



WIKISTRAT SPECIAL ANALYSIS:

INTERVIEW WITH PROF. ANOUSH EHTESHAMI ON THE ARAMCO ATTACKS

September 2019



ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE

ANOUSH EHTESHAMI

Professor Anoush Ehteshami is Professor of International Relations in the School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University. He is also the Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Chair in International Relations and Director of the HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Programme in International Relations, Regional Politics and Security. He is, further, Director of the Institute for Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies (IMEIS) at Durham, one of the oldest and noted centres of excellence in Middle Eastern studies in Europe. He has been a Fellow of the World Economic Forum, and served as a member of the WEF's foremost body, the Global Agenda Councils, 2010-12, focusing on energy. He was Vice-President and Chair of Council of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) 2000-2003. He is Editor of two major book series on the Middle East and the wider Muslim world, and is member of Editorial Board of seven international journals.



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Wikistrat: I'd like to hear your interpretation of events in Saudi yesterday and the attack on the Aramco facility. There seems to have been some kind of progress lately in US-Iran relations with the firing of John Bolton as National Security Advisor, and also some feeling of maybe detente between Trump and Rouhani and possible talks of a summit between these two leaders. So why would Iran, if it is indeed Iran, try to escalate the situation right now by provoking this attack on Saudi oil facilities?

Prof. Ehteshami: I think it is really difficult to ascertain at this point the inner workings of calculations in Tehran. I think it's fairly safe to rule out the Houthis for this one, even though we know they've got long-range missiles that would reach the facilities in Khurais, even though they've got drones that they've demonstrated in targeting even facilities near Riyadh and so on. Nevertheless, the intensity of this one – the Pentagon is now saying

that there were at least a dozen missiles and over 20 drones and so on – this is not the work of non-state actors sitting way away in Yemen. I think this is much closer to home.

The suggestions that this was, in fact, [fired] from Southern Iraq and not from Iranian territory, I think, provide a very interesting set of dynamics. One, using Iraqi territory doesn't mean that the Iranians are trying to keep themselves immune from direct targeting from the United States. And secondly, using Iraqi territory doesn't mean that, in fact, there is a rogue element, if you like, which is trying to scupper any potential for a conversation or dialogue between Washington and Tehran, between Trump and Rouhani, between Pompeo and Zarif, and so on. And the Iraqis have come out now completely rejecting that it was their territory that was used. But I think satellite information and

closer ground intelligence would clear that one up.

It is likely to be an Iranian-linked operation. There is very little doubt about it. And as to why Iran would be doing this now, much depends on which bit of Iran we're talking about. If it is those who want to sever any opportunity for dialogue, well this is the way to go. But I would submit this is a very, very high-risk strategy. Whether they think now that John Bolton is gone, that Trump is going to be a coward and that they can push him into a compromise by this kind of escalation, or whether they think that actually the pressures on them at present are such... The economic pressures which are continuing to mount and that the Europeans are unable to provide a lifeline for the Iranian economy, they are such that there is little option but to escalate dramatically as a way of finding a solution.

However, the problem with that kind of analysis is that we assume that the Saudis are a totally passive actor here. I would argue that they are not, in fact, passive actors; that certainly, under the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudis are much more proactive and, indeed, aggressive when it comes to their attitude toward Iran. I don't think the Saudis will take this one lying down. I think they will want to confirm as definitively as possible that either Iran or Iranian hands were involved in these attacks. And I think they will want to respond to it militarily as well. Whether that is to provoke the minorities around Iran, or whether it is to push for the isolation of Iran in terms of containment of Iran's shipping, in terms of inviting yet more naval presence from the West and maybe even China into these waters.

I would also say that the consumers of Persian Gulf oil will not be very pleased about what has happened. I

think the Chinese will be very concerned about this, much more so than the United States, obviously. And probably even more than Europe, given that the Chinese have been building very close energy ties with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, and developing them further also with the UAE and Qatar. This kind of confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia is very bad news for the Chinese and for their diplomacy.

Wikistrat: And how about the Russians? Do you see any kind of Russian concern for these developments regarding the impact of Iranian oil exports to Russia?

Prof. Ehteshami: Yeah. I think the Russians will also be concerned about this. The Russians will see in this more opportunity to try to get closer to both Iran and Saudi Arabia again. We all know that relations between Moscow and Tehran are close, and there is a semi-strong military dimension to it. And, also, Putin and Rouhani have been talking about closer energy cooperation, and about Russian investments in Iranian oil, and indeed the flow of Iranian oil through Russian territory. I think the Russians will be very cautious about being seen to be aiding Iran, while at the same time they've been sitting out a stall to draw closer to Saudi Arabia and also coordinate oil prices more closely overproduction arrangements and so on. So, it puts the Russians in a difficult position as well, but they will probably sit back and watch the Americans squirm a bit before they do anything directly.

Wikistrat: Do you think that this development could maybe consolidate the Saudi-Emirati alliance further and unite Saudi Arabia and Bahrain? And maybe, in a sense, unite all the Arab Gulf States against Iran with the financial backing of the United States in response to this attack? Or

will there be more of a Saudi-led response to these attacks?

