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## The Tactics and Strategic Consequences of the Attack on Oil Installations in Saudi Arabia

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*Cruise missile and drone attacks on Saudi oil installations suggest that Iran is implementing new tactics and a riskier strategy toward the U.S. and its regional allies. [The attacks are the latest escalation of tensions by Iran, which are aims to show the failure of U.S. “maximum pressure” policy.](#) The strikes revealed gaps in Gulf Arab countries’ defence systems and highlighted the vulnerability of oil exporters to different forms of attack. The Aramco attacks should be viewed in the context of Iran gradually over-stepping limits on its nuclear programme. The whole European Union (not just France, Germany and the UK) should take a tougher stance on consequences for Iran should it continue to escalate the situation.*

On 14 September, more than 20 drones and cruise missiles damaged Aramco’s facilities in Abaqiq and Khurais. The strikes cut off half of Saudi Arabia’s oil production, resulting in a short-term 20% spike in prices. The Yemeni Shia (Houthi clan) militia took responsibility, justifying it by Arab countries’ intervention in Yemen. Iran has publicly dissociated itself from involvement in the attacks, but at the same time supported Houthi’s version and repeated its threats to U.S. forces in the Gulf. The Saudis argued that the attack originated in the north (not from Yemen), probably via Iraqi or Kuwaiti air space. France, Germany and the UK view Iran as the only possible source of the attacks.

**Gaps in Saudi Defences.** The coordinated air strikes exposed the limitations of the Saudi air and missile defence architecture, built over three decades for large-scale conflict and protection from ballistic missiles. Despite the large territory it was designed to defend, the system proved itself during missile attacks launched from Iraq in 2003 and from Yemen since 2015. However, intensified strikes by Houthis forced the Saudis to reconfigure their defence system and to adapt to parallel threats from the north and south. The system is based on 108 long-range air and missile defence PAC-2/3 units, which have so far intercepted more than 100 ballistic missiles from Yemen. Only a few missiles launched at Saudi Arabia hit cities, airfields or military bases.

The effectiveness of the Saudi system prompted Houthis and their Iranian sponsor to change their weapons and tactics to take advantage of the vulnerabilities and weaknesses of Saudi Arabia’s early warning systems and the low readiness of air defence crews. The success of the September 14 strikes resulted from the 120° angle limit of Saudi AN/MPQ-53/65 radars, and lack of data from five AWACS E-3 aircraft, which should be able to track objects at low altitude. Saudi air defences were also unable to intercept low-flying missiles and drones en route and in the vicinity of both Aramco installations. Such capabilities should be guaranteed by the medium-range I-Hawks (108 units), short-range Crotales and Shanines (181 units) and point-defence with Avengers and Mistrals (around 400 units), which could not be launched without warning. All these limitations became apparent during earlier, single-drone attacks from Yemen on the main east-west oil pipeline, and during strikes from Iraqi territory by non-state actors on Aramco’s oil pump stations in March and May. It is also likely that there was a failure to exchange information between six Arab members of the

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which in 2016 initiated situational awareness in the air and missile defence area.

**The Strategic Context.** The 14 September attacks further escalated tensions between Iran and the United States. It is possible that Iran intended to demonstrate the failure of U.S. “maximum pressure” policy in its regional and nuclear dimensions, and to show the limitations of U.S. security guarantees for the GCC. Iran has demonstrated the ease with which it can block oil exports in all directions, through the earlier Houthi attack on the main Saudi oil pipeline, incidents during which tankers in the Strait of Hormuz have been attacked or detained (May to July), and the latest attack on Aramco. These actions harm the economic interests of oil producers in the Gulf, as well as those of its main importers (80% of Saudi oil exports go to Asian countries). Traditionally, the U.S. has been recognised as a protector of uninterrupted oil exports from the Gulf. However, this region accounts for only 16% of total current U.S. oil imports. The U.S. announced the activation of its strategic oil reserves immediately after the Aramco strikes, but President Donald Trump also emphasised the country’s independence from Gulf oil. This kind of response, together with Trump’s earlier public reluctance about war in the Middle East and problems in building an international coalition to protect tankers transiting the Gulf may reassure Iran that escalation of tensions is the right policy, at least in the short-term.

