

Was Iran Really Behind the Attack on Saudi Aramco Facilities?

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On 14 September, state-owned Saudi Aramco's oil processing facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais in the Eastern Province were the target of a sophisticated drone and cruise missile attack. The Houthis of Yemen were quick to claim responsibility for "Operation Deterrent Balance 2", which more than halved Saudi Arabia's oil output and caused a surge in oil prices by 20 per cent at one point.

If true, this would be their most significant and daring attack in the Kingdom to date. A month ago, they carried out the first "Operation..." using 10 drones against the Shaybah oil fields in south-east Saudi Arabia near the border it shares with the UAE.

Houthi military spokesman Yahya Saree said that new drones had been used, which likely refers to the long-range Samad-3, unveiled officially on 7 July by the Supreme Political Council and named after former Council president Saleh Ali Al-Samad who was killed in a [Saudi-led coalition drone strike](#) last year. The same "suicide UAV" Samad-3 was [used by the Houthis](#) to strike Abu Dhabi's International Airport last year.

However, dismissing the Houthi claims, both the Saudis and the US are intent on laying the blame on Iran. Describing the events as an "act of war", US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has [stated explicitly](#) that Iran carried out the operation and requested all nations to "unequivocally condemn Iran's attack", thus leaving no room for an alternative narrative. US President Donald Trump, meanwhile, has been less keen to label Iran as the perpetrator.

For its part, Iran has flatly denied the allegation and reiterated Yemen's right to defend itself against foreign aggression. Moreover, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan implied that Saudi Arabia was to blame for dropping bombs on Yemen in the first place. Close US allies such as Japan and France have also confirmed that there is no actual evidence of direct Iranian involvement; even Gulf neighbour and coalition partner the UAE has not backed the allegation.

Saudi Ministry of Defence spokesman Colonel Turki Al-Malki revealed to the press on Wednesday the wreckage of drones and missiles which he said were fired from the north or north-west. He told reporters that the attacks were "unquestionably sponsored by Iran." However, when pressed by journalists, he too failed to state explicitly that the attacks emanated from Iranian territory.

One of the most far-fetched claims thus far has been from US investigators suggesting that the Saudis have recovered a "[pristine circuit board](#)" from a cruise missile retrieved from the

attack site. This is reminiscent of the claims that one of the 9/11 hijackers' passports survived the attack on the World Trade Centre.

What the Saudis did state, though, was that 18 drones were launched against the Abqaiq oil facility and seven cruise missiles targeted the Khurais oil fields, three of which fell short. Satellite images provided by the US government of the attack sites revealed at least 17 separate impact points.

However, this is not sufficient evidence that the attacks came from Iranian territory. Retired General Mark Hertling told *CNN* that the images "really don't show anything, other than pretty good accuracy on the strike of the oil tanks."

Furthermore, the evidence made public does not suggest that the attacks came from the north or north-west (which would have us believe that the source was either Iran-aligned Iraqi territory or from [south-west Iran](#), which would be north-east of the attack sites). They also do not point to the south, which would be the most likely trail leading to the Houthis in Yemen.

It appears more likely that the [targets were struck from the west](#) when one looks at the close-up images of the tanks from the Abqaiq facility against the arrow indicating due north. This may corroborate an announcement by Houthi spokesman Saree following the attack, that after careful intelligence gathering and monitoring, it was implemented with "the cooperation of honourable and free men within the Kingdom", a likely reference to the 15-20 per cent of the population who form the Saudi Shia community concentrated mainly in the oil rich but socio-economically deprived east of the country.

Dr Stephen Byren, writing in the [Asia Times](#), is of the opinion that the Houthis did not carry out the attack, but he certainly believes that,

"Saudi Arabia was infiltrated by well-trained operators who were close to the targets and were able to guide the terminal phase of the attacking cruise missiles (and maybe the drones) via video transmitted from the missiles and drones."

