle East region (see Figure 1).
- Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Syria have received the highest number of UAV attacks, primarily carried out by weaponized commercial drones (see Figure 1).
- There were 354 incidents in which perpetrators weaponized commercial drones to attack their targets. Military drones were involved in only 5 incidents, while the type of drone used remained unidentified in 105 incidents. As a result of these 464 incidents throughout the last five years, about 600 people were killed.
- Houthi extremists, Hay-at Tahrir al-Sham, and the Islamic Resistance in Iraq are among the top perpetrator groups who have used drones most frequently (see Figure 2).
- Before the October 7 attacks, Israel had been targeted with UAVs 14 times (see Figure 1).
- UAV use for terrorist attacks peaked in early 2023, with the highest number of fatalities exceeding 150 in a single month (March 2023).
- The groups that were able to access and use military drones include Houthi extremists, al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, the Karen National Liberation Army, and the Kyaikhto Revolution Forces in Burma (see Figure 2).

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Figure 1



While military UAVs have demonstrated a higher fatality rate per incident, commercial drones have been the most commonly used type of UAV for malicious purposes because of their accessibility and affordability. To mitigate the threat posed by UAVs, stricter regulations are needed. These regulations should include mandatory drone registration, operator licensing, and remote identification and tracking technologies.

Houthi extremists (Ansar Allah)	Commercial UAV			240
	Military UAV	1		
	Unclear/Unknown UAV	24		
Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham	Commercial UAV	6		
	Unclear/Unknown UAV	19		
The Islamic Resistance in Iraq	Unclear/Unknown UAV	25		
Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)	Commercial UAV	10		
	Military UAV	1		
Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)	Commercial UAV	3		
	Unclear/Unknown UAV	5		
Hamas	Commercial UAV	3		
	Unclear/Unknown UAV	4		
al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)	Commercial UAV	3		
	Military UAV	1		
Unicorn Guerilla Force	Commercial UAV	3		
Al-Fath al-Mubin Brigade	Unclear/Unknown UAV	1		
All Burma Student's Democratic Front	Commercial UAV	1		
Kachin Independence Army (KIA)	Commercial UAV	1		

Figure 2