

Drone attacks in Saudi Arabia: Yemeni Houthis, Iran or Iraq?

Blurred lines of contestation are typical in the region, raising the risk of a miscalculation flaring into a major conflict

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For *The Straits Times*

Last Saturday saw an unprecedented strike on Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure leading to the temporary suspension of half of the country's oil capacity – over 5 million barrels. This saw the removal of about 5 per cent of global oil supplies from the market. Oil prices rose by almost 20 per cent before falling again.

According to Bloomberg, the attacks led to the single biggest disruption of oil supplies on record. Widely circulated footage from Saudi Arabia showed vast fires engulfing the targeted oil facilities.

Ansar Allah of Northern Yemen – a group more commonly referred to as the Houthis – claimed responsibility for the attack, stating that they had launched up to 10 drones directly targeting Saudi Aramco oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in eastern Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia, however, has fingered Iran, saying the attack involved Iranian-made cruise missiles. US officials have also blamed Iran, but without providing evidence.

Commenting on the symbolic and material magnitude of the strike, energy analyst Roger Diwan stated that: "Abqaiq is the heart of the system and they just had a heart attack." Abqaiq is home to a major petroleum processing facility run by Aramco, the Saudi Arabian Oil Company.

Saudi Arabia has been involved in a destructive and seemingly stalemated war against the Houthis in Yemen since 2015. The war was triggered by the Houthis' takeover of the Yemeni capital Sana'a and the ousting of pro-Saudi Yemeni president Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi.

Saudi Arabia views the Houthis as an Iranian proxy and felt that their

takeover in Yemen marked an unacceptable Iranian extension onto their southern borders. The ensuing war has seen a sustained Saudi-led air campaign in Yemen to little effect. The Houthis remain entrenched in northern Yemen and the war has achieved little beyond strengthening the Houthis' hand, deepening their ties to Iran and devastating an already impoverished country.

This is not the first Houthi drone attack on Saudi territory. Over the past two years, there have been some two dozen such strikes. While critical infrastructure has been hit in the past (such as those aimed at Abha airport in southern Saudi Arabia) none compare to last Saturday's operation.

The Abqaiq crude processing plant is described as the single most important facility in the Saudi oil sector and lies well over 1,000km from Yemen.

That the Houthis, who only a few years ago were being described as a ragtag militia, now have the ability to strike at such critical infrastructure and at such distances highlights their perhaps underestimated capabilities and also raises questions regarding the efficacy of Saudi defence spending – Saudi Arabia is the world's largest importer of arms, spending an estimated US\$355 billion (S\$489 billion) since 2015.

These attacks will inevitably derail already tenuous moves towards a resolution of the conflict in Yemen. Recently reported American efforts to establish a dialogue with the Houthis will likely be abandoned.

More alarming are the implications for the wider region. The Houthis' attack is being framed as an Iranian attack against Saudi Arabia. As such, rather than an episode in the Yemeni conflict, these attacks carry the potential of leading to regional war that could see the low-level conflict between



A satellite image from Planet Labs showing thick black smoke rising from Aramco's Abqaiq oil processing facility in Saudi Arabia last Saturday. The Houthis have claimed responsibility, Iran is being blamed and there are also suspicions that Iraqi paramilitaries are involved. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

the US and Iran quickly heat up.

On Sunday, President Donald Trump tweeted that the United States was "locked and loaded", suggesting it was considering military action.

At this stage, it is difficult to establish whether the drone attacks were indeed a message from Iran – one showcasing its ability to disrupt global oil supplies by striking beyond Gulf waters as it is alleged to have done in a series of tanker attacks over the summer. It does not matter whether Iran directly ordered the attack or if it was part of the Houthis'

ongoing (Iranian-supported) effort to up their game. Either way, it highlights Saudi vulnerability and Iranian proxy capacity.

The attacks also point to the increasing and increasingly effective role that auxiliary forces are playing in regional rivalries. Asymmetric and non-conventional warfare complicates an already fraught geostrategic landscape. One attraction of such methods is the deniability that it offers state actors seeking to project power.

Nevertheless, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has already placed the blame for the attacks

squarely on Iran. In this way, the Yemeni civil war, the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen and the stand-off between Iran and the US and its allies are intertwined.

There have been suspicions regarding the Houthis' claims of responsibility, with several people, including Mr Pompeo, saying the direction of the attacks indicated they did not originate from Yemen but were more likely started from Iran itself or Iraq.

Teheran supports a number of Iraqi paramilitary organisations which can be counted upon to help project Iranian power when

necessary. These have engaged in military operations in Iraq and in Syria. They are also suspected of having acted against Saudi Arabia. On May 14, drone attacks struck a Saudi oil pipeline west of the capital Riyadh.

As with last Saturday's attacks, the Houthis claimed responsibility, Iran was blamed and there were suspicions that the attack actually came from Iraqi paramilitaries to the north.

On Monday, Mr Pompeo backtracked and stated that evidence suggests the attacks did not come from Iraq after all. That provides some relief but Iraq remains a key front to watch in the US-Iranian-Saudi rivalry. Iraq is home to a number of paramilitary organisations that are collectively recognised as a state institution referred to as the Hashd al-Sha'bi or Popular Mobilisation Units. These form an entrenched part of Iraq's political and military landscapes and contain some of Iraq's most capable assets – they were recently the target of a series of Israeli airstrikes against Iraq.

The Iraqi government is incapable of fully demobilising or integrating these. Iraq remains caught between its contradictory relationships with the US, Iran and Saudi Arabia. The diffusion and incoherence of political power in Iraq means that it can at once have good relations with all three, yet be an unwilling staging ground for military activity in the simmering conflict between them.

Such blurred lines of contestation are characteristic of the region today and are similarly reflected in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

The danger in such a situation is the risk of escalation on one front inflaming the others and engulfing the Middle East in a region-wide conflict with global implications. Even absent such a major conflagration, the tit-for-tat demonstrations of military reach are affecting the stability of an increasing number of Middle Eastern countries.

One thing seems certain, absent a serious attempt at resolving the perpetual game of brinkmanship that dominates the stand-off between Iran and the US and its allies, we are only one miscalculation or overreaction away from a major conflict with global implications.

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