Prof. Ehteshami: No. I think all of them will worry about this for different reasons. Bahrain's majority Shia population can be agitated into street protests and political violence even. Oman will be vulnerable because Oman has been trying to provide a bridge, as we speak, between Iran and the United States. They will not want to alienate Saudi Arabia. That has implications for Oman's position over the Yemen war for example. As you know, Oman's border with Yemen is very vulnerable, and there is a lot of two-way traffic between Yemen and Oman. Qatar will be very concerned because this can affect its increasingly warm relations with Tehran. But also, if the United States gets involved, then the Al Udeid Air Base Qatar will be America's front line as far as any conflict with Iran is concerned. And Iran has already said that it will target all American facilities in the region, including the airbase in Qatar. So, I think Qatar will be worried about this. I think Kuwaitis will also be extremely worried about this because they are the closest to Iran. They share a long border with Iraq, and they would be vulnerable to pressures of this nature were they to be forced to join more closely with Saudi Arabia in condemning this, leaving themselves vulnerable to Iranian pressure internally, but also across the border from Iraq. So, I think all GCC countries will be very concerned about this. And I suspect the Saudis will try to rally certainly the ones closest to them, the UAE and Bahrain. [They] may leave Qatar out of it, but will expect support also from Kuwait and Oman.

Wikistrat: Very interesting. So, I think that, maybe unintentionally, this could be a chance of reviving the GCC as a joint security alliance, in a sense, in the face of Iranian threats.

Prof. Ehteshami: Ironically it could very much have that kind of effect. And furthermore, ironically it could also bring the Chinese Navy a bit closer to these waters as well. Something they have continued to resist. Something the United States has goaded them with. But I think, nevertheless, they may well see that the escalation of crisis here is such that they cannot just sit back and let America and its allies take care of the maritime passageways, and that they need to get involved. But diplomatically, I think the Chinese are put in a very difficult position right now.

Wikistrat: Okay. And, as far as you know, since these attacks yesterday morning, have there been any attempts to deescalate the situation in a sense, to prevent any further escalation between Iran and Saudi Arabia?

Prof. Ehteshami: I've seen nothing. The fact that Iran is vehemently denying any involvement in this, of course, makes any compromise very difficult because they're saying that it's not them and it's not their problem. What will be critical is what the Saudi response to this will be. What will their position be? And it's interesting that President Trump has already put the ball in their court, asking the Saudis to ascertain from their perspective who is responsible and what will be appropriate. He's come under a lot of pressure from Congress for this position, but I'm of the sense that he's being rather astute. He doesn't want to escalate this, and it can very easily get out of hand if the Saudis are not prepared for a confrontation. And I suspect, with the Yemen war continuing to bleed the Saudis, the Saudis are probably not prepared for a confrontation. And yet, at the same time, I cannot believe that the Saudis would let such an aggression go unanswered.

Wikistrat: Do you have any idea, so far, what the Saudi reaction will be – militarily, diplomatically, politically, or otherwise?

Prof. Ehteshami: I think they've started diplomatically trying to get the Quartet, which is Bahrain, UAE, and Egypt, around to their position and are seen as trying to build a much broader diplomatic coalition against Iran. The Quartet met in Cairo last week and issued a very strong statement against Iran, condemning what they said was its occupation of Arab land and involvement in Arab issues. I don't think this has anything to do with that because that has been happening quite often. But what this will do is, I think, stiffen the spine of the Quartet in ways that Saudi Arabia may not have expected hitherto. But also, maybe open a dialogue with Iraqis, that the Saudis had been trying to do over the last couple of years, to try to reach some sort of understanding about the security in Iraq affecting Saudi security. That conversation, they have tried but have not had it. This may well be the time that the Saudis will reach out and try to have this conversation with the Iraqis.

Wikistrat: I see. Finally, what kind of message do you think that the Iranians were trying to convey in these attacks if, as you just pointed out, they are also denying any involvement in these attacks in the first place? What's the message that Saudi Arabia, the United States, and the world at large should understand from what really took place yesterday?

Prof. Ehteshami: If we assume that the attacks were cleared at the highest level in the

Tehran government and the Leader's Office of it, then that means that they are saying that we cannot tolerate these isolation sanctions any longer. Secondly, that we have the means to target the world's lifeline through attacking our neighbors. That, if we can hit their oil facilities – which they threatened to do way back – we can hit other targets. They have threatened that as well. They have shown, if this is coming from highest level, that they have the resolve and the ability to undertake these attacks.

What we don't know, however, is how they will respond to a counteract against them. Whether they see this as an opportunity to escalate so high as to then force a UN-type arrangement around the security dialogue in the Gulf, or whether they see this as the only way of breaking the sanctions deadlock which is crippling their economy. Either way, it's a high-risk strategy, and I've been of the view that if you boxed them, as Americans have done over the last six, seven months or so, then if they don't have a ladder to climb down off, then clearly they will escalate. They will retaliate, and we are beginning to see the beginnings of that, if this is coming from the highest level.

If, however, it is so-called rogue actors operating out of Iraq, then that would put the central person in Tehran in a real pickle. They could continue denying it, but would be very concerned about forces beyond their control now effectively shaping Iran's foreign policy beyond the Central Authority's control. That's bad news for them and is very bad news for the rest of us.