The Strategic Implications of the Strikes on Saudi Arabia

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The strikes on Saudi Arabian petroleum facilities have already shown the new level of risk that the wars in the Gulf region pose to global energy supplies and to the global economy. They have already created at least a minor crisis in world petroleum exports, and repairing Saudi facilities and resuming exports have already become key issues. The more serious challenge, however, is how do you stop future attacks of this kind, and this is both a short- and long-term strategic challenge.

The exact short-term challenge is still unclear. Saudi Arabia and Aramco have not provided any public detailed data on the level of damage the strikes inflicted, and there are good reasons not to disclose the level of accuracy in the strikes relative to key targets where damage can have a long-term effect, and further strikes can be planned in ways that greatly enhance the level of damage and extend repair times. It also makes good sense to alter undamaged Saudi oil and gas operations to minimize vulnerability to follow-on strikes — actions that can further limit production.

Saudi Arabia has stated, however, that it has suspended production of some 5.7 million barrels of crude per day, or more than half of the Kingdom’s output. This is a figure equivalent to some 6 percent of the world's normal daily oil supply. Prices have already jumped, and sooner or later the Kingdom will have to fully clarify both the scale of actual damage and how long repairs will take.

There also is a major dispute over who is responsible for these attacks. The attacks hit Saudi oil facilities in the districts of Khurais and Abqaiq — including key processing facilities. They were long-range strikes by the standards of developing countries. Khurais is the site closest to the Yemeni border and it is 770 kilometers (480 miles) from the border and more than 805 kilometers (500 miles) from a suitable the Houthi-controlled launch zones in Yemen. Abqaiq is some 200 kilometers (125 miles) further on.

The Houthi claim they were responsible and launched 10 "drones" — what the military call Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAVs) or remotely piloted vehicles (RPVs) — against the Saudi targets. This is technically credible to some degree. The Houthis are known to have acquired strike systems that have far more than the necessary range and that can fly up to 1,500 kilometers (930 miles). Presumably, these have GPS levels of accuracy and may have the capability to both fly complex flight profiles that dodge around Saudi defenses and guidance systems that can home in precisely on a given target using some form of imagery and terminal command (TERCOM) guidance.

Targeting such systems does not require satellite or complex intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (IS&R) systems of the kind Iran possesses but the Houthi do not. Flying small unarmed UAVs/RPVs can “scout” the route and such flights may not arouse much concern even if they are detected. It is virtually impossible to secure civilian facilities from a worker or
visitor's capability to use a cell phone to get precise GPS coordinates, commercial satellite coverage is now very good, and there are many ways to produce the kind of image needed for terminal guidance from ordinary photos.

No official source has yet disclosed an estimate of the level of accuracy, size and nature of the high explosive warhead, and nature of terminal guidance systems actually used in the attacks. It is clear, however, that UCAV/RPVs and cruise missiles with limited conventional warheads that are “smart” enough to hit a target with great precision can become "weapons of mass effectiveness" if they are directed against a critical infrastructure, commercial, or military point target.

There are, however, good reasons to doubt the Houthi claim, and Secretary State Pompeo and other U.S. officials have blamed Iran for the attacks. At a minimum, the Houthi have no advanced technology base. They are clearly dependent on imported missiles, RPVs, UCAVs, and cruise missiles for any attacks, and it is unclear that they have to ability to manage a complex set of near simultaneous attacks on this complex a set of targets at such long distances. Iran may not have technically executed the attacks, but it is extremely doubtful that the Houthi could have executed them without Iranian assistance.

While the full details remain unclear, the U.S. has also released satellite photos of the attacks on each site that show that at least 19 strikes were launched and 17 actually hit targets. U.S. experts have stated on background that there were more strikes than this that did not come as close to the target, and the strikes involved at least some cruise missiles as well as drones or were all cruise missiles. The U.S government has also released satellite imagery to U.S. and other networks showing that the Saudi facilities at Abqaiq alone were damaged on the west-northwest-facing sides — not the southern facades, as would be expected if the attack came from Yemen.

