

Attribution, Intent, and Response in the Abqaiq Attack

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A M E R I C A N E N T E R P R I S E I N S T I T U T E

Executive Summary

The U.S. should conduct a military strike in response to the Iranian attack on the Abqaiq oil facility in Saudi Arabia in order to deter continued Iranian military escalation. Deterrence requires more than punitive strikes. It requires credibly holding at risk something the regime is not willing to lose. Beginning an air campaign against Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) targets in Syria is one approach; a significant air/missile campaign against targets in Iran itself is another. Each option carries its own significant risks and opportunities, which must be weighed carefully before choosing a course of action. The risks of any retaliatory strike are high, but the risks of failing to respond to the Abqaiq attack are higher.

The attack on Abqaiq was planned and executed by Iran and most likely launched from Iranian territory. It was part of a pattern of Iranian military escalation in response to the Trump Administration's "maximum pressure" campaign.

The al Houthi claim to have conducted the attack was part of a skillful information operation intended to divert the Western discussion away from Iran's role and focus it instead on the war in Yemen and on Saudi Arabia's misdeeds. That information operation has succeeded to a considerable extent as the Western debate has indeed focused excessively on the question of attributing the attack, on Saudi Arabia's culpability for the humanitarian situation and its own bombing campaign in Yemen, and on the horrific murder and dismemberment of Jamal Khashoggi.

The U.S. and Iran are escalating in parallel. The U.S. is escalating in sanctions and defensive military deployments and operations. Iran is escalating its military aggression and violations of the nuclear deal. U.S. escalations have not thus far deterred Iranian escalations. The U.S. has

steadily increased sanctions and other economic pressure, has deployed limited military forces to the region to bolster its own and its allies' defenses, and has formed a maritime defensive operation to deter Iranian seizures of oil tankers. Iran and its allies and proxies have escalated military attacks, including shooting at (and shooting down) multiple American drones, firing rockets and mortars at U.S. positions in Iraq, and repeatedly attacking Saudi oil infrastructure and a desalination plant. It has also escalated its violations of the nuclear deal. Increasing American economic pressure has not deterred Iranian military or nuclear deal-violation escalation, and American military actions have only changed the precise shape of Iranian military escalation, if that. The U.S. has not therefore identified a non-violent means of deterring future Iranian escalation.

Separating the U.S. from its partners in the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, was one of Iran's central objectives in the Abqaiq attack. The Iranians likely chose this escalation step over others because it hit Saudi Arabia alone and thereby forced the U.S. to choose explicitly whether or not it would defend a front-line state exposed by the "maximum pressure" campaign. American inaction, which includes encouraging the Saudis to conduct a military retaliation of their own, will further this Iranian objective by solidifying the belief in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi that the U.S. will not defend front line states even against serious Iranian military attack.

The U.S. has vital economic interests in the defense of Saudi (and more generally Gulfi) oil infrastructure even though America imports little Gulf oil. Oil is a fungible commodity, and its global price rises and falls depending on global supply and demand. Americans will pay higher prices for petroleum products if large amounts of Saudi oil remain off the market, regardless of

America's technical "independence" of Saudi oil, because the global price will rise. America's allies, who do depend on Saudi oil, could be economically devastated by a protracted disruption in Saudi oil exports. Such damage to vital American trading partners would severely damage the American economy as well.

Reducing the "maximum pressure" campaign or seeking negotiations with Iran without military retaliation will establish the global precedent that America and the West will surrender to military attacks, thereby increasing the likelihood of future military attacks by Iran or other adversaries. The U.S. must first demonstrate a willingness to respond to unjustified aggression and attacks on its allies before considering any significant change in its overall policies toward Iran.

Deterrence requires holding at risk something the adversary is unwilling to lose and that the U.S. might plausibly take away from him. Using military force simply to indicate U.S. strength or displeasure will not deter a determined adversary. It is difficult to identify target sets on Iranian territory that would reach the threshold necessary to deter the regime without also moving toward a military regime-change operation, which is unwise and likely impracticable. Limited American military strikes against the positions from which the Abqaiq attack were launched, for example, will not likely meet the necessary deterrence threshold given the existential nature of the threat the "maximum pressure" poses to the Iranian regime. The U.S. cannot—and should not—plausibly aim at overthrowing the Islamic Republic by military means, rendering deterrence by attacking targets in Iran less likely to succeed.

Iranian leaders have frequently identified Iran's positions in Syria as vital to the regime's survival. Those positions are far more vulnerable to American attack than the Iranian regime is at home. The threat of American action against IRGC positions in Syria is also more credible than the threat of a massive military regime-change operation in Iran. Presenting Tehran with

the choice of continuing its military escalation or seeing its positions in Syria severely degraded is the best chance the U.S. has to deter continued Iranian military action.

The risks of such an attack include Iranian military escalation. Iran could attack Americans in Syria, Iraq, or elsewhere in the Gulf region; it could conduct terrorist attacks in the U.S. itself or in allied states in Europe or Latin America; it could interfere with the movement of ships through the Strait of Hormuz; or it could attack more vital targets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The U.S. and its allies can mitigate these threats to varying degrees, but never completely. We must recognize, however, that Iran is on a military escalation path and may well decide to conduct such actions even if the U.S. makes no response to the Abqaiq attack. On the contrary, trends suggest that inaction may encourage further Iranian escalation.

American military action against Iran in Syria could also have severe diplomatic repercussions. It could persuade European leaders to support the Assad government up to and including recognizing it. Turkey's response to such an operation is unclear. The U.S. would have to work energetically to minimize the likelihood of these and other negative diplomatic consequences of any action in Syria, recognizing that it might not be able to do so fully.

The Russians could also use their advanced air defense systems in Syria against U.S. aircraft and missiles attacking Iranian targets. The U.S. could mitigate that risk by deploying the force package necessary to defeat those systems and prevent the Russians from replacing or reinforcing them. A detailed assessment of Vladimir Putin's objectives and constraints in Syria strongly suggests that he is unlikely to engage in such a direct conflict, particularly if American strikes avoid hitting Russian targets. The notion that he would initiate a global thermonuclear war over a local conflict in Syria is absurd.

Advice presenting military inaction as the safer course may in fact be dangerous.

The Iranians are on a path to split the Saudis and Emiratis from the U.S. Success in that endeavor would unravel the “maximum pressure” campaign that relies on those states to adhere to financial and other sanctions and provide military support to American objectives in the region. It would create opportunities for both Russia and China to gain firm footholds in the Gulf, transforming the regional security challenge facing the U.S.

Inaction will also strengthen the convictions of Iran’s leaders that they can conduct large-scale devastating attacks against American allies at will, particularly if they do not kill Americans. It will therefore likely accelerate the very escalation scenarios frequently offered as arguments against an American retaliatory strike.

It harms every American alliance by undermining the belief of U.S. allies that America will come to their aid militarily if they are attacked. Rhetorical dances around the lack of a formal American security guarantee to Saudi Arabia will not affect this fear, nor will reassurances that the U.S. would defend this or that other ally. All such rhetoric will be undermined by the fact of American inaction in this case and the much louder rhetoric from the White House about the need for other states to defend themselves.

There is no safe course the U.S. can pursue after Abqaiq. Both action and inaction carry great risks. The balance of risk at the moment lies with inaction—failure to respond militarily to the Abqaiq attack is far more likely to harm American security and vital national interests, including economic interests, than is prudent action.

Attribution, Intent, and Response in the Abqaiq Attack

An Iranian information operation has successfully confused the policy discourse in the U.S. about the drone- and missile-attack on Saudi oil facilities on September 14, 2019.¹ The Yemeni al Houthi movement quickly claimed the attack while Iran denied its involvement.² The Trump Administration has assessed that Iran conducted the attack using bases within Iran itself.³ Administration critics quickly attacked those claims while arguing energetically against any meaningful American response to the attacks. Few analysts have considered in any detail what Iran's objectives might have been in conducting this attack, thereby obscuring the larger context in which decisions about possible U.S. responses must be made. The false al Houthi claim, likely made in coordination with Tehran, has thus successfully diverted the U.S. discourse and distorted the development of American response options. The U.S. must likely conduct military strikes against the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), although not necessarily in Iran itself, to deter Iranian aggression, prevent Iran from splitting America from its regional partners, and collapsing the "maximum pressure" campaign thereby.

What Happened?

- Over 20 Iranian drones and missiles struck the world's largest oil-processing facility, the Abqaiq crude-processing plant in eastern Saudi Arabia on September 14. Riyadh's oil production was temporarily cut in half as a result.⁴
- The Yemeni al Houthi movement rapidly claimed the attack and threatened additional strikes.⁵
- Saudi Arabia stated that recovered-drone and missile debris indicated Iranian

origin but did not accuse Iran of directly conducting the attack on September 18.⁶

- US Secretary of State Pompeo quickly attributed the attack to Iran and asserted that there is no reason to assess the attacks originated in Yemen. Pompeo later affirmed that the attack did not originate from Iraq either following a phone call with Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mehdi on September 15.⁷ US officials reportedly concluded that the attack originated in Ahvaz in southwestern Iran at the direct order of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei.⁸
- The UK, France, and Germany released a joint statement, attributing the attack to Iran and condemning the action.⁹

Who Dunit?

