

## **The Saudi oil industry under attack**

*Shaul Shay*

(Senior research fellow at the International Institute for Counterterrorism (ICT) at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya and former deputy head of Israel's National Security Council)

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The Houthi militia is escalating its hostile attacks to target energy sources in Saudi Arabia and the Red Sea region. The escalation comes on the seventh anniversary of the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in Yemen's war.

The Saudi-led Arab coalition announced on March 25, 2022, that the Iran-backed Houthi militias in Yemen had carried out 16 attacks against the Kingdom. The coalition said that Saudi defenses shot down 12 armed drones and a ballistic missile fired at the southern and southwestern regions of the Kingdom.

The Saudi led coalition also has destroyed two explosive-laden Houthi boats on March 23, 2022, in the Yemeni ports of Saleef and Hodeidah . The coalition said that the militia was planning to use the boats in attacks on oil tankers crossing the Bab Al-Mandab Strait.<sup>1</sup>

The attacks came at a time when the conflict in Ukraine is causing extreme volatility in oil prices and Saudi Arabia, one of the world's biggest oil exporters, and its partners in the Opec alliance, are all under pressure to raise production to help control the price of oil. <sup>2</sup>

Abdulaziz bin Salman Al Saud, Saudi Arabia's energy minister, said that the repeated attacks on Saudi infrastructure "do not just target the Kingdom but aim to undermine the security and stability of global energy supplies".

Saudi Arabia will not hold responsibility for any shortage of oil supplies in global markets caused by the Houthi attacks on its oil facilities, the Energy Ministry stressed. It urged the need for the international community to realize the danger of Iran's continued supply of the Houthis

with ballistic missiles and armed drones that are targeting Saudi oil and gas facilities and that are in turn affecting the Kingdom's output and ability to meet its commitments to the global markets.<sup>3</sup>

Two other significant events that are taking place in the international arena and in the local arena in Yemen these days are: the nuclear talks with Iran and the opening of peace talks between the rival factions in Yemen under the auspices of the GCC.

The Arab Coalition on March 29, 2022, announced that it would cease all the military operations during the month of Ramadan to help create “propitious conditions” for peace talks to end the yearslong war in the country. The Houthis have refused to attend the talks and have repeatedly rejected peace talks over recent years.<sup>4</sup>

The last attack also appeared timed to coincide with the opening of the Formula One event. The attack was close enough to the venue that the smoke was clearly visible from the track, where practice runs were taking place for the races.

### **The attack on the Jeddah's oil plant (March 25)**

The Saudi-led Arab coalition announced on March 25, 2022, that the Iran-backed Houthi militias in Yemen had carried out 16 attacks against the Kingdom. The coalition announced that Saudi defenses shot down 12 armed drones and a ballistic missile fired at the southern and southwestern regions of the Kingdom. In several places the attack caused damage:<sup>5</sup>

One attack targeted Saudi Aramco’s Bulk Plant in Jeddah and a fire erupted in two tanks in the oil facility, the fire was controlled, and no injuries or loss of life were recorded.<sup>6</sup>

The Houthis have twice targeted the North Jeddah plant with cruise missiles: One attack came in November 2020 while the last one came on March 20, 2022.<sup>7</sup>

The North Jeddah Bulk Plant stores diesel, petrol and jet fuel for use in the city. It accounts for more than a quarter of all of Saudi Arabia’s supplies and also supplies fuel crucial to running a regional desalination plant.

The coalition said a projectile attack led to the eruption of a small fire at a power distribution plant in Samta, Jizan. No casualties were reported.

Saudi state television acknowledged attacks in the town of Dhahran al-Janub that hit water tanks of the Saudi National Water Company and damaged vehicles and houses.

The interception and destruction of two drones fired at Najran city led to the crashing of remains over some residential areas, causing minor material damage. No casualties have been reported.

### **The Houthis claimed responsibility**

Houthi military spokesman Yahya Sarea said on March 25, 2022 that Yemen's Houthis had attacked Saudi Arabian state oil giant Aramco's facilities in the port city of Jeddah with missiles and the Ras Tanura and Rabigh refineries with drones. Sarea added that the attack also targeted vital facilities in the Saudi capital Riyadh.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Houthi attack on oil refinery in Riyadh (March 20)**

Two Houthi drone attacks were launched at Yanbu's gas plant and another on YASREF. The Houthi drone assault on the YASREF refinery, in the Yanbu Industrial City on the Red Sea, has led to a temporary reduction in the refinery's production.

The Houthi e insurgents said that they launched cross-border drone and missile attacks on the kingdom, targeting a number of "vital and important" establishments — including Aramco facilities.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Houthi attack on oil refinery in Riyadh (March 11)**

Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels claimed responsibility for a drone attack on an oil refinery in Riyadh. The attack caused a small fire. In a televised address, Houthi spokesperson Yahya Sarea said the Saudi Aramco refinery was hit with three drones. He said they also targeted other Aramco facilities in the Saudi cities of Jizan and Abha.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Houthi strike on Aramco Oil Depot (March 4)**

The Houthi rebels said they launched missile and drone strikes against a Saudi Arabian oil facility and a military base, as their attacks on the kingdom's energy and security installations multiply. The Houthis, said they bombed King Khalid Air Base in Saudi Arabia's southwestern city of Khamis Mushait with a drone and hit a Saudi Aramco fuel depot.<sup>11</sup>

## **The response of the Saudi led coalition**

The Saudi-led Arab coalition warned the Houthis against continuing their grave violations and of testing the patience of the coalition.