This theory adds credence to the idea of local involvement. Arguably, the targets were carefully selected. With regard to the Abqaiq oil processing plant, at least 11 of the 17 points of impact were tanks containing liquid gas; the piping, [it has been suggested](#), was configured such that any damage to one or a group of tanks, would not affect the overall production process, as it would simply be re-routed to the next tank. However, with all tanks in this particular area being taken out, production was interrupted.

"The targeting for this attack was done with detailed knowledge of the process and its dependencies... they may have been launched from within Saudi Arabia."

This is not to say that Iran did not have a rational motive to carry out the attack. With increased sanctions and external attempts to cripple its economy and ability to export oil, from Tehran's perspective if Iran is not able to sell oil, then no one else should be. It could also be interpreted as intended to inflict a humiliating blow on the US.

It is their advanced weaponry and defence systems that the Saudis are ultimately employing and relying upon for their state security. The Gulf, after all, is one of the most monitored areas in the world, with US-supplied radar systems and missiles facing Iran, not only in Saudi territory, but also in other Gulf neighbours and on US ships fitted with Aegis air ballistic defence systems. If true, this attack exposes the failure of the US defence systems as deployed there.

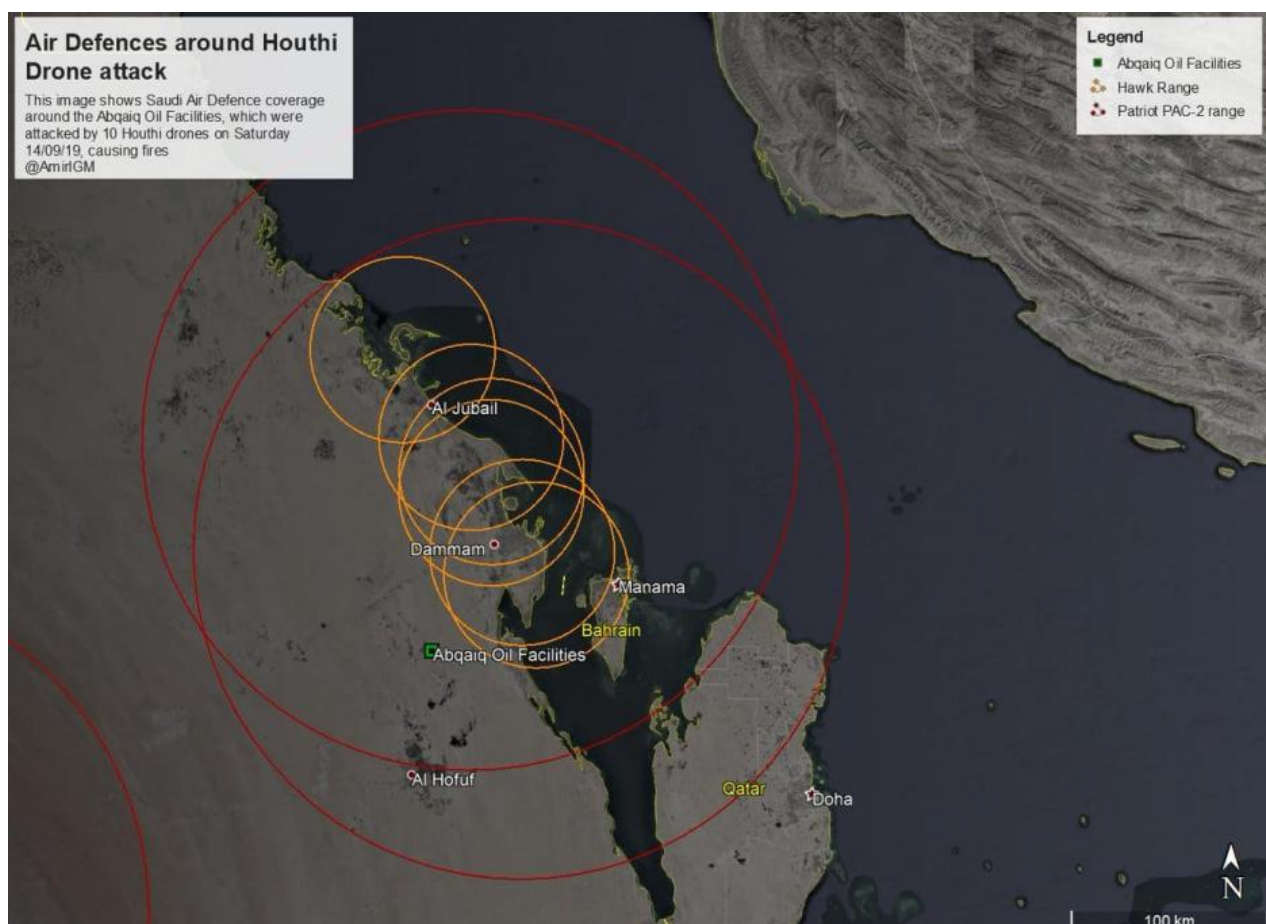
The question that must be asked is this: how were almost two dozen missiles and drones not detected, especially if they came from Iran? A former US Navy officer who has experience in the region told [Business Insider](#),

