

# Strategic Analysis Paper

11 June 2019

## Saudi Arabia vs. Iran: The Washington Factor

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### Key Points

- King Salman of Saudi Arabia convened emergency meetings to discuss attacks on Saudi assets.
- He blamed Iran for the attacks, an accusation that Iran flatly rejected.
- The danger lies in the fact that Arab countries could be potentially arrayed against Iran.
- The greater danger lies in the fact that the US could use the situation to achieve several of its own goals.

### Summary

Saudi King Salman called an emergency gathering of the leaders of twenty-one Arab League countries to be held on 30 May at two consecutive meetings in the city of Mecca. The reason for the summit was simple: according to the king, decisive action was required to confront Iran's recent 'criminal' actions and to prevent '[escalations](#)'. The call for action against Iran followed Tehran's alleged [attacks](#) on Saudi oil pumping stations in the kingdom, allegedly by Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen using drones, and on four vessels, including two Saudi-owned oil tankers, off the United Arab Emirates.

Iran denied any part in those incidents, calling them 'worrisome and dreadful' and also called for an investigation into the attacks. It also suggested that saboteurs from a third country could have carried out the attacks and noted that the attacks only demonstrated how vulnerable the Gulf states were to such attacks. President Trump's National Security

Adviser, John Bolton, who is a recognised anti-Iran hawk, has suggested that he possesses evidence to demonstrate that Iran or its agents were behind the attacks on the Saudi assets.

### Analysis

The main danger inherent in the situation is that King Salman chose to bring together major member states of the Arab League, the Gulf Co-operation Council and the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation to, first, call for a united front against any escalation of the attacks by Iran and, second, to also counter what he called Tehran's growing influence in the region. [Calling](#) Iran's actions a 'glaring violation of UN treaties', King Salman went on to state that 'This is naked aggression against our stability and international security', adding 'recent criminal acts ... require that all of us work seriously to preserve the security... of GCC countries'. Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Assaf suggested that Riyadh ought to 'confront [Tehran] with all means of force and firmness.'

It is interesting to note that Qatar's Prime Minister, Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser Al Thani, took the place of the emirate's ruler, Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, who had been invited by King Salman to attend the meeting despite the fact that Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE had imposed a land, sea, and air blockade on Qatar in June 2017. King Salman did not offer the Prime Minister the customary kiss, however. Qatar only took part in the meeting after the United States had applied considerable pressure on it to do so.

The probability that Iran did carry out the attacks on the oil tankers or instructed one of its proxy militant groups to do so remains elevated. Washington has once again sanctioned Tehran economically and President Trump has, more recently, issued a stark [warning](#) by of 'dire consequences' if it threatened the US again. He then authorised an aircraft carrier strike group to be positioned in the region to demonstrate how serious he was. The US under Mr Trump has also pulled out of the Obama-era Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, informally known as the Iranian Nuclear Agreement. Worrisome, to say the least, for Tehran is Washington's success in pressuring Iran's main purchasers of its energy products to [terminate](#) their Iranian supplies and source their energy requirements elsewhere. Iran's economy, as may be expected, has been dealt a massive blow because of the sanctions. Given that situation, it is more than likely that Iran [authorised](#) the attacks on the oil tankers. As Mr Bolton ominously [stated](#), however, 'I don't think anybody who is familiar with the situation in the region, whether they have examined the evidence or not, thinks anything other than that these attacks were carried out by Iran or their surrogates.' Mr Bolton, it appears, had already determined Iran's complicity in the matter when he made that statement.

He probably is vindicated in his assessment, however. A joint investigation that is being conducted by Norway, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the flags of which countries the tankers carried, found that all four tankers had almost identical blast holes in the stern just above the water line as they were moored off the coast of the emirate of Fujairah on 12 May. Their technical findings were given to the ambassadors of the five UN Security Council permanent members. That [report](#) noted that it was probably the case that a

[state actor](#) had carried out the attack in which magnetic mines were used on the tankers. It added that:

Based on the evaluation of radar data, and the short time several of the targeted vessels had been at anchor prior to the attacks, it appears most likely that the mines were placed on the vessels by divers deployed from fast boats. While investigations are still ongoing, these facts are strong indications that the four attacks were part of a sophisticated and co-ordinated operation carried out by an actor with significant operational capacity, most likely a state actor.

Mr Bolton's assessment was likely based on a report by an American destroyer in the Gulf, the USS *Mason*, which tracked 20 small Revolutionary Guard navy vessels on 12 May, the night of the attack, as they crossed the Strait of Hormuz and entered UAE waters off the Fujairah coast.

While Tehran denies that it authorised or conducted those attacks and, in fact, called for a [probe](#) into the incident, Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, its Lebanese proxy militant group, [said](#) that the United States ought to 'know well that any war on Iran will not remain confined to Iran's borders. The entire region will burn', and that all of its forces and interests in the region would be annihilated. The top US Commander in the Middle East has also [warned](#) that the Iranians or their proxies may orchestrate an attack at any moment.

Therein lies yet another danger. If an enraged Saudi Arabia, perceiving yet another attack on its assets as being carried out by Iran and knowing that it now has the backing of the summit attendees, were to launch an attack of its own on Iran, there could be little doubt that Tehran would authorise Hezbollah, the Houthi insurgents and other militant groups to attack Saudi, US and UAE assets. Those attacks could occur on Saudi or UAE territory, or against US targets in Syria, Iraq or Bahrain. Were that to occur, it is likely that President Trump would authorise retaliatory and amplified strikes against Iran, no matter his claim of not wanting to enter into another war in the region. If Iran were to be targeted, it is equally likely that it would initiate a regional conflagration.

