



September 2019

COUNTING DOWN TO A REGIONAL WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST? THE ARAMCO ATTACK COULD TRIGGER AN ESCALATION

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What Happened?

➤ On September 14, 2019, Abqaiq and Khurais oil processing plants run by the Saudi state-owned energy company Aramco were hit by yet to be confirmed projectiles.

➤ Although initial news stories pointed at a complex drone attack by the Yemeni Houthi armed groups, there are contradicting statements at present with respect to the means and the origin of the strike:

- The U.S. and Saudi sources pointed out Iran as the primary perpetrator. The U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo even tweeted that there was no evidence

proving that the attack came from Yemen¹. Secretary Pompeo's comments have put Iran-backed Iraqi Shia paramilitaries under the spots².

- The Iraqi Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi immediately denied the allegations. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif also dismissed Saudi and American accusations³.
- The Houthis claimed the responsibility, declaring that they carried out the salvo with a strike package of 10 drones⁴.

Significance

Recently, the Houthi militias, Iran's Yemeni proxy, have focused their campaign on targeting critical infrastructures, such as airports, energy facilities, and pipelines. There is a broad array of offensive assets at the Houthis' disposal, ranging from ballistic and cruise missiles to armed drones⁵.

Abqaiq and Khurais are key oil facilities of Aramco, which in turn represents the heart of the Saudi economy. Riyadh already declared significant cuts in its oil output⁶. This decision, and thus the attack, will inevitably bring about dire consequences for energy markets and global economy. Besides, the risk of a regional war remains at an intolerable level in the Middle East.

¹ 14 September, 2019, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Twitter, accessed on 15 September 2019, <https://twitter.com/SecPompeo/status/1172963090746548225>

² Isabel Coles and Dion Nissenbaum, 28 June 2019, U.S.: Saudi Pipeline Attacks Originated From Iraq, Wall Street Journal, accessed on 15 September 2019 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-saudi-pipeline-attacks-originated-from-iraq-11561741133>

³ The Latest: Trump disputes ground rules of meeting with Iran, Associated Press, accessed on 16 September 2019, https://apnews.com/39236494acde42bf9fb62730891ffe5?utm_medium=AP&utm_campaign=SocialFlow&utm_source=Twitter

⁴ 14 September 2019, Second Deterrent Balance Operation Hits Abqaiq, Khurais Oil Refineries East of Saudi Arabia, Al-Masirah English, accessed on 15 September 2019, https://english.almasirah.net/details.php?es_id=8774&cat_id=1

⁵ 14 September 2019, Timeline: Houthis' drone and missile attacks on Saudi targets, Al-Jazeera, accessed on 15 September 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/timeline-houthis-drone-missile-attacks-saudi-targets-190914102845479.html>

⁶ 14 September 2019, Saudi Arabia oil and gas production reduced by drone strikes, BBC, accessed on 15 September 2019 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-49703143>

Geopolitical Intelligence Assessment

In case the attacks were launched from Yemen, it would mean that the Houthis are now capable of striking key Saudi infrastructures from more than a thousand mile away with high precision. The same conclusion would also be relevant in the Iraq-originated attacks scenario with respect to the Iran-controlled Iraqi Shiite militias' warfighting capacity. Besides, the Iraqi scenario would mark a whole new front through which Tehran could challenge and bleed the Saudis. The third scenario, namely a missile or loitering munitions salvo emanating directly from Iranian territory, would clearly signal an act of war.

Sectarianism, hybrid warfare, proxies, an energy bonanza, nuclear issues, and a regional arms race have altogether brought the Middle East on the brink of a dangerous escalation. Notably, despite the recent 'divorce' between President Trump and his hawkish security adviser John

Bolton, the prospects of an American military intervention against Iran is still loudly expressed by influential figures in Washington. Reacting to the attack, for example, Senator Lindsay Graham stated the U.S. should put on the table an attack on Iranian oil refineries in case Tehran opts for recklessly continuing its provocations and pursuing further nuclear enrichment⁷.

On the one hand, a military response might trigger a regional war. On the other hand, the Iranian elites can well consider any sober reaction to be a sign of weakness. All in all, there is no good option in the Middle East, and the September 14 attack has probably marked a flashpoint with no backtrack. The world will either witness a US / Saudi response with uncontrollable consequences, or a bolder Iran finding larger room to promote its regional aspirations through systematic acts of aggression, knowing that it can get away with that.

Military Assessment

➤ Regardless of how, by whom, and from where the oil facilities were targeted, the attacks showed that the Iranian proxies surrounding the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have registered significant improvements in their concepts of operations (CONOPS), strategic planning, geopolitical intelligence, and defense technological know-how, none of which could be achieved without the diligent support of the Iranian Quds' Forces.

