

Oiling for War: The Houthi Attack on The world's Largest Oil Processing Facility at Abqaiq in Saudi Arabia

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[Agenda](#)

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The [attack](#) on the world's largest oil processing facility at Abqaiq in Saudi Arabia southwest of Aramco's headquarters in Dhahran had a few predictable responses. Given that the facility has a daily output of some 5.7 million barrels, damaging it was bound to cause a spike in the price of oil.

The question troubling the security chatterers was whether the party claiming responsibility – in this case, the Yemen-based Houthi rebels – had managed to engineer the feat. Drones, it is claimed, were used, striking at some 17 points. But such copyright is being denied to the rebels. For one, Riyadh is considering the possibility that the attack might have come from Iraqi soil, involving another group armed with cruise missiles. The direction of the attack, [it is claimed](#) by US sources, was from the north or northwest, suggesting the direction of the Persian Gulf, Iran or Iraq.

The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has decided to pour cold water on any suggestion that the Houthis were competently responsible. Having displaced John Bolton as hawk-in-chief, he is preparing the ground for possible retaliation. In [his view](#), there is only one state responsible for the attacks.

“We call on all nations to publicly and unequivocally condemn Iran’s attacks. The United States will work with our partners and allies to ensure that energy markets remain well supplied and Iran is held accountable for its aggression.”

In [another tweet](#) posted on Saturday, the convinced Pompeo accused Iran of being behind some 100 attacks on Saudi Arabia “while [Hassan] Rouhani and [Iranian Foreign Minister Javad] Zarif pretend to engage in diplomacy.” He ruled out Yemen as a base for the assault. Iran had “launched an unprecedented attack on the world’s energy supply.”

Tehran is behind nearly 100 attacks on Saudi Arabia while Rouhani and Zarif pretend to engage in diplomacy. Amid all the calls for de-escalation, Iran has now launched an unprecedented attack on the world’s energy supply. There is no evidence the attacks came from Yemen.

— Secretary Pompeo (@SecPompeo) [September 14, 2019](#)

President Donald Trump, for his part, is [venting and waiting](#).

“There is reason to believe that we know the culprit, are locked and loaded depending on verification, but are waiting to hear from the Kingdom as to who they believe was the cause of this attack, and under what terms we should proceed!”

The more immediate concerns for the president [are economic](#): releasing oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve and expediting “approvals of the oil pipelines currently in the permitting process in Texas and various States.” Many thanks to be had, it seems, for such strikes.

The machinery behind a military strike on Iran is being put in motion, one that was already being readied with claims of Iranian attacks on maritime shipping in the Persian Gulf and the shooting down of a US drone. (The latter led to a flirtation with the use of force by Trump.) Generally speaking, the legal basis of any such attack is questionable, despite Pompeo’s airy [contention](#) that,

“We have always had the authorisation to defend American interests”.

Trump, however, [has been briefed](#) by a few warring enthusiasts in Congress suggesting that any assault on Iran can be brought within the purview of the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF).

Republican Senator Lindsey Graham is not troubled by legal niceties, happy to entertain the prospect of a regional apocalypse in the name of punishing the mullahs. Having called the attacks “yet another example of how Iran is wreaking havoc in the Middle East” he [considered](#) it important “to put on the table an attack on Iranian oil refineries if they continue their provocations or increase nuclear enrichment.” Like a delinquent of international relations, Iran, he [tweeted](#) over the weekend, “will not stop their misbehaviour till the consequences become more real, like attacking their refineries, which will break the regime’s back.”

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— Lindsey Graham (@LindseyGrahamSC) [September 14, 2019](#)

Accepting Iranian responsibility for such attacks has been an easy matter for many on the Hill. There are those, like Democratic chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, US Representative Adam Schiff, who are already [satisfied](#) that Tehran’s less than subtle hand is heavily involved.

“I think it’s safe to say that the Houthis don’t have the capability to do a strike like this without Iranian assistance.”

Speculation and invention remain a foreign policy staple in Middle Eastern politics. The

region still labours with legacy of a US-led invasion of Iraq inspired by fictional Weapons of Mass Destruction supposedly harboured by Saddam Hussein. It involved grotesquely [extravagant assessments](#) of Iraq's destructive prowess; it involved intelligence failures, bureaucratic bungling and venal manipulation of the record in Washington, London and Canberra.

Zarif, for his part, is convinced that Pompeo, having failed in exerting maximum pressure on Iran, has now turned to a program of maximum deceit. The US and its allies, [he tweeted](#), "are stuck in Yemen because of illusion that weapon superiority will lead to military victory. Blaming Iran won't end disaster." The question, however, is bigger than Yemen, and bigger than oil. The sole question here is whether Trump takes of the root of madness held out by Graham, or holds out for a meeting with Rouhani at the UN General Assembly.

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Featured image: A fire broke out at the Saudi Aramco facility in the eastern city of Abqaiq on Saturday after a drone attack by Houthi rebels from Yemen. | Reuters

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