There are only two plausible answers to this question—either Iranian security forces conducted the attack themselves using bases in Iran, Iraq, or both, or else the al Houthi movement conducted it from its bases in Yemen.

No serious analyst has suggested any alternative perpetrator, and no alternatives are plausible. Salafi-jihadi groups have shown sophisticated capabilities to use drones and even drone swarms in Syria and elsewhere, but from where could they have launched this attack? Their nearest meaningful safe havens are in Somalia, Yemen, and northwestern Syria. Ranges from any of those safe havens are greater even than from the al Houthi territory in Yemen, and the Salafi-jihadi groups have shown no ability to fly drones to such distances, nor have they used cruise missiles. They would certainly have claimed the attack publicly, moreover, as it would have been one of the biggest terrorist coups since 9/11. And, of

course, forensic evidence already shows that the weapons used were of Iranian type if not Iranian manufacture.¹⁰ No further evidence is therefore required to narrow the field of possible attackers to two—the al Houthis and Iran.

The al Houthis very likely did not conduct the attack.

The al Houthis are Iran's partner and receive assistance from Tehran, but they are not yet a simple proxy like Lebanese Hezbollah. Iran does not fully control the movement, which is not itself homogeneous, and cannot compel it to act or desist from acting as thoroughly as Tehran can control Hezbollah or some of the Iraqi Shi'a militias, for example. Yet the al Houthis are close allies of Iran from which they receive advanced weapons, training, and equipment that allows them to improve and build their own weapons. Iranian officials regard the al Houthis as part of Tehran's "Axis of Resistance"—the regional grouping that includes Hezbollah, the Assad regime, HAMAS, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and a number of Iraqi militias. The al Houthis, for their part, pay homage to Tehran and have adopted the Islamic Republic's slogans and worldview (although not its ideology) to a considerable degree.¹¹

But the al Houthis have shown no ability to field weapons with the range necessary to reach Abqaiq from their territory, let alone to coordinate such a complex strike integrating drones with cruise missiles. The al Houthis could have conducted this attack only with enormous Iranian help, including the transport to Yemen of advanced Iranian weapons despite intense Saudi-Emirati efforts to track and disrupt precisely such transport. It is not plausible that the al Houthis developed the capability to field and use such weapons on their own thus secretly and perfectly.

The question of attribution, therefore, is not whether Iran or some other non-Iranian group conducted the attack. The question is whether Iran did so using its own personnel and bases or using an ally. Even if the attack did originate in Yemen, unlikely though it is, the U.S. would still

need to confront the reality that Iran at least made it directly possible if it did not order it. In other words, the U.S. would still need to see the attack in the context of Iranian regional escalation and consider its own responses within that context. The issue of al Houthi responsibility for the strike is thus to a large extent a red herring.

This artificial ambiguity about who perpetrated the attack has served the Iranian purpose of distorting the Western discourse and deflecting the debate away from focusing on Iranian escalation brilliantly, however. The al Houthis claimed to have hit Abqaiq in response to Saudi actions in Yemen. Anti-Saudi feeling in the U.S. and Europe is already intense following the brutal murder and dismemberment of Jamal Khashoggi. Anger over that terrible crime has solidified an exaggerated narrative that Saudi Arabia is uniquely responsible for the humanitarian crisis in Yemen and most of the atrocities committed in that conflict. The al Houthi claim thus immediately brought forward all the anger toward Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS), the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, and turned part of the discussion to the conflict in Yemen rather than Iranian regional activities. It ensured that opponents of the Trump Administration, which has stood by MBS and Riyadh and supports the Saudi-Emirati coalition fight in Yemen, would assault the idea of seeing Saudi Arabia as an ally that should be defended and instead promote the notion that the Saudis had brought this kind of attack on themselves.

It was a bright information campaign taking excellent advantage of the prevalent information environment and sentiment toward Saudi Arabia. It also benefited from the political polarization of the U.S. that drives instinctive opposition to any claim made by the Trump Administration (just as that administration and its supporters instinctively oppose claims made by their opposition).

The first step in determining what action the U.S. should or should not take in response to the strike, therefore, is recognizing that it was, in fact, an

Iranian attack against Saudi Arabia taken in the context of Iranian policy concerns and to advance Iranian objectives. It was not an al Houthi attack in response to Saudi actions in Yemen.

Why Did Iran Do It?

The current Islamic Republic leadership has shown great sophistication over the years in devising undertakings aimed at achieving multiple strategic goals simultaneously. The attack on Abqaiq is no exception. We cannot know for sure exactly what the regime was seeking to do, but we can identify a number of problems the attack would help Tehran solve.

Sanctions Relief. The Iranian response to the Trump Administration's de facto withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA—the Iran nuclear deal) in May 2018 was relatively muted apart from Iranian rhetoric. Tehran did not pull out of the deal, but rather sought to persuade the European signatories to ignore American sanctions and give Iran the economic benefits the deal promised despite Washington's threats to punish them if they did so. The sanctions imposed under the "maximum pressure" campaign have greatly stressed the Iranian economy and constrained the financial resources available to the regime for both domestic purposes and foreign adventures.

The Europeans responded with much rhetoric but little action, dragging their feet (from the Iranian perspective) even on a limited instrument that would have facilitated trade on humanitarian grounds.¹² The European Union passed blocking legislation essential (though not necessarily sufficient) to get European companies to evade sanctions, but individual European countries have either not passed or have not enforced the equivalent laws needed to assure companies of their governments' protection.¹³ It is unlikely that any large European company would risk exclusion from the American market in order to trade with Iran or that any major European government would penalize a large company for complying with U.S. sanctions.

Tehran began moving down a path of gradual violations of the nuclear provisions of the JCPOA as Iranian disappointment with the European response mounted. It began retaining more low-enriched uranium than the deal permitted, then enriching to slightly higher levels than the agreement allows, and, most recently, has committed to testing advanced centrifuges that the timeline of the agreement does not yet permit.¹⁴ The intent of these gradual escalation measures was both to pressure and to persuade European governments to reject the American "maximum pressure" campaign. That effort has failed. Some European states have been discussing a \$15 billion line of credit for Iran, but those discussions do not seem to be progressing more promisingly (for Tehran) than previous such conversations.¹⁵

Iran will be hard pressed, in fact, to find ways of violating the nuclear deal meaningful enough to persuade the Europeans to break with the U.S. but not threatening enough to prompt an Israeli or American military strike. The deal reduced Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium (LEU) to such a low level that Iran cannot threaten to have enough weapons-grade material for a bomb for quite some time. Enriching the small stock of LEU in Tehran's possession would generate only a tiny fraction of what is needed for a warhead. Iran could accelerate the process either by beginning to use thousands more centrifuges of its currently-deployed type or by starting to use more advanced centrifuges—both actions prohibited by the deal and observable by international inspectors. And even those actions would take considerable time to produce the requisite high-enriched uranium (HEU). Not only can Iran not threaten to field a nuclear weapon quickly, therefore, but the European states and the U.S. can afford to be patient even as Iran violates provisions of the deal.

It seems likely that Iran's leaders initially thought that they could devise a pattern of deal violations that would achieve their desired effects and have only recently realized that they may not be able to thread the deal-violation needle by taking

actions scary enough to weaken the Europeans but not enough to provoke a strike. The announcement of their most recent planned violation on September 5 was greeted by and large with a European yawn. The repeated small-scale violations may, in fact, be desensitizing the Europeans to future violations. That phenomenon could work for Iran if the objective were to try to boil the European frog, moving toward a weapons capability so gradually that no one really noticed. It is a disaster if the objective is to scare the Europeans into breaking with the U.S. and violating American sanctions.

The timing of the Abqaiq strike is interesting in this respect, as it follows both the announcement of the intended deal violations and the lack of excitement that that announcement generated. The Islamic Republic's leaders may have concluded before the most recent nuclear announcement that it might not be sufficient and prepared this military escalation as an alternative.

Viewed in that light, the Abqaiq attack is just another escalation in the use of military force to pressure the Europeans and America's Gulf partners to break with Washington and cut deals with Iran. Iran's attacks on and seizures of multiple ships in and around the Persian Gulf, attacks on ships in the Red Sea from locations in al Houthi-controlled territory, attacks on Saudi oil pipelines, attacks on American UAVs, and limited attacks on American assets in Iraq have all formed a pattern of Iranian military responses to the U.S. reimposition of sanctions.