➤ From a military standpoint, such a strike could be executed by cruise missiles and/or loitering munitions (popularly known as 'kamikaze drones'). The range parameters (assuming launch positions either in Yemen or Iraq) and the known inventories obtained by the Iranian proxies tilt the scales towards ground-launched cruise missiles.

➤ The Quds Cruise Missile remains one of the plausible

suspects for the attack. Displayed by the Houthis in July 2019⁸, the missile was reported to be the weapon of choice in the June 2019 Abha Airport attack in Saudi Arabia⁹. Alternatively, a yet unrevealed variant of the Iranian Soumar (based on the Soviet – Russian Kh-55 obtained from Ukraine) with more than 2,000km operational range¹⁰ could be the culprit.



The Quds Cruise Missile¹¹

⁷ 14 September 2019, Senator Lindsey Graham on Twitter, accessed on 15 September 2019, <https://twitter.com/LindseyGrahamSC/status/1172913309697433601>

⁸ Jeremy Binnie. "Yemeni Rebels Unveil Cruise Missile, Long-Range UAVs", Jane's Defence Weekly, July 08, 2019.

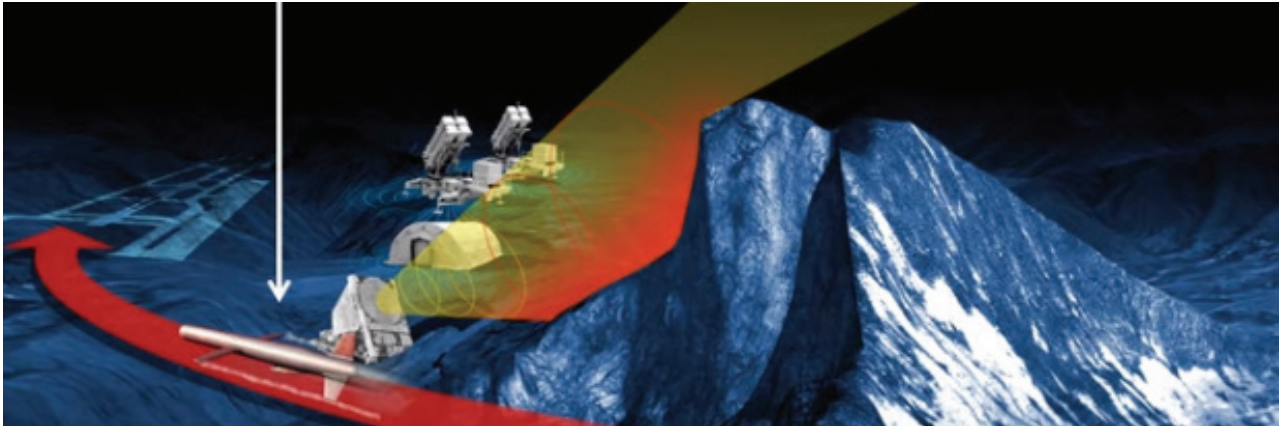
⁹ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/suspicions-rise-that-saudi-oil-attack-came-from-outside-yemen-11568498542>, Accessed on: September 17, 2019.

¹⁰ Missile Threat, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/soumar/>, Accessed on: September 17, 2019.

¹¹ Jeremy Binnie. "Yemeni Rebels Unveil Cruise Missile, Long-Range UAVs", Jane's Defence Weekly, July 08, 2019.

➤ Cruise missile defense is technically very complicated, especially if the offensive missiles are launched in salvos. Above all, a network of sensors remains a must to detect low-flying, low-observable missiles, probably homing from different azimuths. The quality of intelligence cueing

and sensor-to-shooter coordination are other important parameters. Besides, one should not underestimate the limited radar horizon of ground-based radars and problematic terrain features enabling the low-flying missile to penetrate the protected airspace¹².



Northrop Grumman's Illustration of a cruise missile going undetected when flying-low through the terrain features¹³.

➤ The Houthis also have loitering munitions. The most known of these kamikaze assets is the Qasef line, derivatives of the Iranian Ababil family. Yet, this line's range is around some 150 kilometers which rules out the Qasef-1 option¹⁴. However, with some modifications (like drop tanks), the

Sammad-3 UAV can be turned into a loitering munition carrying some 20kg warhead up to 1,500km¹⁵ (although geospatial battle damage assessment is needed to conclude if such a warhead could inflict the reported damage).



