



PERSPECTIVES

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Iran Escalates: The Attack on the Saudi Oilfields

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The attack on the Saudi oilfields took the security establishments of both the kingdom and the US completely by surprise. The strike led to a 50% drop in Saudi oil production, which in turn prompted a surge in oil prices in the global market. The attack was a daring and aggressive leap forward on Iran's part, and it has serious regional and geopolitical implications.

The latest findings in the investigation of the September 14 attack on the Abqaiq and Khurais oilfields in eastern Saudi Arabia indicate that it was launched from Iranian territory and not by Tehran's Houthi proxies from Yemen, as was initially alleged. The attack appears to have been conducted by the Revolutionary Guards via cruise missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and was apparently launched from Ahvaz Air Base. [According to CBS News](#), the attack was approved by the Iranian Supreme Leader on condition that Iran's fingerprints be undetectable. After the strike, Tehran quickly labeled the Houthi rebels as responsible.

In the first week after the attack, Saudi oil production declined by approximately 50%, leading to a surge in oil prices in the global market. Though this effect was by no means insignificant, the event is not expected to lead to a crisis in the global energy market, as major oil producers should make up for the expected shortage. The rise in oil prices and slowdown in Saudi Arabia's oil output are secondary to the regional and geopolitical implications of the incident.

The attack should concern decision-makers in countries that are in a state of conflict with Iran, as it represents a leap in Iranian daring. Tehran's willingness to swiftly turn its aggressive statements into action could indicate a shift in strategy. Also worrying is the fact that the attack was not detected by either the US or Saudi Arabia, indicating an effective utilization of a low-altitude cruise

route that is difficult to intercept. As a senior US official said, "[The attack caught us off guard.](#)"

Iran's readiness for conflict is the culmination of the accumulated experience of its forces in the various fighting rounds in the wake of the so-called "Arab Spring." For example, the years-long fighting in Syria has led to an improvement in infantry combat and asymmetrical warfare among the Revolutionary Guards. The fighting in Yemen and the assistance to the *Ansar Allah* (Houthi) militia helped Iran improve the armament, navigation, and striking capabilities of its cruise missiles and UAVs. The launching of a large number of Iranian missiles toward targets in Saudi Arabia (as well as some toward the UAE) has led to a significant improvement in Iran's air units.

The decision to focus on developing ballistic capability resulted from Iran's experience during the Iran-Iraq War, a conflict that inflicted many casualties and much loss of property. That war also led to the development of Iranian naval doctrine, which is based on assault by numerous high-speed boats that attack their targets simultaneously with missiles and firearms. This modus operandi was recently implemented during Iran's attempts to disrupt the transit of oil tankers crossing the Hormuz Strait.

It is instructive to examine the pattern of Tehran's actions from the moment the US tightened its sanctions on the Iranian oil sector. Its first step was to threaten to close the Hormuz Strait to tanker traffic, which was defined as a counter-reaction to the sanctions. This was accompanied by the unveiling of various types of missiles and military drills, with an emphasis on the naval arm of the Revolutionary Guards. As the pressure of sanctions increased, the Guards took operational measures that included sabotaging tankers docked along the shores of the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. While these actions were conducted in a manner to obscure Iranian involvement, their goal was to signal the seriousness of Tehran's intentions and provide information on how the countries involved would counter-react.

Iran then moved on to the next stage: it attempted to take over and divert oil tankers on the pretext that they had crossed the maritime border and penetrated Iranian territory while transiting the Hormuz Strait. It then set a milestone in the growing conflict in the Persian Gulf by shooting down a US drone (a Triton MQ-4C) in June 2019.

President Trump's decision to cancel a US military response, mere hours after declaring that "Iran made a big mistake," was greeted in Tehran with a sigh of relief, but was likely also interpreted as a signal that the US does not want a military confrontation with Iran. This meant its aggressive course of operations could continue.

In parallel with the above, Tehran has continued to promote offensive measures in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, with the aim of expanding its “axis of resistance.” Iraq has become an Iranian base for the storage of accurate missiles, and Shiite militias (incorporated under *al-Hashd al-Sha’bi*) continue to follow Tehran’s orders despite the decree instructing them to integrate into the Iraqi army. Syrian territory continues to be used by the Quds Force to threaten Israel’s border, despite the losses the Force has suffered. Hezbollah, which gained considerable fighting experience in Syria, remains a successful proxy model for Iran. And as stated, *Ansar Allah’s* attacks on Saudi targets are an experimental field on which Iran is improving its air and ballistic capabilities.

In view of all this, it is hardly to be wondered at that Iran has chosen to be more bold.

Tehran’s decision to significantly disrupt Saudi Arabia's oil output was meant to send several messages. The first, of course, was to the kingdom, its biggest rival in the Arab sphere: that it should acknowledge Iran’s military supremacy and deterrence capability. Another was to the global oil market: that it should understand that Tehran will shock it as long as the Iranian oil sector is subject to sanctions. The final message was to the US: that Iran will test its willingness to use military force to protect its allies. As in the past, this message was accompanied by threats from senior officials, with Commander of the Revolutionary Guards Hussein Salami warning that any country that dares to attack Iran [will turn into a battlefield](#).

Iran is a rational player. It plans and responds to events according to particular worldviews that are interwoven with its historical narrative. History has left deep marks on the thinking of Iran’s decision-makers, particularly the Supreme Leader and senior commanders of the Revolutionary Guards. Tehran has drawn conclusions from crises like the Iran-Iraq War and subsequent state reconstruction, the fight against opposition groups, the First Gulf War (1991), and the invasion of Afghanistan, all of which undermined its security somewhat.

Iran is able to seize opportunities, such as the collapse of Iraq after the invasion of coalition forces in March 2003 and the rise of ISIS. As global attention shifted to the fight against the Islamic State, Iran was left essentially free to promote its “axis of resistance” and establish a supranational militia army under the leadership of the Quds Force commander.

Iran’s modus operandi involves constantly testing its rivals’ professionalism and willingness to respond. What is perceived by the West as prudent restraint is perceived by Tehran as weakness. Commanders of the Revolutionary Guards are thus likely to recommend that the Supreme Leader continue the offensive line with even more daring and a higher level of accuracy.

Iran showed creativity in its attack on the Saudi oilfields. What will be the next escalation? And to what extent is Iranian escalation the consequence of a lack of a proper response?

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