Analysts considering the escalation ladder between the U.S. and Iran have long viewed an attack against Abqaiq as a likely step. It is simply too obvious a target—not only does it hurt and potentially cripple the Saudi economy, but it also can raise the global price of oil to Iran's benefit (and we will consider how Iran does benefit from a global oil price increase even when it is exporting very little oil itself presently). Yet a strike on Abqaiq was not the likely next step in the escalations ongoing since the U.S. pulled out of the deal. It was, rather, something that seemed

likely to come considerably further up the escalation ladder than it did, as it carries with it the high risk of a substantial military retaliatory attack against Iran. Tehran has skipped over a number of steps that had seemed likely to precede an attack on Abqaiq including mining the Strait of Hormuz, launching major attacks on Americans in Iraq, attacking U.S. and allied naval vessels in the Persian Gulf with small boats and/or missiles, among others. It is of course possible that assessments of Iranian perceptions of the escalation ladder were wrong, but we must also consider another likely objective of the Abqaiq attack.

Splitting America's Gulf Allies from Washington. Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates are on the front line of the Trump Administration's "maximum pressure" campaign. Bahrain, effectively controlled by Riyadh for some years, hosts the U.S. Fifth Fleet headquarters, and the U.S. has just begun re-establishing a military base in Saudi Arabia for the first time since 9/11.¹⁶ Washington depends, further, on the Saudi military as part of a regional deterrent to Iranian adventurism and also to fight both the al Houthis and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen. The UAE, a key partner in the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, is also the banking hub of the Gulf. The UAE has in the past reportedly facilitated financial transactions by the IRGC and other elements of the Iranian regime, and Emirati failure to enforce U.S. sanctions aggressively could do great harm to the American "maximum pressure" campaign.

America's Gulf partners have clearly become concerned that the "maximum pressure" campaign could expose them to Iranian attacks against which the U.S. could not or would not defend them. The Emiratis are withdrawing from Yemen—creating a vacuum that will likely be filled in part by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) while also weakening the Saudi effort against the al Houthis. They are simultaneously establishing bases in the Horn of Africa.¹⁷ Both efforts are likely attempts to position the small but good Emirati military to defend the Emirates

against Iran—in the first case by freeing up Emirati aircraft, anti-missile, and intelligence assets from Yemen to defend against an Iranian attack on the Emirati homeland; in the second by establishing positions outside the range of most Iranian missiles from which presumably to threaten retaliatory strikes plausibly.

The Saudis, for their part, are clearly concerned about the anger growing against them in the West and the risk that they might have to face Iran's wrath alone. They have begun working harder toward finding an elusive political settlement to the war in Yemen, from which they seek to extricate themselves. They have also demonstrated remarkable restraint, even in the wake of the Abqaiq attack, in accusing Tehran directly, let alone threatening to retaliate.

Iran's desire to increase the schism between Riyadh and the West could well have prompted Tehran to bypass some of the seemingly lower-level escalation steps it might have taken in favor of the Abqaiq attack. Those lower-level steps would likely hit non-Gulf states directly. Mining the Strait of Hormuz certainly would affect a broad range of states and international companies, as would any large-scale campaign of attacks on naval vessels in the Persian Gulf. The Abqaiq attack was one of the first steps on the escalation ladder that hits Saudi Arabia alone, forcing on Washington a difficult policy conundrum. Had the IRGC mined the Strait or launched an expansive campaign of small-boat attacks on shipping and/or Western naval vessels, it would have been almost impossible for the U.S. to resist engaging in first defensive and then likely retaliatory military action against the Islamic Republic. Such actions would have been self-defense and would have justified at least limited retaliation to reduce Iran's ability to attack us again.

But the Abqaiq attack hit only Saudi Arabia. It forces Riyadh to ask for U.S. and possibly other regional and Western support to retaliate against Iran. In the context of the polarized information environment discussed above, and with the

waters muddied by the al Houthi claim of responsibility, we are seeing just how difficult it is for the Saudis to rally support behind them and how hard it is for the Trump Administration to decide on a tough response, let alone gain support for it. The Iranians can hope either to deter the U.S. from reacting, thereby demonstrating to the Saudis that they do, indeed, stand alone, or to ensure that a strong American response that reassures Riyadh simultaneously erodes American and European tolerance for the "maximum pressure" campaign and Trump's Iran policy in general. Either scenario widens the split between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia—the first does so immediately and directly; the second does so indirectly and over the longer term by fueling anti-Saudi sentiment in the U.S. as part of attacks against Trump's Iran policy. Tehran almost certainly made these obvious calculations in choosing an escalation path.

Responding to Israel's Regional Air Campaign. Iran has been expanding the capabilities of the IRGC and the Quds Force in Syria for some years. It has repeatedly tried to bring missile and drone systems into Syria that could threaten Israel without relying on Lebanese Hezbollah's massive arsenal or the more limited capabilities of HAMAS. Iran would benefit greatly from having bases outside Lebanon and Gaza from which its own personnel could operate its own advanced weapons systems. The Hezbollahi arsenal is large and increasingly capable, but Hezbollah itself is vulnerable to Israeli conventional attacks. It is confined in a relatively small area in a tiny country on Israel's border. HAMAS is even more vulnerable because of Israeli control over Gaza and the group's much weaker financial position. Syria is a sizable country, by contrast, and the forces of the Iranian military coalition there are strong enough to deter an Israeli ground offensive. It is also covered by advanced Russian air defense systems that would pose a serious challenge even to the vaunted Israeli Air Force (if and when Moscow used those systems against Israeli attack). If Iran could establish Syria as a base for

the forward deployment of missile and drone systems under its direct control it could threaten Israel with meaningful military strikes that did not originate in Iran. It would thereby gain a fig leaf of implausible deniability, but more importantly be able to use some of its more capable weapons that lack the range to hit Israel from the Islamic Republic itself.

The Israelis have responded with an escalating air campaign in Syria that reportedly targets primarily Iranian efforts to transport and deploy high-end weapons. Moscow has not used its aircraft or ground-based air defense systems against these Israeli attacks and has taken control over some of the air defense systems it had given to the Assad regime after the regime mistakenly shot down a Russian plane during an Israeli airstrike.¹⁸ The Iranians, for their part, have done relatively little directly to respond to the Israeli air campaign other than to continue their efforts to get systems into Syria, and what they have tried has so far not deterred Israel.¹⁹

Tehran recently began experimenting with moving advanced weapons systems that could threaten Israel into Iraq, however.²⁰ It was presumably testing whether the Israelis would conduct airstrikes into Iraq despite the presence of the U.S. military operating there (and, possibly, whether the U.S. itself would attack its forces). The Israelis have responded by expanding their air campaign to hit targets in Iraq.²¹ The Abqaiq strike may have been intended in part to send a message to Tel Aviv about Iran's capabilities and willingness to escalate without engaging Iran directly in an open conflict with Israel at this time, especially given the difficulty it Tehran has had conducting reprisal attacks against Israel itself.²²

Clever escalation in Iraq. Even as the al Houthis took credit for the strike and Iran denied any involvement rumors have swirled that some of the drones or missiles were launched from inside Iraq. The Iraqi government released a read-out of a call between Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Iraq's Prime Minister Adel Abdul

Mehdi explicitly rejecting those rumors and stating that the strike was not launched from Iraq shortly after the attack.²³ The timing is noteworthy because the U.S. government had still not officially and publicly identified the launch-points days later.

The reason for the care is obvious—the U.S. and the Iraqi government would be in a difficult position if it turned out that Iran or its Iraqi proxies had fired missiles or launched drones from Iraqi soil. Prime Minister Mehdi would not likely have approved or even known about such an action given the near-control Iran has over elements of the Popular Mobilization Forces and its own militias inside Iraq. The Saudis and the U.S. would face a dilemma. Retaliating against the attack's perpetrators or point of origin inside Iraq could break the Iraqi government and collapse the order on which the U.S. relies to continue operations against the Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria. Failing to act against such an abuse of Iraqi sovereignty, however, would begin to establish a precedent for future abuses, particularly after the U.S. reportedly concluded that an earlier attack against Saudi oil infrastructure claimed by the al Houthis actually originated in Iraq.²⁴ Even the possibility of this scenario arising is enough to add tension to the U.S.-Iraqi relationship and set conditions for additional escalations along these lines.

An Iranian escalation through attacks launched from Iraq against non-U.S. targets outside Iraq offer an intriguing and creative solution to a dilemma Iran faces. Iran prefers a weak Iraqi state that it penetrates, influences, and may even control—but with a degree of plausible deniability. It needs Iraq to function increasingly over time as an entrepôt well-integrated into the regional and global economy through which it can evade sanctions, among other things. Iraq can only do so if the U.S. continues to turn a relatively blind eye to Iraq's financial relationships with Iran, effectively exempting Iraq from the full weight of the secondary sanctions it has imposed on Iran. If the Iraqi government collapses, orders the U.S. out, or

Iranian-controlled militias become the only meaningful military force, the U.S. has every incentive to impose crushing sanctions on them. Iranian proxies in Baghdad would refuse to honor such sanctions, but the U.S. could then begin sanctioning them directly. Such actions would seriously complicate Iraq's ability to sell oil and function in the international economy even if they were only partially respected. Fear of such a scenario is likely one factor that has restrained Iran from launching major attacks against American personnel in Iraq hitherto, but that restraint has limited Iran's ability to make full use of the great leverage it gains from the vulnerability of Americans in Iraq. Even if none of the weapons that hit Abqaiq were launched from Iraq (which is likely) and Tehran had not given this matter any thought while planning the strike (which is almost inconceivable), the American and Iraqi reactions will have shown the possibilities presented by escalation along these lines.