On March 25, 2022, the coalition also gave the Houthis a three-hour deadline to withdraw weapons from Sanaa airport and from two ports on the Red Sea.

In an attempt to prevent the reaction of the coalition the Houthis announced a unilateral initiative that included a three-day suspension of cross-border attacks on Saudi Arabia, as well as fighting inside Yemen. They demanded an end to the coalition air and sea blockade on their territories before engaging in negotiations.

On March 26, 2022, Saudi state media said the Saudi-led coalition had begun a military operation – including air attacks on Yemen’s Houthi-controlled capital Sanaa, and the Red Sea port city of Hodeidah – to stop attacks on its oil facilities and “protect global energy sources.”<sup>12</sup>

Brigadier General Turki al-Malki, a spokesman for the Saudi-led coalition, was quoted as saying that the raids targeted drones allegedly being prepared in Hodeidah to be launched on the kingdom and accused the Houthis of using civilian infrastructure, including Hodeidah’s ports and the Sanaa airport, to launch attacks on Saudi oil facilities.<sup>13</sup>

The Coalition also said it had destroyed an arms depot in the vicinity of Saleef port after the Houthi militia had transferred weapons into it.

## **The international response**

The Houthis came in for widespread international condemnation on Saturday following the attacks.

The US State Department condemned the Houthi attacks as “unacceptable.” US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said in a statement: “At a time when the parties should be focused on de-escalation and bringing needed life-saving relief to the Yemeni people ahead of the holy month of Ramadan, the Houthis continue their destructive behavior and reckless terrorist attacks striking civilian infrastructure”.

US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking landed in the region to “continue leading US diplomatic efforts to advance a durable, inclusive resolution to the conflict in Yemen and bring immediate relief to the people of Yemen.” The State Department said Lenderking participated in

the opening of the Yemeni-Yemeni dialogue and engage with Yemeni participants.<sup>14</sup>

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson also slammed the attacks. “These strikes put civilian lives at risk and must stop,” he said.

The UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council, Jordan, Egypt and Pakistan condemned the latest Houthi attacks on the Kingdom.

### **Concluding Remarks**

***The escalation of the Houthi attacks on oil infrastructure in Saudi Arabia is occurring at a critical time for the global energy economy due to the war in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed by the US and European countries on Russia's oil and gas exports.***

Two other significant events that are taking place in the international arena and in the local arena in Yemen these days are: the nuclear talks with Iran and the opening of peace talks between the rival factions in Yemen under the auspices of the GCC.

***The Houthi rebels appear to be initiating escalation in order to serve the interests of their patrons in Tehran. Iran uses the threat to oil infrastructure in Saudi Arabia and in February 2022 also in the UAE as leverage on the US to sign the nuclear deal under conditions desirable to Iran that would include the removal of sanctions and the removal of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps from the list of terrorist organizations.***

The Houthi attacks come ahead of GCC sponsored peace talks between Yemeni factions that the Houthis said they would not attend. Iran is currently interested in continuing the war in Yemen so that it can continue to use the Houthis to advance their goals and therefore Tehran also has an interest in thwarting peace talks in Yemen.

It is not yet clear if Iran is behind the attacks, or if it was a Houthi decision, but it seems that the Houthis would not have carried out such attacks with regional strategic implications without Iran's consent or perhaps even under its direction.

***The attacks on Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi can be considered as Iran's message to the big powers that in the absence of an agreed solution to the issue of nuclear talks, Iran can destabilize the Middle East and harm the interests of the West and its allies in the region.***

The United States and European countries should be attentive to the unequivocal message of their allies in the Middle East, as they were expressed at the Negev Conference in Israel and not succumb to Iranian blackmail.

### **Notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> Coalition foils Houthi attack on oil tankers, destroys explosive-laden boats, Arab news, March 23, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Saudi Arabia: Riyadh oil refinery hit in drone attack claimed by Houthis, Middle East Eye, March 11, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Arab Coalition Says Saudi Arabia Targeted by 16 Attacks, Warns Houthis Against Testing its Patience, Asharq Al Awsat, March 25, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Arab Coalition announces halt to military operations in Yemen as peace talks begin, Al Arabiya, March 30, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Arab Coalition Says Saudi Arabia Targeted by 16 Attacks, Warns Houthis Against Testing its Patience, Asharq Al Awsat, March 25, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Houthis hit 'backbone of the global economy' in Jeddah oil depot strike, Arab news, March 26, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Saudi Aramco's Jeddah oil depot hit by Houthi attack, Al Jazeera, March 26, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Yemen's Houthis attacked Aramco facilities, Ras Tanura and Rabigh refineries, spokesman says, Reuters, March 25, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Houthi drone attack causes 'temporary reduction' in Saudi oil output, the Times of Israel, March 20, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Saudi Arabia: Riyadh oil refinery hit in drone attack claimed by Houthis, Middle East Eye, March 11, 2022.

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<sup>11</sup> Yemen's Houthis Claim Strike on Saudi Base, Aramco Oil Depot, Bloomberg, March 4, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Iran-backed Houthis under global condemnation after Saudi Aramco attack, Al Arabiya, March 26, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Yemen: Saudi-led coalition hits Houthi targets in Sanaa, Hodeidah, Al Jazeera, March 26, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Arab Coalition announces halt to military operations in Yemen as peace talks begin, Al Arabiya, March 30, 2022.