Iran’s actions are also calculated to test the durability of U.S. alliances with Gulf Arab monarchies. There are several bilateral agreements, generally political, which allowed the U.S. to protect these monarchies from Saddam’s Hussein’s Iraq, revolutionary Iran, and the Islamic State. The U.S. also maintains a military presence in most Gulf states. Countries of the GCC also form an attractive market for U.S. arms exports. In 2018 alone, Saudi Arabia allocated nearly \$83 billion for security and defence (11% of its GDP), and during Trump’s 2017 visit to Riyadh, Saudis announced the purchase of \$110 billion worth of U.S. military equipment within a decade. However, the alliance with Saudi Arabia is being questioned in the United States. This is due to the Saudi role in the Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks in 2001, criticism of human rights violations by the House of Saud, and concern about the scale of civilian casualties in the Yemen war. Moreover, U.S. ties with the Gulf Arab states lack binding security guarantees and do not ensure an automatic response by the U.S. military in the event of conflict. In addition, several U.S. administrations have failed to neutralise divisions between the GCC states, particularly in respect of rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Despite the threat that Iran poses to the region, U.S. diplomats also failed in attempts this spring to establish a Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), which was foreseen to include Jordan and Egypt alongside GCC members. Taking advantage of these problems, Iranian President Hasan Rowhani recently proposed an even more unrealistic idea of a “Coalition of Hope”, which would include Iran, Iraq and GCC members and exclude any external military presence.

The 14 September attacks on Saudi Arabia could also serve Iran as a test of transatlantic ties. More than year after Trump’s termination of the nuclear deal (JCPOA) with Iran, most EU countries are concerned about prospects of another war in the Middle East. Although the leading EU Member States rejected Iran’s ultimatum on moving away from quantitative and qualitative limits on uranium enrichment, many are reluctant to give active support to Trump’s policy. Apart from the UK and France, many Member States also have reservations about close relations with Saudi Arabia. These divisions are well known to Iran, and have helped the country to avoid any changes in the JCPOA.

**Conclusion.** The 14 September attacks on Saudi Arabia marked a serious escalation of Iran’s activities in the region, especially in the context of subsequent violations of the JCPOA restrictions and some unattractive diplomatic offers for the region. Iran is also testing U.S. military ties with the GCC Arab states, counting on isolating Trump by making it impossible for him to gain European support. The initial U.S. response to the attacks were limited to assisting Saudi Arabia’s air and missile defences, but may include tolerance for intensified actions by Saudi Arabia and Israel against pro-Iranian forces in the Middle East. The U.S. may also decide to disclose its intelligence and telemetry data to confirm Iran’s role in the attacks, which would then require verification by independent EU or UN experts.

It seems necessary for the EU to adopt a policy on Iran immediately, and to strengthen its joint position on the nuclear issue by warning Iran that further attempts to violate nuclear limits may result in the end of European efforts to ensure economic compensation for the U.S. departure from the JCPOA. Following statements by France, Germany and the UK, the EU should make it clear to Iran that it will not tolerate further escalation, nor remain neutral to the security of Gulf oil and gas exporters. At the same time, it cannot be ruled out that Iran will also take steps against smaller and vulnerable states of the Gulf, such as the United Arab Emirates (with its regional air-hub and tourist centres) and Bahrain (with its Shia majority and U.S. Fifth Fleet base).

The air strikes on Aramco also reveal the needs of countries that are targets of a potential coordinated air and missile attack by China, Russia and North Korea. In this context, the attacks will also have an impact on NATO’s work on integrated air and missile defence systems for low-altitude use, as well as on the EU’s projects (the PESCO mechanism) in the area of countering drones.