A Rising Oil Price Floats Many Boats. The oil market has generally taken the escalations in the Middle East over the past few years calmly although insurance premiums for shipping through the Strait of Hormuz have increased.²⁵ It does not seem inclined to build in a high risk premium despite attacks on and seizures of oil tankers, Iranian threats to close the Strait of Hormuz, or the elimination of most Iranian oil from the market. It spiked briefly in response to the Abqaiq attack but had fallen again the next day—although not back to previous low levels. If the Iranians aimed by this attack to raise the price of oil dramatically for a prolonged period it would seem, at least for now, that they did not succeed.

One might ask why it matters to them what oil costs when their own exports are virtually nil. One reason is that an increase of \$10 per barrel would add an additional \$365 million to Tehran's coffers if it exported only 100,000 barrels per day (bpd). That amount is not significant for a large economy, but it is significant for Iran's small one facing tremendous pressure.

But Iran benefits from oil it does not own or sell. Iraq, for example, exported around 3.9 million bpd in 2018. A \$10 per barrel increase would net Iraq something like \$14 billion over the course of a year—more than 10 percent of Iraq's \$111.8 billion budget for 2019. Iraq's fiscal health matters to Iran because the Iraqi government is increasingly paying for militia forces that Iran influences or controls, and Iraq's management of its oil and natural gas resources is inefficient. The more Tehran can shift the cost of those militias to Baghdad the less it has to spend itself. The opportunities for Iran to benefit from corruption in Iraq also increase when more oil money sloshes around the country.

Russia is another major beneficiary of any oil price increase, of course, since oil exports are a sizable portion of the Russian government's income. Russia's fiscal health also matters to Iran. Russo-Iranian cooperation has long suffered from the fact that both countries have been cash-strapped. Tehran has wanted to buy high-end weapons from Russia, which Moscow might be willing to sell—but Iran needs credit and Russia needs cash on the barrelhead. As Iran takes action that puts money directly in Moscow's coffers it is possible that Putin might return the favor by offering more generous payment options.

These and other indirect benefits accrue to Iran only if the price of oil rises and remains higher, of course. The limited attack on Abqaiq does not seem to have been enough to price in a large and long-term risk premium. From which fact the Iranian regime might conclude either that it will not work or that it did not do enough damage to make it work...this time.

Next Escalation Steps

That sour reflection raises the question: What might be the next Iranian escalation steps if they are dissatisfied with the results of this one (leaving aside, for the moment, the question of possible U.S./Saudi responses)?

Abqaiq Redux. The discussion above about previous assessments of where an attack on Abqaiq falls on the escalation ladder omitted a nuance unimportant in that context but important in considering possible Iranian next steps—how much damage was the attack meant to do? The major escalation step would have been to destroy the facility in such a way as to make its restoration impossible for months. Such an attack would almost certainly lead to a significant long-term increase in the price of oil. The attack Iran conducted on September 14, however, did not aim to cause such damage. It was clearly a limited strike meant to show capability and do some harm without going all the way. (We can assess intent from effect here with pretty high confidence—the Iranians surely know enough about facilities like Abqaiq to know how much damage a strike of a given scale and type would do and how hard it would be to repair that damage). Another strike on a larger scale could follow, however, intended to do much more serious and lasting harm.

But the Iranians cannot assume that they will be able to replicate the strike they just conducted at greater scale (or even at the demonstrated scale) unless they do it relatively soon or the Saudis unaccountably fail to take the obvious steps needed to defend their facilities better. No anti-aircraft or anti-missile system is good enough to take down all the cruise missiles and drones Iran could conceivably throw at Abqaiq, but a combination of U.S. and Israeli systems might be able to attrite such an attack enough to stop the Iranians from inflicting really catastrophic damage on the facility. Russian air defense systems such as the S-300 and S-400 would also likely degrade such an attack—if the Russians sold them to the Saudis and allowed them to be used against Iranian targets. Iranian planners considering a second, larger strike against Abqaiq would have to choose one of three options:

- 1) Do it before the Saudis can really harden the facility's defenses;
- 2) Make it so much larger that it can overwhelm whatever defenses they add;

- 3) Accept that a much larger strike will not likely translate into much greater damage, but will, at least, get through even improved defenses to some extent.

Iran's ability to choose the first option depends in large part on the speed with which the Saudis can get meaningful defenses in place. The point of the strike was to generate effects having nothing to do with Abqaiq itself, so the Iranians need to allow time to see if it had the effects desired before moving again. They can try to execute the second option but may find it prohibitively expensive. Advanced drones and cruise missiles are not cheap to a country as cash-poor as Iran. Hurling them against prepared defenses that will shoot down many or most of them is not a good expenditure of resources. That argument makes option three even less appealing than option two.

A massive follow-up strike on Abqaiq is thus a possible further escalatory step, but not necessarily the most likely.

Water. Water is even more precious than oil to a desert country. Saudi Arabia derives a high proportion of its water from desalination plants, particularly the large plants at Jubail and Ras al Khair that serve Riyadh. Both are also on the Persian Gulf side of the country somewhat to the north of Abqaiq (and thus closer to Iran via the route the attack on Abqaiq apparently took) and right on the coast (of course). The destruction or serious degradation of these two plants would likely cause a major crisis for the Saudi kingdom that could rapidly turn into a humanitarian catastrophe. An attack on such a facility, with its horrible consequences, would in principle galvanize the Kingdom to respond with all its force—except that Riyadh would likely have its hands completely full dealing with the crisis for quite some time. It is worth noting that the al Houthis attempted to damage a desalination plant in southwestern Saudi Arabia in June although with no significant effect.²⁶

Abqaiq is about 75 miles from Jubail and around 115 miles from Ras al Khair—far enough to make it difficult to defend all three sites reliably with a

single set of defensive systems, depending on the system. The Saudis could (and now likely will) build an integrated air defense and anti-missile system to cover both facilities against a major strike, but that will take time. One or the other facility will likely offer vulnerabilities for long enough to give Tehran a shot at doing much damage in upcoming escalation rounds.

Irregular Warfare. The Quds Force has been attempting to set conditions for Iranian irregular warfare in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia for many years.²⁷ The Saudis have effectively taken control of Bahrain to prevent the Iranians from using the island kingdom's disenfranchised Shi'a majority to conduct attacks on the U.S. base there, on Saudi Arabia, and on the Sunni ruling dynasty itself. Riyadh periodically arrests suspected Iranian agents working among its own Shi'a minority population, which resides primarily in the Eastern Province where much of the kingdom's oil lies. Kuwaiti Shi'a also briefly protested in 2015 and Kuwait's proximity to Iran itself and to the Shi'a-militia-infested Basra Province of Iraq make it vulnerable to future Iranian efforts.

Iranian attempts to infiltrate these Shi'a populations do not appear to have been very successful thus far, however. Bahrain is a very hard target for Tehran because it is an island and because the Saudis have taken over its security. Saudi control over the Eastern Province also appears solid, although Riyadh's control of media coverage makes it impossible to assess the stability of that control reliably from open sources. Kuwait has seen little overt (or reported) Iranian activity so far. The government could have the situation under control or the Iranians may simply not yet have tried to use their capabilities there to any serious degree.

The Iranians are probably unable to generate a large-scale irregular warfare campaign in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain now and will likely find it difficult to set conditions for one in the future unless the government of one or another of those states weakens or collapses. They probably

do not, therefore, have a meaningful escalatory option in this form at this time.

Cyber. The likelihood of successful large-scale cyber-attack is difficult to assess at any time, as the high-end capabilities of an attacker are not easily known before they are used while the vulnerabilities of the defender they might exploit are equally hard to gauge. Previous Iranian cyber-attacks, including on Saudi's oil company, ARAMCO, have put the kingdom on alert and caused it to take counter-measures. Iran's cyber-attack capabilities are significant, however. Tehran could well try another major cyber-attack, especially considering the increasing American propensity to try to deter escalation with such operations, with unforeseeable effects.

Russia could also assist Iran in a cyber-operation against Saudi Arabia, although the likelihood of such cooperation is relatively low. Russia benefits greatly, as noted above, from a prolonged increase in oil prices. It has refused Iran the high-end weapons systems Tehran has requested thus far (apart from finally delivering the S-300 air defense system originally promised in 2007).²⁸ It has also resisted giving Tehran and its allies the full support they desire in Syria and has pointedly allowed the Israeli Air Force to operate against Iranian targets there. Putin might see providing cyber assistance to Tehran as a way simultaneously to strengthen the partnership thus strained while simultaneously filling his own depleted coffers.