The CBS version of these photos is available at [https://mobile.twitter.com/saraecook/status/1173415086054084609/photo/1](https://mobile.twitter.com/saraecook/status/1173415086054084609/photo/1). The imagery does seem to have been deliberately chosen to limit any outside damage assessment, but there is nothing secret or vague about the sheer complexity of the two attacks, and U.S. charges about the direction the attacks came from seem to be clearly validated.

As might be expected, an Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman, has called the U.S. charges “pointless.” The Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, has said that, “Having failed at ‘max pressure’, Pompeo has gone to ‘max deceit.’” Al Jazeera reports that Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi has said that the US allegations over the pre-dawn attack on Abqaiq and Khurais in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province were meant to justify "actions" against Iran. "Such remarks ... are more like plotting by intelligence and secret organizations to damage the reputation of a country and create a framework for future actions."

Al Jazeera also reports that Brigadier-General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, an officer in Iran's Revolutionary Guard force, said on Sunday it was prepared for a "full-scale war". The commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' aerospace arm noted Iran's missiles could hit US bases and ships within a range of 2,000km (1,240 miles). "Because of the tension and sensitive situation, our region is like a powder keg…Neither us nor the Americans want a war.
When these contacts come too close, when forces come into contact with one another, it is possible a conflict happens because of a misunderstanding...Of course, some forces facing each other in the field could do something by which a war could start. We have always prepared ourselves for a full-fledged war.” Hajizadeh stated that said Iranian forces could counterattack if the US used force against Iran, and named the U.S. Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar and the al-Dhafra Air Base in the UAE as possible targets, along with U.S. navy ships in the Gulf and the Arabian Sea.

Iraq has separately denied that any launches came from Iranian or PMF forces from its territory. The Saudis initially did not mention Iran. Col. Turki bin Saleh al-Malki, a Saudi spokesman limited his first set of comments to saying that "investigations are ongoing to determine the parties responsible for planning and executing these terrorist attacks.” On Monday morning, however, Col. Malki stated that the attack did not come from Yemen and that, “investigations were underway to determine the launch location.” This seemed to imply that Saudi Arabia believed that Iran was the source but was not yet ready to make a formal statement.

In contrast, the Houthi kept up their threats and a Houthi spokesman named Yahya Saree stated that, “We assure the Saudi regime that our long hand can reach wherever we want, and whenever we want,” and added that drones modified with jet engines were used in the initial attacks. A different Houthi spokesman, Mohammed Albukhaiti, had already said on Saturday that, “We don’t need to provide evidence.”

Russia warned that the U.S. might be rushing to judgment and said U.S. attacks on Iran would be “unacceptable.” China warned that no one should name a country “without conclusive facts.” According to the Washington Post and Reuters, British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said, “In terms of who is responsible, the picture is not entirely clear...I want to have a very clear picture, which we will be having shortly.” German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said that Germany was working with its partners to determine who was responsible.

Like some of the recent tanker attacks, it may never be possible to prove to the world’s satisfaction exactly who was responsible for what beyond all deniability. This is a further warning about the longer-term risks involved. The Iranians can keep claiming that the Houthi did it, and even if they admit supplying the weapons and training the Houthi, they can always claim that the Houthi made the decision to attack on their own. Even implausible deniability makes such attacks a good way to strike without establishing a clear line of responsibility, and a low-cost, lower-risk way to inflict serious damage.

UCAV/RPVs and cruise missile attacks offer precision strike options with high levels of accuracy from small, easily dispersible systems that are very hard to locate and target. At least Iranian systems do have both GPS and imagery capability to home in even more precisely on a target. UCAV/RPVs and cruise missiles are also small air defense targets compared to fighters, can fly evasively, and have flight profiles that are hard to detect. Saudi fighter and SAM intercept capabilities to cover wide areas with any effectiveness are uncertain, and ballistic missile defenses can only cope with a different threat.
This is why the success of the existing strikes will – at a minimum — act as a major incentive to Iran, the Hezbollah, and other such powers to develop such forces as well as precision guided ballistic missiles and cruise missiles.

