



Saudi Strikes Are A Critical Test For Trump

September 18, 2019 **Ilan I. Berman** *The Hill*

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On Saturday, two of Saudi Arabia's most important oil facilities became the targets of the most significant attack on world energy infrastructure in more than a quarter-century. The coordinated strikes on Abqaiq and Khurais in the Kingdom's Eastern Province — which appear to have been carried out by Yemen's Houthi rebels as well as by Iran directly — were devastating, taking roughly 60 percent of total Saudi daily oil production — an estimated 5.7 million barrels from the 9.8 million total — offline and at least temporarily jeopardizing the country's position as a global energy power.

In the aftermath of the attacks, the Trump administration has pinned the blame squarely on Tehran. But it has also made clear that it isn't eager for a military confrontation with the Iranian regime (though the Pentagon is still actively planning for some sort of response). Yet how Washington responds to the incident will have profound implications, both for its continued credibility in the region and for the future of its relations with Iran.

In a nutshell, the White House now needs to focus on three priorities:

Stabilizing global markets. The *Wall Street Journal* has dubbed the Saudi attack the “big one” — unequivocal proof that the energy infrastructure on which the world relies remains fragile and vulnerable to subversion. Indeed, the immediate aftermath of the attack saw the global price of oil jump by some 10 percent. And while the Saudis are confident they can restore production in the near term, confidence building measures are still needed to demonstrate to nervous nations that the market is stable, and resilient. The President's announcement that he is releasing supplies from America's Strategic Petroleum Reserve in order to keep world oil prices down is a good first step in this direction. It should be followed by others, economic and otherwise, that convey the same soothing message to jittery investors and clients.

Securing world oil routes. In recent weeks, Iran has exhibited increasingly provocative behavior in the Strait of Hormuz, interfering with tanker traffic and seizing commercial vessels there. In response, the White House has suggested an “internationalization” of the strategic waterway and the creation of a regional security architecture by which to safeguard regional oil supplies. Yet those plans have met with only limited success so far; other countries have been hesitant to sign on to the American plan, worried that it might complicate their commercial relations with Iran. The Saudi attacks, however, provide the Trump administration a renewed opportunity to advance the idea of a regional security mechanism to safeguard regional oil and diminish Iran's ability to manipulate energy flows from the Middle East.

Deterring Iran. Iran's recent, aggressive regional behavior is a clear attempt by the country's ruling ayatollahs to improve their bargaining position ahead of any return to the diplomatic table with the U.S. That strategy appeared to be working — at least initially. Over the past several weeks, the Trump administration's policy of “maximum pressure” seemed to soften substantially, with the President himself floating the idea of a \$15 billion bailout for Iran's ailing economy and suggesting that he and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani might meet at the UN General Assembly gathering in New York later this month. Such a rapprochement, however, is now increasingly difficult to imagine. Instead, the focus of the Administration's Iran policy should shift to concrete steps the U.S. can take to diminish the activities of Iranian-sponsored forces like the Houthis and deter further regional meddling by the regime in Tehran (ranging from surgical strikes designed to degrade Iran's extensive proxy network to a buildup of American forces in the Middle East).

The stakes are exceptionally high. A cogent, hard-hitting response to the Saudi attacks could go a long way toward reassuring America's Middle Eastern partners that it remains committed to repelling Iranian aggression and safeguarding their security. A lackluster U.S. reply, on the other hand, would inevitably result in a massive loss of confidence in the Trump administration among the countries of the region. That, in turn, raises the risks of a wider conflict, as the Saudis (and perhaps others) are prompted to take matters into their own hands.

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