Putin has been courting the Saudis and other Gulf states aggressively, however, and has made it clear that he is not satisfied with having a Persian ally at the expense of the Arab world. He has reportedly offered to sell Riyadh the S-400 system following the Abqaiq attack, in fact.²⁹ He aims to split Saudi Arabia from the U.S. almost as eagerly as does Iran, as part of his larger global effort to break up American alliances and partnerships and push the U.S. back to its own shores. He would not likely take action even in cyberspace that might plausibly link Russia to an Iranian attack on Saudi (or Emirati) IT systems.

Cyber-help could come in various forms, however, some of them quite deniable—especially when the help is provided to a state that has already demonstrated a high degree of offensive cyber capability. It could be as simple as revealing a “zero-day” exploit (that is, a vulnerability in a computer system not yet publicly known) that Russia’s hackers have found and Iran’s have not. It could take the form of sharing the kind of over-arching assessment of Saudi (or Emirati) IT systems that Russia’s larger and more sophisticated cyber experts can undertake possibly better than Iran’s. It could even involve the sharing of Russian-produced malware or access to systems the Russians have already compromised, although the risks of having the Russian involvement revealed increase significantly in such a scenario. The bottom line is that a combined Russo-Iranian attack on Saudi is more likely to succeed than a purely Iranian attack, but the Russians will likely be wary of too deep a cyber-partnership.

Conventional Attack. The difficulties Iran faces attempting to scale-up and repeat the Abqaiq attack considered above fade somewhat if Iran decides to use a significant portion of its own military openly. Both Abu Dhabi and Dubai are in range of many of Iran’s mobile missile systems. Defenses against a full-scale barrage of such systems are not in place now and could not likely be put in place for some time, if at all. The Iranian-occupied island of Abu Musa is about 50 miles from Dubai and 100 miles from Abu Dhabi—and the Iranians have turned Abu Musa into an island aircraft carrier/missile platform. The much larger Qeshm Island is about 100 miles from Dubai and 160 from Abu Dhabi. Some of the Saudi facilities are equally close to Iran. Jubail is about 135 miles from Iran’s coast; Abqaiq about 180. Most of Iran’s ballistic missiles could range these targets from Iran proper, as could its cruise missiles and some of its drones. Iran could likely overwhelm the air/missile defenses of Saudi Arabia and the UAE even after they were improved with additional US Patriot batteries and Israeli anti-missile systems.

Such an attack is the most reliable way Iran could severely damage its principal Gulf adversaries.

Conclusion. This consideration of possible further Iranian escalation steps is concerning because it suggests that Tehran must consider an overt missile strike against Saudi Arabia or the UAE if its efforts at current covert levels, possibly with the addition of cyber activities, do not achieve its objectives. Iran’s decision to escalate to such a level depends on many factors. How much are Iran’s leaders willing to risk to try to break down Saudi and Emirati support for the “maximum pressure” campaign? How urgent is achieving that objective to them? They could be content to muddle along at something like current levels of escalation if they feel that they have the time to do it. At what point do they abandon the effort to split Saudi Arabia from the U.S. and resort to overt large-scale attack to break the West’s will to continue to tolerate or support the “maximum pressure” campaign? There is no way to assess with any confidence when or if the Iranians would escalate to the point of major missile attack. The worry is that they could well decide that they have no other option if they are serious about breaking the U.S.-Saudi-Emirati partnership or if they abandon that aim and choose a more straightforward approach to escaping sanctions.

These aspects of the situation thus drive Iran toward further conventional military escalation even in the absence of a US military response. They make such an escalation far likelier in the event of a purely or even primarily Saudi military response. We will consider the consequences of this reflection below when discussing possible responses to the Abqaiq strike. Before that consideration, however, we must first put the Abqaiq strike more firmly in the context of the parallel escalation approaches the U.S. and Iran have been pursuing.

Parallel Escalation

The U.S. and Iran are escalating along multiple parallel axes. The U.S. has taken little direct

military action against Iran or its proxies in the Middle East since the April 2018 missile strike in Syria in response to Assad's use of chemical weapons.³⁰ It has instead steadily increased the scope and application of sanctions as part of the "maximum pressure" campaign. It has also deployed additional military assets to the region and worked to build a maritime defense coalition that has not yet fired a shot in anger. It reportedly conducted a sophisticated cyber-attack against Iran on June 20 in response to the Global Hawk shoot down and, apparently, another on September 20 in retaliation for the Abqaiq strike. Iran, for its part, has escalated along two other axes. It has steadily increased its violations of the JCPOA and military attacks conducted by its armed forces and its proxies against America and its allies.

A fundamental assumption underlying opposition to American military responses to the Abqaiq attack is therefore invalid. Iran may indeed engage in military escalation in answer to a U.S. or coalition military retaliation—but it is also likely to escalate militarily in the absence of such military action. It is by no means clear that taking military action now increases the likelihood that Iran will launch any particular military escalation of its own. It may accelerate Tehran's timeline for any specific action, of course, but it may not even do that. Iranian military escalation thus far has proceeded in the absence of American military action against Iran, and there is every reason to believe that that trend will continue and even intensify—quite possibly to direct attack against Americans whether or not the U.S. acts now.

Iranian and proxy military escalation has taken four primary forms: oil tanker attacks and seizures, attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure, al Houthi and Iranian attacks on US drones, and rocket attacks in Iraq. The al Houthis claimed a drone attack against Saudi oil infrastructure on May 14 (that the U.S. assesses actually originated in Iraq) and conducted a multi-drone attack on Saudi oil infrastructure near the UAE border on August.³¹ The Abqaiq attack is thus a significant

escalation of a pattern of attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure in its scale.

The IRGC has been interfering with the movement of tankers through the Persian Gulf on a frequent basis in 2019. It seems first to have focused on damaging tankers through special forces action, targeting four unsuccessfully in May and two with more success in June.³² In July it turned back to seizing tankers outright, likely in response to Gibraltar's July 4 seizure of an Iranian tanker that was heading to Syria in violation of international sanctions on the Assad regime.³³ The IRGC Navy attempted to seize a Royal Navy-escorted tanker on July 10 and successfully captured an Emirati and then a British tanker on July 14 and July 19 respectively.³⁴ The IRGC also deployed GPS jammers to Abu Musa, which US officials assessed was aimed at disrupting commercial ships' navigation systems, giving the IRGC a pretext to seize any that mistakenly sailed into Iran's territorial waters.³⁵ The US announced the initiation of a maritime defense operation following the July 19 seizure and set about building a multinational coalition to protect shipping from IRGC actions.³⁶ Iranian attempts at high-profile seizures of large ships in the open have since fallen off. The IRGC Navy has announced several seizures of smaller boats closer to Iran's shores for smuggling—and it is possible that at least some of those seizures were, in fact, counter-smuggling operations.³⁷

Iran and its proxies have also sought to contest America's ability to operate drones. The al Houthis shot down American drones over Yemen on June 6 and August 20.³⁸ The IRGC attempted to down a drone over the Persian Gulf on June 13 and then successfully shot down a US Global Hawk drone, also flying in international waters over the Persian Gulf despite Iran's claims to the contrary, on June 19.³⁹

Iranian proxies have fired rockets at US military and commercial facilities including an Exxon Mobile facility in Iraq on at least two occasions

in the last six months but have generally refrained from significant escalation.⁴⁰

Iran formally violated JCPOA restrictions on its nuclear program for the first time on July 1.⁴¹ It announced its intention to commit further violations a week later, four days after Gibraltar's seizure of its tanker.⁴² Neither Iran nor its proxies conducted actual attacks between the June 19 Global Hawk shoot down and the August 17 al Houthi attack on Saudi oil infrastructure although the IRGC Navy increased its harassment of U.S. and British naval ships.⁴³ It seems that Iran sought in that period to ascertain whether tanker seizures and nuclear violations would generate the effects it sought vis-a-vis Europe. It is also likely that Tehran was observing Trump's response to the Global Hawk incident and sought to avoid further military escalation as it did so.

Trump's rhetoric after the Global Hawk attack was aggressive, and reports of the US military retaliatory strike aborted at the last minute proliferated.⁴⁴ Iranian leaders quickly picked up on reports that Trump had cancelled the strike because it might have killed Iranians whereas the drone was unmanned. Iranian outward-facing messaging hastened to assert that the IRGC had deliberately avoided shooting down a manned US aircraft before deciding to shoot down the UAV, attempting to portray the Islamic Republic as having sought, like the US, to manage escalation.⁴⁵ Iranian inward-facing messaging began with a focus on preparing the Iranian people and military services for a possible US attack, but rapidly shifted to claiming victory over the US when no American retaliation came.⁴⁶ The meme of IRGC triumphalism based on the Global Hawk incident continued throughout the pre-Abqaiq period, and internal messaging aimed at preparing the Iranian population for a US attack fell away.