As for the immediate future, this is no reliable way to estimate the immediate threat of further strikes. Whether or not Iran did directly strike Saudi Arabia, it can certainly launch large numbers of future strikes – and add ballistic missiles to the mix. Iran is also the most likely source of any Houthi systems, and even if the attacks all came from Houthi areas in Yemen, this gives Iran considerable potential leverage while leaving the level of Houthi dependence on Iran uncertain.

As for the Houthi, they have already threatened follow-on strikes, although the size of Houthi restrike capability, reloads, targeting capability, and ability to use ballistic missiles as well as UCAV/RPVs is just as unclear as Houthi responsibility for the existing strikes. Any real-world Houthi follow-on strike capability is likely to be far more limited than Iran’s capability to launch from Iran, but some restrike capability is certainly possible, and so is Houthi pre-targeting of more Saudi targets and deployment of more launch-ready weapons.

The U.S. and Saudi Arabia both have the capability to retaliate against the Houthi and Iran, but the options are complex and uncertain. As is all too clear from the history of Saudi and UAE air strikes in Yemen, striking at key Houthi targets almost inevitably involves civilian casualties, and even if the Houthi have such missiles and they can be targeted, such strikes are unlikely to halt further Iranian support of the Houthi. At least at present, striking at Iran means escalating against a state whose involvement is uncertain and unproven and where such strikes are unlikely to get UN support.

Iran is the more challenging case. Saudi Arabia has to consider its own vulnerability in launching any form of retaliation against Iran, and the U.S. has to consider the impact of any such escalation on further cuts in Gulf petroleum exports and imports as a result of the fighting. Strikes on Iran’s air defenses missile forces – and other key military targets – might deter Iran. They might also, however, provoke new Iranian attacks on Saudi and Gulf petroleum facilities or key areas of vulnerability lie electric power and desalination plants – the source of virtually all Arab Gulf drinking water. They also can lead to a major escalation in the “tanker war,” and while the world needs Gulf petroleum exports, the Gulf needs massive imports of food and manufactured goods. It is easy to escalate. It can be far harder to stop escalating and limit the lasting effects of every new step up the escalation ladder.

Looking further into the future, the strikes on Saudi Arabia provide a clear strategic warning that the US era of air supremacy in the Gulf, and the near U.S. monopoly on precision strike capability, is rapidly fading. UCAV/RPVs, cruise missiles, and precision strike ballistic missiles are all entering Iranian inventory and have begun to spread to the Houthi and Hezbollah. Nations like North Korea are following, and other areas of military confrontation like India and Pakistan will follow. All of these systems can be used at low levels of conflict intensity and in “gray area” wars, as well as in far more intense conflicts. There also are no clear “firebreaks” to limit escalation, although most sides will want to limit the scale of escalation if they can find some way to do so on favorable terms.
Such strikes can also be linked to a wide range of other forms of unconventional attack, both on land and in the Gulf. The Iran-Iraq War and more recent attacks in the Gulf have already shown that such options include sabotage, support of proxies, small special forces attacks, cyber attacks, IEDs and bombings, anti-ship missiles, smart mines, etc. There are no rules to hybrid and gray area warfare, and for all the talk about the "laws of war," civilian targets, hostages, shields, and proxies are already part of the real-world nature of modern war.

Analysts have been warning about these shifts in the nature of war for years, but the recent strikes on Saudi Arabia have made it clear that they are now at least a limited reality. The US still has a vast superiority in precision strike and IS&R capability, but it is already confronted with the issue of how does it actually use it? Who and what in any given case will be the target? How far will the U.S. be willing to escalate? Who are America’s real and trustworthy strategic partners, and how does the U.S. best cooperate with them? How far is the U.S. willing to risk involvement in a major new war? What new forces will be needed to arm U.S. forces to deter and defend, and equip our strategic partners?

The seriousness of the questions is now all too obvious. The answers are not.

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