The Sammad-3 UAV¹⁶

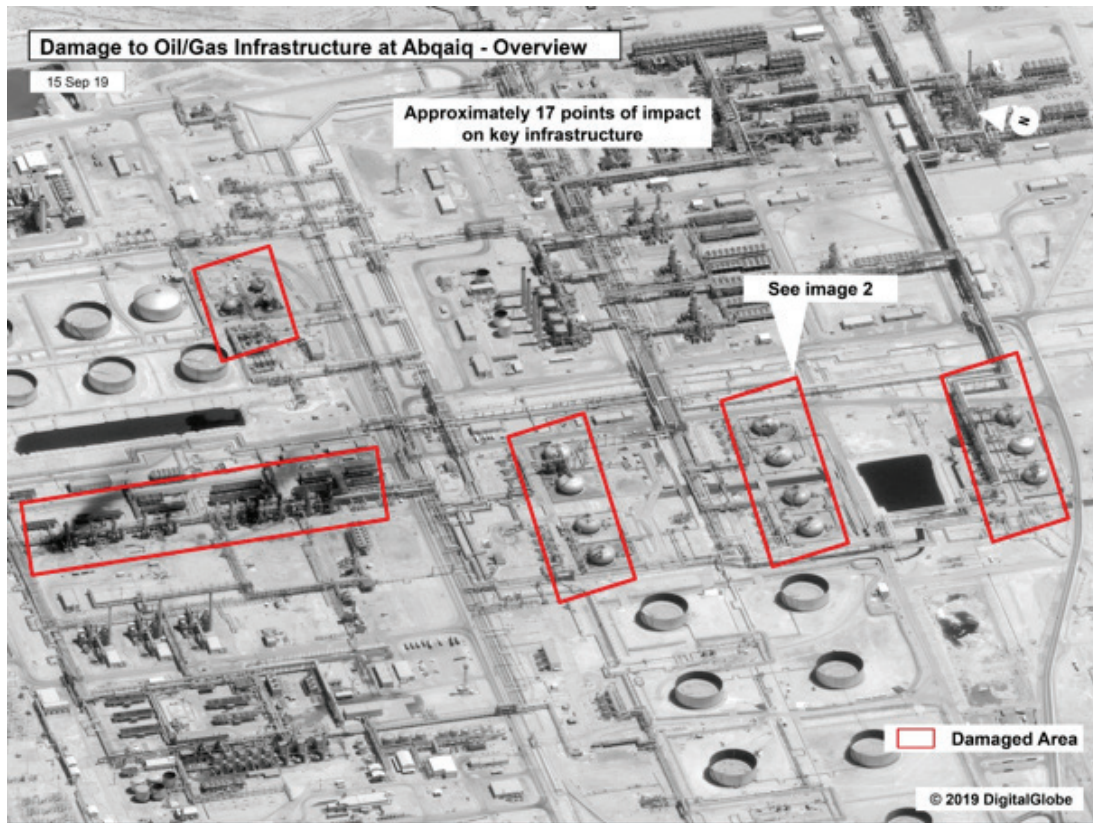
¹² Dave Majumdar. "Why It might be Impossible to Stop a Cruise Missile Attack (For Now)", The National Interest, May 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/why-it-might-be-impossible-stop-cruise-missile-attack-now-25651>, Accessed on: September 17, 2019.

¹³ Northrop Grumman, <https://www.northropgrumman.com/Capabilities/MissileDefense/Pages/default.aspx>, Accessed on: September 17, 2019.

¹⁴ Jeremy Binnie. "Yemeni Rebels Display UAVs", Jane's Defence Weekly, March 02, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170302184730/http://www.janes.com/article/68423/yemeni-rebels-display-uavs>, Accessed on: September 17, 2019.

¹⁵ Jeremy Binnie. "Yemeni Rebels Unveil Cruise Missile, Long-Range UAVs", Jane's Defence Weekly, July 08, 2019.

¹⁶ Jeremy Binnie. "Yemeni Rebels Unveil Cruise Missile, Long-Range UAVs", Jane's Defence Weekly, July 08, 2019.



The initial geospatial battle damage intelligence from the Aramco site in Saudi Arabia¹⁷

The recent missile and drone strikes record suggests that the Houthis have boosted their operational tempo¹⁸. More importantly, critical national infrastructures (airports, energy infrastructure) are looming large as an integral part of the target set¹⁹. Some sources suggest that one of the previous drone attacks on Saudi Arabia's pipelines (May 14, 2019)

originated from Iraq, not Yemen²⁰. These grave developments remain dangerous signs of a spiraling escalation that could easily ignite a regional war, or an equally unpleasant outcome, an encouraged Iran knowing that it could get away with all-out proxy war.

¹⁷ The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/09/16/world/middleeast/trump-saudi-arabia-oil-attack.html>, Accessed on: September 17, 2019.

¹⁸ Al Jazeera, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/timeline-houthis-drone-missile-attacks-saudi-targets-190914102845479.html>, Accessed on: September 17, 2019.

¹⁹ Soufan Group, Intel Brief, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-houthis-drone-attack-targets-major-saudi-oil-facilities/>, Accessed on: September 17, 2019.

²⁰ Al Jazeera, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/drone-attacks-saudi-aramco-blow-iran-tensions-190916051658838.html>, Accessed on: September 17, 2019.



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