By mid-August Tehran apparently felt safe to test the kinetic waters again at least by proxy. The al Houthis' downing of a US drone over Yemen on August 20 generated no meaningful American response, nor did the al Houthi attack on Saudi

infrastructure near the UAE on August 17, despite its unprecedented nature—10 al Houthi drones flew far over the Saudi desert and hit their targets. Washington's inaction following the Global Hawk incident and then after these attacks likely persuaded Iran's leaders that a further escalation against Saudi Arabia would also meet with little or no military response, particularly if it did not kill Americans. The general yawn that greeted Iran's announcement of its intent to increase its violations of the JCPOA on September 5 could have been one of the triggers for the Abqaiq strike in this context.

US Escalation. While Iran escalated militarily and with JCPOA violations in this period, the US responded with sanctions and military activities short of kinetic actions (apart from shooting down a small drone that approached a U.S. warship too closely).⁴⁷ The US announced additional sanctions against Iran and its Syrian allies no fewer than 14 times between May and the Abqaiq strike on September 14.⁴⁸ The sanctions targeted Supreme Leader Khamenei, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, Hezbollah leaders, IRGC commanders, and even a Chinese company.

The US has also undertaken two kinds of non-kinetic military escalation. It deployed air, sea, and anti-air/missile assets to the Middle East on multiple occasions, especially in June and July. Those deployments included a carrier strike group, an amphibious transport ship, Patriot anti-missile batteries, and F-22 stealth fighters to the region in that period.⁴⁹ It also initiated its maritime security operation after the July 19 seizure of a British ship, as noted above, and focused on getting allies to join the operation for the rest of the summer. By the time of the Abqaiq strike the UK, Australia, and Bahrain had agreed to participate in the operation.⁵⁰ Some reports indicate that Israel and South Korea are also participating, but the US has yet to confirm this.⁵¹ Saudi Arabia and the UAE agreed only after the strike.⁵²

The US has conducted several cyber-attacks against Iran and its partners, finally, including one against Iranian-controlled Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq on June 25 and one against Iran itself on June 20.⁵³

Sanctions clearly did not deter Iran from the Abqaiq attack or other escalations. It is easier to argue that they actually precipitated Abqaiq (which followed a flurry of sanctions designations that began on August 28), but it is in fact likelier that specific sanctions and even sanctions flurries have had no meaningful effect on Iranian leaders' decision-making about escalation.

US non-kinetic military activities may have changed the nature of Iranian military escalation without deterring it. Iranian efforts to attack tankers through special forces operations seem to have ended in mid-June after the announcement of American naval reinforcements to the region. The IRGC then shifted to seizing tankers (although that shift may well have been a response, as noted above, to Gibraltar's seizure of the Iranian tanker rather than to any change in the US posture in the region) and harassing our ships. It seems to have abandoned that approach as the US has cobbled together a maritime coalition to protect tankers transiting the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf. It is likely that US and regional partner responses persuaded the IRGC that continued efforts first to sabotage or attack and then to seize tankers would either be too expensive or would run too great a risk of rapid military escalation.

Conclusion. The U.S. "maximum pressure" campaign's sanctions actions have not deterred Iran's military escalation and may, in fact, be accelerating it. US cyber-attacks thus far also appear to have had no effect on Iran's escalation calculations. Only US military operations, even non-kinetic actions, seem to have changed the way in which Iran escalates, although they have not thus far deterred Iran from escalating. Even in the case of Western military responses, however, it appears that the changes occurred

only when the US and its partners actually postured themselves in ways that forced the Iranians to consider higher losses, lower likelihood of successful outcomes, or direct confrontation with Americans and Europeans.

Non-kinetic military actions intended to deter Iran from further attacks on Saudi or other regional state critical infrastructure will likely have to meet these thresholds to be effective. The deployment of additional anti-air and anti-missile capabilities around Saudi and Emirati infrastructure would lower the likelihood of successful subsequent Iranian attacks but would not raise the risk of direct military confrontation with the US and/or the Europeans. It remains to be seen if meeting only that lower threshold will be enough to deter future such attacks.

Possible Responses

Saudis in the Lead. The emerging policy consensus that the Saudis should take the lead in any military response to the Abqaiq attack is mistaken. Such an action would actually further the Iranian objectives of driving a wedge between the U.S. and the kingdom, persuading other Gulf states that the U.S. is not a reliable partner, and giving Tehran the excuse to escalate militarily against Saudi Arabia. It will likely either drive rapid acceleration up the kinetic escalation ladder or cause the collapse of regional support for the "maximum pressure" campaign, and, thus, the collapse of that campaign itself.

Saudi Arabia, on its own, is far more vulnerable to Iran than the Islamic Republic is to the kingdom. Iranian missile and drone attacks on fewer than 10 targets (de-salination plants and oil processing facilities) could destroy the monarchy, collapse the government, and create a massive humanitarian crisis.

The American discourse today would likely greet that prospect with a shrug—the inclination to say, "That's their problem; we don't need their oil" is very strong. It is also very wrong. The U.S. does not need Saudi oil, but oil is a fungible commodity, and its price rises or falls depending

on global supply and demand. Taking a considerable portion of Saudi production offline will raise the global price of oil in ways that devastate the U.S. and its major trading partners. The increased profits American oil companies make will be irrelevant in that macro-economic disaster.

American interest in Saudi Arabia since the 1990s has never been only about oil, moreover. The Salafi-jihadi movement, which includes the Islamic State and al Qaeda, would benefit tremendously from such chaos. Supporters within the kingdom, freed of pressure and able to exploit the chaos, would gain access to resources on a scale that dwarfs what they obtained in Iraq and Syria at the height of their strength there.

The collapse of the Saudi monarchy and government in this fashion would be a security and economic calamity for the U.S.

Nor can the Saudis threaten Iran with any equivalent harm. The Iranian security forces, economy, and government present no such limited target set elimination of which would lead to collapse. The security forces began decentralizing in 2007 precisely to mitigate the risk of a U.S. decapitation airstrike. Saudi attacks might be able to damage Iranian crude oil facilities seriously, but the effect would be limited given Iran's near-total inability to export oil now anyway.

Attacks on Iran's oil refineries would be more damaging to the Iranian economy and, therefore, potentially to the regime's stability. But of the top eight largest refineries in Iran only three are within plausible range of a Saudi attack. Those three (Bandar Abbas, Abadan, and Bushehr) account for almost 40% of Iran's crude distillation capacity to be sure. Taking them offline for a long time would do tremendous damage to Iran. They are widely separated from one another, however, and the prospect of three Saudi airstrikes successful enough to take them offline for a protracted period is improbable in view of the performance of the Saudi air force in Yemen. Even their destruction, moreover, would

not devastate Iran as completely as the destruction of Saudi Arabia's desalination plants and major crude processing facilities.

The difficulties the Saudis have faced in hitting targets precisely in Yemen against an enemy with little meaningful air defense capability, in fact, argue against the likelihood that the Saudi air force would accomplish much against a foe with its own air force and extensive anti-aircraft systems including the advanced Russian S-300.

To undertake such a strike or series of strikes, moreover, the Saudis would have to divert most or all of their air assets from the war in Yemen, giving the al Houthis an opportunity to make gains there or to prepare and conduct reprisal attacks against the kingdom from the south. Iran faces no such dilemma. Its forces too are engaged in a war in another theater (Syria) but it has not allocated its own air force, missile systems, or anti-aircraft capabilities to that conflict (Russia is providing those capabilities to the pro-Assad coalition).

A meaningful Saudi-led retaliatory strike is thus both implausible and unwise.

U.S. The U.S. has a much greater range of options to retaliate militarily against Iran. Its air and missile forces could penetrate even the S-300 air defenses the Iranians have, and Iran's other air defense systems are of little concern to American air planners. There is likely no target in Iran that the U.S. military could not successfully strike if it so chose. An American retaliatory strike on Iranian territory is likely unwise for a number of different reasons, however.

The primary objective of any U.S. strike should be to deter Iran from continuing its campaign of kinetic attacks, let alone escalating further. Deterrence succeeds when one can hold at risk something the enemy cannot afford to lose and when the threat to deprive the enemy of that essential thing is plausible. The leadership of the Islamic Republic regards only one thing as essential—its ability to remain in power. It has long been behaving as though it does not believe

that the U.S. can deprive it of this. Iran will not likely be deterred by American military action against it in the long run, therefore, unless the U.S. persuades it that America can and will pursue regime change by military means.