A bad situation could become decidedly worse, however, if China, Russia or both used the opportunity to draw the US further into another Middle East war and face enhanced losses by supplying Iran with weapons and other military technology. That situation would enable both to perceive how the United States would counter those weapons and technology, thus reducing the surprises that it could bring to bear in, say, the South China Sea or Ukraine. While such a situation is remote, it is not entirely impossible. Russia and China would follow the example that the United States established in arming Afghan fighters in their conflict against Russian forces from 1979.

More recently, however, President Trump has indicated that he is not interested in going to war with Iran. That could be because he wishes to focus on further developing the US economy, because he wishes to stick to a campaign promise not to take the country into more wars or because he wishes to focus on a larger target: China. Be that as it may, it has been reported that Mr Trump is prepared to [talk](#) to President Rouhani and his Secretary of

State has added that the US would do so [without any preconditions](#). So earnest is the President to initiate a dialogue with Iran that he has [reportedly](#) given Swiss authorities his direct telephone number to be handed over to Iran in an effort to demonstrate his willingness and desire to talk to Tehran. True to form, however, Mr Trump also [stated](#) that the possibility of conflict with Iran remains, although he would prefer to talk to Iran's leaders. In so doing, Mr Trump appeared to [dismiss](#) the hardline stances of National Security Adviser Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

That reasoning would, however, fall short of offering a true picture of the US's policy on Iran. It is far more likely that the Trump Administration seeks to end the asymmetrical threat that Tehran poses to the region and beyond, including the United States. After informing reporters that the President had authorised sending the aircraft carrier strike group and a bomber force to the Gulf region to send a 'clear and unmistakable message' to Iran in early May this year, Mr Bolton [noted](#), just as President Trump did, that the United States did not seek to wage war against Iran but 'we are fully prepared to respond to any attack, whether by proxy, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, or regular Iranian forces', and added that 'Any attack on United States interests or on those of our allies will be met with unrelenting force.' The United States, in short, had placed Iran on notice. Arguably even more troubling, however, was Mr Pompeo's slip that 'It's something we've been working on for a little while.' Washington, it would appear, had evaluated the entire situation, including Tehran's possible responses, and reached the conclusion that the Ayatollahs would cross a red line at some point in time, thus giving the Trump Administration the excuse it required to initiate possible military action against them.

President Trump and his advisers may be correct in their assessment that Iran is not as strategically clever as it is assumed to be. In 2015, for instance, while negotiating the terms of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, the Iran Nuclear Agreement), the Obama Administration mistakenly stated in public that the ongoing negotiations were a "foreign policy success". That mistake led Tehran to believe that Washington desired an agreement that they could hold up to the American public more than they did one to the Iranian people. When the negotiations stalled on the terms of the surveillance measures to be put in place to ensure Tehran's compliance with the terms of the JCPOA and Mr Kerry walked out of the negotiations, Tehran was very much taken aback and, finally, gave in to Washington's demands.

In the present situation, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps appears to be on the ascendant in Iranian politics and apparently believes that if it were to calibrate its attacks against US forces, Washington, as in the past, would be very reluctant to respond. The attack on the oil tankers with the absence of direct evidence that Iran carried them out, they may believe, could point the way to future attacks of a similar nature on US forces in the region. That strategy would pose an enormous risk, however, given the hardline nature of the current administration in Washington and its seemingly ambivalent attitude towards Iran.

The danger to Iran is compounded by two other factors. It is, first, a major supplier of China's oil and gas. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is predicated almost entirely on those supplies. Given the Trump Administration's determination to force China to acquiesce

to its terms in order that a fairer and more equitable trade balance obtain, any conflict with Iran would almost certainly curtail its energy exports. That certainty would be amplified if there is regime change in the country. If carefully planned, Washington could even bring the dislike that the Iranian public has for the theocracy to the surface and, in doing so, accomplish two goals: bringing about the end of the Iranian Revolution and creating a potential ally in its competition with China. While bringing the Iranian public onside would need to be carried out very carefully, it is by no means an impossible goal. It would only require that Washington recognise the demand of ordinary Iranians to be treated with the respect that they deserve, for themselves and for their collective national sovereignty. It would need to recognise that achieving regime change does not automatically imply creating a friendly country. Most Iranians have not forgotten that it was America's overthrow of Mossadegh that led to the abuses of the Pahlavi regime and the rise of Khomeini and the theocracy.

A second factor is Iran's nuclear programme. In any future conflict with Iran, Washington would undoubtedly seek to neutralise Tehran's nuclear ambitions once and for all, thus putting an end to a potential nuclear race in the region. These two factors by themselves would be sufficient for Washington to wish for conflict with Iran.

It is in this context that King Salman's emergency gathering becomes salient. President Trump, having campaigned in part on terminating the United States' security regime in the Middle East, would almost certainly permit Saudi Arabia and its partners to appear to take the lead in any conflict against Iran. It would be the US, however, that directs the conflict and provides arms and military supplies to that Arab coalition, secure in the knowledge that any Chinese or Russian involvement could see those two countries fighting against Arab countries and, thus, putting their Middle East policies at risk. To a transactional president, that situation could see enhanced US influence in the Middle East with an attendant diminution of Chinese and Russian influence there and the potential sales of billions of dollars' worth of military goods to the region.

The curtailment of energy supplies to China from Iran and potentially from Saudi Arabia if China were to support Tehran against Riyadh and its coalition partners would force China to become dependent on Russian supplies and, consequently, have to face the risks associated with strategic over-dependence on the one supplier. That situation would make the incipient Sino-Russian friendship more to President Putin's liking and the relationship more equal than it currently is.

King Salman's emergency meetings may have been in response to attacks on Saudi assets but it is likely that his goals would be overtaken by larger ones that could be played out on a much-larger scale.

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Published by Future Directions International Pty Ltd.  
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