

What is Iran's thinking behind the attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure?

Daniel Moshashai | MENA Analyst | d.moshashai@castlereagh.net

No matter the degree of Tehran's involvement in the Saudi Aramco drone strikes, the endgame of attacks on regional oil infrastructure is to push Washington to a volte-face on its "maximum pressure" policy by reformulating the cost-benefit calculus behind any eventual war against Iran. To this end, the IRGC has been given increased room to showcase the effectiveness of regional security infrastructure built over decades and the sophistication of domestic armament.

The geopolitical implications of the Abqaiq and Khurais attacks will be much more long-lasting than their impact on energy markets and even Saudi oil infrastructure. The kingdom will need to come to grips with the new geopolitical reality of unresponsive coalitions, and gradually phase out its containment strategy against Iran without losing too much face.

What is the message behind recent attacks?

Wherever the strikes against Saudi Arabia's major infrastructure originated, the scale and increasing regularity of attacks reflects Tehran's growing reliance on hard power in the face of external pressure, and has specific political significance to regional and international actors alike.

The primary message is directed towards the US, and highlights the oft-declared claim by Iranian officials that they have reshuffled the geopolitical cards in the Middle East by interweaving multiple conflicts. In the words of IRGC Aerospace Commander, Amir Ali Hajizadeh: "The days of hit-and-run strikes are over for the enemy [...] now if the enemy hits us in Syria, we will make sure that our allies retaliate against them elsewhere, such as Yemen." Since the attacks occurred, Iranian officials have redoubled this rhetoric, claiming any limited strike against their country would automatically lead to a regional war no country is prepared for.^[1] In this context, the latest regional incidents are indicative of Iran's version of preventive warfare and are a way to assert its reinforced position in the region.

The second recipient is Saudi Arabia. The message is not contained in the prodigious costs imposed by the attacks but rather in their aftermath. By highlighting the weakness of Saudi Arabian air defences and, above all, the unreliability of US support, Tehran hopes to push Saudi decision makers to review their current regional alignments and mellow their stance towards the Islamic Republic. It is essential to grasp that the kingdom is not perceived by Tehran to be an adversary; the Islamic Republic's leadership holds the ruling Al Saud family in disdain, and views Saudi Arabia as the "sick man of the Middle East," weak and unable to defend itself, and a losing client-state of the US.^[2] The take-home message for Riyadh is that pushing for containment of Iran without engagement will only raise political costs for the kingdom.

[1] A recent interview with former Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs and current Special Aide for International Affairs to the President of Parliament, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, is highly informative regarding Tehran's justification of its regional presence. The former diplomat draws striking parallels between the post-9/11 US response and Iran's foreign policy: both countries have sought to defend themselves by pushing conflict outside their borders, which is the landmark of preventive warfare.

[2] In the same interview, Abdollahian claimed that the Saudis were not those pulling the strings in the Yemeni conflict and that their state-of-the-art fighter jets would be unable to hit any target without US reconnaissance drones, whose procurement is unavailable to Saudis. The "sick man of the Middle East" injunction was uttered by Behzad Saberi, advisor to foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.