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# Hybrid Tactics Come of Age: Implications of the Aramco Attack

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On September 14, 2019, Saudi Arabia's state-owned Aramco's oil facilities were hit by a swarm of 18 drones and seven cruise missiles.<sup>1</sup> Located in the eastern province in the capital city of Dammam, the Abqaiq oil facility and Khurais oil field are protected by a massive air defence system installed jointly by Saudi Arabia and the US. With a market value worth of US\$2 trillion and reserves 10 times bigger than Exxon Mobil, Aramco is crucial not only to Saudi Arabia and the region, but to the entire world!<sup>2</sup> Therefore, naturally, the attack on the sites at once shut down 5 per cent of the world's oil supply, and oil prices rose up by 20 per cent.<sup>3</sup> Even though the functioning of the sites and oil production was reportedly resumed in two weeks' time, the attack had serious implications in terms of the security apparatus as well as vulnerability.

Given the strategic significance of the Saudi facilities, for long, the sites have been identified as a top security risk globally. The risk factor in Khurais oil field was analysed and kept at top priority after a failed attempt by Al-Qaeda way back in 2006 when the terrorist organisation tried to ram two Vehicleborne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIEDs). Similarly, the Abqaiq facility is heavily guarded and is the most protected place in the world. It has been estimated that a single point of failure in

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the facility could lead to the removal of millions of barrels of oil per day from the global market.<sup>4</sup>

As stated, both the Aramco facility and the oil field are heavily guarded wherein the kingdom has installed armed guards to protect the perimeter. The US, on the other hand, has the super critical high-tech firm Raytheon-produced six battalions of Patriot Defence Systems installed at the sites. Along with this, the US maintains a large Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) station and military personnel stationed in the eastern province to protect against any external threats. Both the US and Saudi Arabia had deployed massive American hardware—satellites, Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS), Patriot missiles, surveillance drones, battleships and jet fighters—yet the jamming of the destructive drones could not be done. More so, it was not even detected! Thus, the September 14, attack on the sites despite such heavy protective measures, has exposed the vulnerability of even protected sites all over the world. More so, it brought to light how non-state actors could destroy such defensive systems by their innovative skills.<sup>5</sup>

The Houthi run *Al Masirah* news agency claimed on September 15, that it was the Zaidi Shia group Ansar Allah that had perpetrated the attack; however, there is a widespread disbelief that the Houthis could have engineered such a pin-pointed attack, with accurate precision and coordination.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the initial reaction by the Saudis and the Americans, after following the trajectories of the attacking drones and cruise missiles from the northwest, was obviously to blame Iran for the attacks. However, no solid claims could be made except that some of the drones were similar in design to Iranian drones used in earlier operations. The two countries claimed to have evidence but no conclusive proof surfaced. Moreover, Iran vehemently denied its involvement.<sup>7</sup> The Persian state further retorted that the Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards shot down the US' RQ-4A Global Hawk BAMS-D, a surveillance drone, in June, but was able to publish the pathway, which in Aramco's case, has not

been shown so far.<sup>8</sup> Hence, a standoff occurred even though President Trump's initial reaction was that his country was "locked and loaded" to punish the perpetrators depending on the verification.<sup>9</sup> Since then, there have been many international attempts back and forth for the peace talks to be initiated and some negotiations to be reached. However, there have been no major developments at that front.

Surprisingly, on November 25, Reuters released a special report titled *Time to Take Out Our Swords – Inside Iran's Plot to Attack Saudi Arabia*. The report claimed that four months before the swarm of drones and missiles crippled the Saudi Aramco facility, "Iranian security officials gathered at a heavily fortified compound in Tehran" in May. The members included "top echelons of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, an elite branch of the Iranian military whose portfolio includes missile development and covert operations".<sup>10</sup> The report further claimed that to "teach a lesson" to the US without getting into direct confrontation with it, a plan was formulated to make Saudi Arabia's oil installations a strategic target. This was the first report to claim Iran's direct involvement in the affair, though the Persian state-run the *Tehran Times* had earlier bashed Reuters for diluting the issue and mingling the facts. The news agency published an article which blamed and accused Reuters of being upset due to the US not attacking Iran.<sup>11</sup>

It is to be noted that the attacks took place at the time when the US Administration under President Trump had given clear indications on disengagement with the Middle East and orienting its focus towards another strategic location – the Indo-Pacific. However, after the September 14 attack, the Trump Administration could not do so and this further irritated the Americans. In that context, re-engagement in the region became imperative because the attacks on the "world's most strategically significant oil facility" reflected poorly on the United States: a country under its protection had been targeted.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the attack further exposed the vulnerability quotient and posed a

question mark on the efficacy of the world's best defence systems installed jointly by the US.

The interesting point is that it is still unclear as to who actually attacked the oil installations! Such manoeuvring and precision based attacks reveal that the hybrid content in future warfare is going to be such that it will be difficult to find out the perpetrators. Moreover, it exposes the vulnerability of strategic installations, even those which are well guarded. A case in point is the ongoing discussion on the risks of water supply disruptions in Saudi Arabia.<sup>13</sup> Water is a key vulnerable component in the kingdom and any disruption to the supplies will be devastating not only for the Saudis but for the entire region.

Similar considerations have engulfed the entire world about the security of key strategic establishments. Even India needs to be watchful and upgrade its defensive systems especially as, recently, in February-March 2019, there was news about the Indian Air Force (IAF) shooting down Pakistani drones in Kutch district of Gujarat. Similarly, the IAF-led Sukhoi-30 shot down drones which had flown in from Pakistan in the Bikaner sector of Rajasthan at the Indo-Pak border.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it is important not only to keep a check on such attacks but even the probability of such incidents needs to be reduced.

Notably, with the revolution in technology, the sprawling black market and easy availability of Do-It-Yourself (DIY) kits, non-state actors are already armed with insurmountable access to innovations. The Aramco incident, in that context, has reiterated the vulnerability aspect of strategic assets such as nuclear power plants, energy installations and water supply systems globally. These installations need to be protected the most. While the ground systems are well guarded, there is a need to install geo-synchronous satellites for monitoring of such sites. Activation and upgradation of digital and firewall systems to counter any form of cyber threats need to be taken into consideration. Thus, in the larger interest of security of the state,

security of the society and stability in the region, nation-states will do well to install innovative measures to provide effective surveillance and security protection to their strategic assets.

## Notes

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