But the U.S. does not have a plausible way to remove the current regime by force. A ground invasion of Iran for such a purpose is beyond the capabilities of the American military at this time—and would be an unwise undertaking in any event. The long history of attempts to remove regimes by air attack alone without the threat of a ground invasion offers no examples of success. The odds of Iran becoming the first proof of the possibility of regime change from the air approach zero because the regime has worked so very hard to defend in advance against precisely such a scenario. The best the U.S. could hope for would be to wreck the Islamic Republic's ability to operate well, force it to focus on surviving and maintaining control over its population, and gradually attrite its leaders and fighting abilities. The regime would still be able to conduct attacks, both conventional and unconventional, around the region for some time even during such an air campaign. It could of course conduct terrorist operations globally as well as it has tried to do before.⁵⁴ The top of the escalation ladder looks very unpleasant for the U.S.

It looks even more unpleasant for the leaders of the Islamic Republic, of course. They would be losing the governmental structures, security forces, economy, and society that they have labored to build for so long even if they did not lose power. They would have to fear constantly that their people might ultimately tire of their rule in the face of so much pain and deprivation. Their abilities to export the revolution and support their allies and proxies—and, thereby, retain the regional influence that matters so much to them—would be seriously degraded. They would likely avoid an escalation path that they believed might lead to this situation until they felt they had no option but to embrace it.

They might also embrace it rather than surrender, however. The current generation of Iranian leaders, especially in the IRGC, all fought in the Iran-Iraq War. They experienced conflict against an enemy with far superior technology who was willing to attack their cities with rockets and chemical weapons. Faced with such terrible odds and such a ruthless enemy the IRGC resorted to religious fervor and almost metaphysical arguments to keep pushing for continuing the war despite unbearable losses and with no prospect of victory. The Supreme Leader and the IRGC commanders today are working hard to reinvigorate the revolutionary spirit in Iranian society as their primary response to the “maximum pressure” campaign.⁵⁵ The likelihood that they will succeed is less important than what that fact tells us about their mentality. As they approach the ends of their careers (and, in the aging Supreme Leader's case, life) they seem determined to return to the mindset that guided them through the Iran-Iraq War. That fact does not bode well for assessments that they will make rational decisions when faced with truly existential attacks.

Limited American military strikes against Iran itself are therefore unlikely to deter continued Iranian kinetic operations or escalations. The regime will not believe that the U.S. can destroy it until the U.S. is well along the path to doing so, and possibly not even then. Attacks that clearly lack such an aim may alter the shape of future Iranian kinetic operations or escalation (as the multinational maritime operation and U.S. deployments to the region may have done), but will not likely stop them.

The U.S. has other ways of threatening positions that the Iranian leadership has identified as existential issues outside Iran. The memory of the Iran-Iraq War makes Iranian suzerainty over Iraq a primary national security objective. Anything that threatened to make Iraq once again into an enemy of Iran, especially one willing to allow the U.S. to use its territory to attack the Islamic Republic, would seem a mortal threat. The Supreme Leader and the IRGC leadership

have also identified Iran's positions in Syria and Lebanon as existential. The regime relies on Hezbollah's vast missile arsenal as its principal deterrent against major Israeli military action. If it lost that ally or that arsenal it would have no meaningful way to respond to Israeli military strikes against its nuclear program or any other important targets in Iran itself. Hezbollah's stability in Lebanon has long depended in part on its access to bases in Syria, since Lebanon is both too small and too vulnerable to Israeli ground attack. Reliable Iranian basing in Syria is therefore essential to Hezbollah's long-term survival, making it in turn essential to the Iranian regime.

Iraq. The U.S. cannot now threaten Iran's presence in or influence over Iraq except by running extreme risks to its own personnel and position. The withdrawal of all American forces and aid in 2011 and the severe limits Washington has imposed on the deployment of U.S. troops to Iraq after the rise of ISIS and its 2014 attack on Iraq have left Iraq very much at Tehran's mercy. The Iranian regime has used its position to consolidate the power of militias that report to it and even to get the Iraqi state to pay for them, as we have seen. It has also positioned them to be able to rain mortars, rockets, and IEDs on American personnel in Iraq, who are vulnerable because there are not enough American forces in the country reliably to defend them. If the U.S. began an effort to expel the Iranians from Iraq or even to damage their positions there seriously, therefore, American leaders could and should expect to pay an unacceptable price in American blood.

The U.S. could threaten to deprive Iran of many of the benefits of its influence in Iraq by destroying the Iraqi economy through the ruthless application of sanctions stemming from the "maximum pressure" campaign. Apart from driving further Iranian military escalation doing so would also lead to the expulsion and likely deaths of American personnel. It would disrupt the ongoing counter-ISIS operation just as ISIS is reconstituting in both Iraq and Syria. It would

take volumes of Iraqi oil offline, driving up the price of oil dramatically. And it would not pose an existential threat to the Islamic Republic even so, since Iraq would be driven even more into the Iranian orbit and become an even more reliable, if unstable, satellite.

The U.S. would have to change its policies and deployments in Iraq fundamentally to gain leverage for any threats against Iran in that country. It should consider doing so but cannot change the equation fast enough to matter for responses to the Abqaiq strike or further Iranian escalations in the coming months.

Syria. The situation in Syria is rather different. The Iranians have been working since the outbreak of rebellion against Assad first to stabilize the Assad regime and then to re-establish its control over Syria and its ability to pay for itself and its military. The pro-Assad coalition has not achieved either objective yet, despite Russia's contributions and U.S. disinterest, and is not on track to do so. Pro-American forces backed by small numbers of U.S. troops occupy Syria's oil-producing region, depriving the regime of the resources it needs to pay for itself and making it a draw on the overstrained Iranian treasury. The collapse of Assad's military down to a small effective core requires the continued deployment of tens of thousands of foreign troops—primarily Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, and Afghan and Pakistani fighters, all trained, deployed, and paid for by Iran. Iran and Assad depend on Russia almost completely for air power and other high-end conventional military capabilities. The direct involvement of the Turkish military in the fight against Assad (as well as the Kurds) increases the challenges facing the coalition supporting him. Iran's ability to continue to sustain its contributions to the pro-Assad coalition under the "maximum pressure" campaign is unclear, rendering the prospects for that coalition's victory and consolidation of control over Syria uncertain and even doubtful.

Iran does not need the Assad regime to control all Syria, of course. Its vital national interests are

largely confined to the southwest where Hezbollah's bases and support zones lie along with the best positions for emplacing Iranian missiles and drones to threaten Israel. Iran could in theory secure these requirements with a rump 'Alawite state, with or without Assad himself in power, ceding much of the rest of Syria. The trouble is that no such rump state would be stable or at peace. The Sunni majority in Syria will not likely accept the country's partition in such a way that deprives it of access to Damascus and the coast. Russian interests, moreover, demand continued regime control over the northernmost part of the coastline around the Russian airbase at Latakia—a position constantly threatened by the Turkish forces and Salafi-jihadi and other Syrian groups in and near neighboring Idlib Province.

Nor could such a rump state pay for itself or its security forces. The Assad regime depended on Syria's limited oil supply for cash, and the devastated Syrian economy cannot recover without regaining access to that or some other source of income. The rump 'Alawite state would thus remain a financial ward of the Islamic Republic at a time when Tehran must find ways to divest itself of such expenses. For all the erroneous discussions of how Putin is mired in Syria, it is actually the Islamic Republic that is trapped.

Iran's leaders suffer from the additional problem that the Syrian war is unpopular in Iran. Chants during the massive Dey Protests at the start of 2018 repeatedly called on the regime to stop spending money in Syria and start focusing on domestic priorities.⁵⁶ Whereas U.S. or Saudi attacks on Iran itself would likely cause at least some limited rallying around the flag (although not likely as much as the IRGC leadership probably expects), attacks on Iranians in Syria would almost certainly not evoke such sentiments among Iranians at large.

The U.S. could therefore undertake an air campaign against IRGC and Quds Force bases and personnel in Syria that threatens Tehran's ability to sustain its presence there at levels it

deems essential to its national security and survival. The overarching aim of such a campaign would be to demonstrate that the U.S. is willing and able to hold at risk something that Iran's leaders are not prepared to lose. It would go beyond the limited Israeli strikes that have focused primarily on very high-end weapons systems and Iranian agents suspected of preparing attacks against Israel. Success in that effort offers the best chance of persuading the Islamic Republic to cease its kinetic escalations around the region for a time and force it to calculate the cost-benefit of future such calculations much more conservatively in the future.

Attacks on the Iranian security infrastructure in Syria would have additional benefits for the U.S. They would re-establish pressure on the Assad regime and the 'Alawite population generally to make the concessions to the Sunni majority needed to get to a durable peace agreement. Of the many obstacles to such an agreement the unwillingness of Assad to compromise, based in part on the belief that he will triumph militarily, has been one of the most important. Such attacks would also give the U.S. the opportunity to inflict pain directly on those most responsible for Iran's regional escalation, the IRGC, in addition, without forcing the U.S. to start walking down an escalation ladder leading toward militarily-driven regime change in Iran. They could likely be calibrated more finely and offer a better chance of succeeding at a lower level of conflict than attacks on Iran itself, finally, because of Iran's exposure and vulnerability in Syria.