“It’s very hard to imagine a salvo of 17 shots from Iranian territory not being picked up via some land and sea radars.”

If there is concrete evidence of Iranian involvement, it should be available from US radar data gathered in the Gulf. A NATO military official posted to Saudi Arabia acknowledged that such data can be obtained easily if the US wanted it, but,

“If they haven’t released that info, it’s because either they don’t have it or the Saudis asked for a delay for domestic political reasons.”

One Twitter user on a blog about Iranian geopolitical issues [shared an image](#) which purportedly illustrates the reach of Saudi Arabia’s air defence systems near the affected areas.



He argues that the drones were within the range of the Patriot PAC-2 system but just outside that of the Hawk's; their small size was a possible reason for passing through undetected.

Although, as the [Military Times](#) points out, the multitude of US made Patriot air defences in Saudi's arsenal "are meant to shoot down hostile aircraft or shorter-range ballistic missiles. Patriots provide 'point defence' — not protection of wide swaths of territory — and it's unclear whether any were positioned close to the oil sites."

In spite of the billions which Saudi Arabia has spent on US-made defence systems, and its reliance on US intelligence, the US does not have "an unblinking eye over the entire Middle East at all times," said Marine General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The failure of US defence systems was probably why Russian President Vladimir Putin [suggested to Riyadh that it should purchase his country's S-400 defence systems](#) this week.

Whoever was behind the attack, the truth is that the balance of power has changed with the human costs in Yemen pitted against the economic and political costs of the war for the Saudis. Yemen was already the poorest country in the Arab region to begin with and has little else to lose, comparatively speaking. The realisation that there is a very serious capability to interrupt, halt or destroy Saudi Arabia's oil production may be enough for the Kingdom to rethink its actions in Yemen.

The Yemenis, of course, are within their right under international law to defend themselves against foreign aggression. In their eyes, an attack on an oil producing facility that contributes to the Saudi war machine — which has included 17,000 air raids and the dropping of 50,000 bombs, many on non-military targets — is entirely legitimate.

The fact that the drones were Iranian made or supplied should not be a reason to go to war with Iran. After all, Tehran has merely done the same as Washington by supplying arms to one of the belligerents in the conflict.

Avoiding war with Iran becomes increasingly difficult, however, when there are policymakers intent on justifying military action, especially without providing credible, concrete evidence. This won't be the first time that a war was predicated on lies, though. There are also those in the media with their delusory push for armed conflict.

Conrad Black's timely piece in the [National Review](#), for example, wherein he argues that "an air assault on Iranian oil facilities and nuclear military sites would be entirely justified", gives little thought to the consequences for the region. Such a response would surely have been undertaken already if the political will existed. Then again, according to Black, Saudi Arabia is "a much more reputable regime than the terrorism-promoting, bigoted theocracy of Iran," so we know where he is coming from.

For now, Donald Trump plans to impose further sanctions on Iran, which so far have not had any impact on Tehran's resolve and defiance. The US President has previously turned down plans to strike against the republic in the wake of the downing of a US Navy drone on 20 June, so there is hope yet that common sense can prevail and war is not inevitable.

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