Risks of Responses

All American retaliation options carry considerable risk. We have already identified several:

- Iran will retain the ability to disrupt maritime movement in the Persian Gulf and through the Strait of Hormuz for some considerable time even in the face

of the most aggressive American air campaign.

- Iran will likely also be able to conduct missile/drone attacks against the Gulf States and U.S. bases in the region, again, even during a large-scale American air campaign and certainly in response to any more limited strikes.
- The global terrorist networks established by the Quds Force and Hezbollah could activate to attack targets in Europe, Latin America, and the United States itself.
- Iraqi militias controlled by Tehran could inflict terrible casualties on American personnel in Iraq and possibly drive the U.S. out of Iraq entirely.

In addition to the risks considered above, U.S. attacks in Syria especially but even in Iran must consider possible Russian reactions. Russian-manned air defenses cover Syria and advanced Russian aircraft operate over Syria's skies. Moscow has so far shown no interest in using those systems against Israeli attacks on Iranian positions in Syria, nor did it activate them against the U.S. missile strike in response to Assad's repeated use of chemical weapons. Putin could change this policy in the face of direct U.S. attacks on his Iranian partner, however, raising the specters both of a serious air defense challenge to American military action and an open military confrontation between the U.S. and Russia.

The Iranians could also retaliate against attacks in Syria by targeting U.S. personnel in Syria and/or by escalating in Iraq. The U.S. cannot maintain its operations in Syria without its bases in Iraq, and its personnel even in Syria are potentially vulnerable to Iranian agents.

One could evolve additional risks and possible Iranian reactions, but these are by far the most concerning and plausible. They are, indeed, very real. A U.S. strike against Iranian forces in Iran or anywhere in the region could trigger some or all of them, and there is nothing the U.S. can do in advance to prevent them. Escalation is

escalation and it can always get out of hand. We will nevertheless consider first some factors that reduce the likelihood of some of these scenarios and then consider the serious risks of inaction that are so rarely discussed.

We have already discussed possible U.S. responses to a full-throated Iranian move in Iraq. Iran's leaders might or might not believe or be deterred by the threat of the U.S. destruction of the Iraqi economy through sanctions, although they would probably take it very seriously if Washington made clear that it was seriously meant. But Iran is not the only actor that matters in Iraq—the Iraqis matter as well. If the U.S. made it clear to Iraqis that it was willing and able to take such a step if they allow the Iranians to use their territory as a free-fire zone against Americans, let alone if they slipped fully into the role of Iranian satellite, they would likely think at least twice. The one threat the current U.S. administration can make that is credible beyond doubt is the threat of imposing crippling sanctions. The extreme vulnerability of the Iraqi economy to such a threat is powerful leverage against Iranian pressures and threats.

The risk of Iranian military escalation against Saudi Arabia or other Gulf states resulting from a U.S. strike must be weighed against the assessed likelihood that Iran will escalate militarily in this way even if the U.S. takes no action. The mitigation for this risk, assuming that the retaliation does not achieve its objective of deterring precisely such attacks, is racing to deploy defensive systems throughout the Gulf.

The danger of Iranian attacks on U.S. personnel in Syria is very real. The U.S. could mitigate the risk somewhat by altering the posture and deployment of those forces for a time and/or reinforcing them—but some risk will remain. As with other risks of action, however, this risk also exists even if the U.S. does not respond to Abqaiq. The potential vulnerability of American service members and other personnel in Syria and Iran's ability to attack them with some degree of plausible deniability makes them attractive

targets in any event as Tehran considers further military escalation. As for the risk of Iranian retaliation in Iraq, the same deterrence factors described above relating to Iranian operations from Iraq still hold in this scenario. The Iranians would have to decide to risk severe damage to Iraq's economy and ability to support their economic needs in exchange for retaliating against U.S. strikes on their assets in Syria.

The real worry is the Russian reaction. It is generally assumed that the Russians will not respond militarily to a U.S. strike against Iran itself but that they will be prepared to engage in a major air war with the U.S. if the America began striking pro-regime targets in Syria. This assumption requires serious examination.

Fears of Russian military action against U.S. operations in Syria ignore the very real problems confronting Putin if he launches a conventional war with the United States (as he would be doing, since the U.S. would certainly not target Russian bases in Syria deliberately at the outset of an air campaign aimed at Iran). These problems are explored in detail elsewhere, but they revolve around Russia's poverty and the purposes for which Putin established himself in Syria to begin with.⁵⁷ His primary aim there is to secure a permanent air and naval base on the Mediterranean; every other Russian objective in Syria is secondary to that aim. He has also used Syria as a showcase to advance Russian weapons sales—a major source of income for the cash-strapped Kremlin. Both those aims would be compromised if he initiated a shooting war against the U.S.

American air power is so much greater than all the airpower Russia has, let alone the very small detachment Putin maintains in Syria, that America's ability to destroy any airframes Putin sends to Syria is unquestionable. Nor is there any real doubt that the U.S. could take down even the vaunted S-400 systems if it committed the necessary resources to the task. Both actions would be equally devastating for Putin. He cannot afford to replace hardware lost in Syria

because of Russia's economic weakness. And the market value of advanced Russian air defense systems rests in no small part on the notion of their invincibility. He would be foolish to create a situation in which the U.S. demonstrated weaknesses in those systems. The U.S. could also drive Russia out of Syria entirely. It could destroy the airfield at Latakia, sink any Russian vessels in or approaching the Russian base at Tartus, and prevent Russia from getting reinforcements to Syria by air or sea, the only practical routes Russia could use. The prices Putin could easily find himself paying for the dubious benefit of showing himself a stalwart ally of Iran are far too high. This calculation on a smaller scale is no doubt part of the reason for Putin's complete passivity in the face of Israeli air operations against Iranian targets in Syria and Iraq.

The prospect of such an escalation is alarming to American military planners despite the high likelihood of U.S. success. It would require the diversion to the Middle East of a large proportion of America's air and certain kinds of naval assets, denuding the Indo-Pacific theater at a time of great tension with both North Korea and China. It would likely also disrupt ongoing counter-terrorism operations in and beyond the Middle East. And, of course, it would almost certainly cost the U.S. expensive aircraft and the even more valuable lives of pilots. These risks and costs must, again, be weighed against the risks and costs of uncontrolled Iranian escalation throughout the region that could compel the U.S. to concentrate its military for a major war on terms set by its adversary, at a time and place of Iran's choosing, and after having suffered significant initial losses.

There can be no guarantees of controlling escalation once begun. Many factors globally and locally make it highly unlikely, however, that Putin would initiate a significant conventional conflict over Syria in response to the start of a campaign of American attacks on Iranian—but not Russian—positions there.

Risks of Inaction

The certain costs and likely risks of any U.S. military action are real and concerning. America has no risk-free option and few decent options at all to respond to the Iranian military escalation campaign the culmination of which, for the moment, was the attack on Abqaiq. The policy discourse generally has ignored the important fact, however, that inaction is also very risky. On the contrary, the risks to American vital national interests of failing to respond adequately to the Abqaiq attack are enormous.

First, the pattern of parallel escalation strongly suggests that adding more sanctions will not deter further Iranian military escalation and could accelerate it.

Second, encouraging Saudi Arabia to strike while the U.S. takes limited or no action furthers the Iranian objective of splitting the U.S. from its Gulf partners and ultimately collapsing key elements of the “maximum pressure” campaign as well as America’s strategic position in the Middle East.

Third, backing down from the “maximum pressure” campaign, whether or not the U.S. goes so far as to re-enter the nuclear deal (as many Trump Administration critics demand) would establish the global precedent that the U.S. will surrender to aggressive military attacks on its allies and partners by ceding whatever is demanded.

Fourth, refraining from retaliating against the Abqaiq attack will encourage Iran to believe that it can take direct military action to raise the global

price of oil at will and without fear. Americans must start to understand that America’s independence of Saudi oil does not make Saudi oil production irrelevant to the American economy. The global price of oil will rise if Saudi oil is taken off the market for a protracted period of time, and such a rise will seriously harm the U.S. economy directly, by raising the price of oil the U.S. purchases even from countries other than Saudi Arabia and domestic oil producers, and indirectly by devastating the economies of our key trading partners that do rely on Saudi oil.

Fifth, inaction in the face of such an egregious act of aggression will fuel the narrative of Iranian triumphalism already powerfully strengthened by the lack of an American response to the shoot-down of the Global Hawk drone. That triumphalist narrative will embolden Iranian proxies and allies and encourage the regime to stand fast with regard to its nuclear program, regional activities, and repression of its own people. It will badly undermine the psychological effects of the “maximum pressure” campaign.

These risks are extremely serious. They transcend the problem of Iran and the value of the relationship with Saudi Arabia. They affect core American national security interests and the domestic economic well-being of Americans. Those who oppose an American response to the Abqaiq attack must at least acknowledge these risks and explain why it is better and safer to run them than to run the risks associated with any of the various response options. That will be a difficult argument to make.

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