



The Iranian Escalation

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September 2019

Executive Summary

* As the shock of the Iran-sponsored Houthi strike on the oil installations in Saudi Arabia subsides - the crux of the Iranian regional strategy, including the role of the Houthi strike therein, becomes clear. Tehran is playing a masterful game - delicately balancing between the publicized confrontation with the US in the Persian Gulf and the real quest for a regional power status by surging to the shores of the Mediterranean.

* In internal discussions, Iranian leaders proudly take responsibility for the 14 September Houthi strike on Saudi Arabia, stressing it was a turning point in Iran's strategic posture.

* Iran's focus remains on the surge to the Mediterranean, and the relentless struggle with Israel to make this happen. Iran is convinced that once the US withdrew from the greater Middle East- Israel would no longer enjoy free hand to strike Iranian and Iran-Proxy targets. To expedite the US withdrawal, Iran will keep striking the US' Persian Gulf protectorates and their hydrocarbon infrastructure. Iran and its proxies might soon strike US forces and vital interests throughout the greater Middle East. Iran is adamant on winning and is ready to pay whatever price it takes. Presently, Iran's strategy is succeeding.

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Analysis

As the shock of the Iran-sponsored Houthi strike on the oil installations in Saudi Arabia subsides - the crux of the Iranian regional strategy, including the role of the Houthi strike therein, becomes clear. Tehran is playing a masterful game - delicately balancing between the publicized confrontation with the US in the Persian Gulf and the real quest for a regional power status. Thus, the Iran-proxy strike on Saudi Arabia and the ensuing threats to the US serve both as a demonstration of the impotence of Saudi Arabia and its guardians, and as a diversion of attention away from the crucial and successful Iranian surge westward.¹

The Iranian declaratory threats of escalation focus on the Persian Gulf and particularly on warning the US against intervention. The Houthi strike reiterated anew the inherent vulnerability of Saudi Arabia, as well as its inability and unwillingness to act unilaterally against Iran. Tehran has long insisted that the US is reluctant to act against Iran, and any passing day reinforces the veracity of the Iranian message.

Hence, Tehran argues, all regional states and entities should take notice of the inherent power of Iran and Iran's Proxies, as well as of the absence of US protection. Iran urges these states and entities to use the Houthi strike as an excuse to bring the current crisis to an end under conditions favorable to Iran. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani introduced the concept in the cabinet meeting of 18 September. He explained that the Houthi strike was "a warning to the enemies to end war and conflicts in the region." There is urgent imperative to exploit and capitalize on the current shock. "Enemies of the region should take lesson from this warning and should be after extinguishing the fire of war in the region to let the people live in freedom and welfare," Rouhani said.

In a major speech delivered on 22 September, Rouhani elaborated on the theme and now urged all the Persian Gulf states to reconcile with Iran and reject US intervention. Iran is ready to "extend the hand of friendship and fraternity to all of its neighboring states" in the current "critical and historic" juncture. "In this regard, we are even ready to forgive their past mistakes, because today we are faced with conditions in which the enemies of the region, particularly the US, the arrogance and the Zionism, are seeking to exploit the gap, rift, and division among the regional countries," Rouhani said. Time is of essence because "enemies of Islam and the region seek to make the most out of our division." Rouhani contrasted between the US and Iran. "The presence of foreign forces can be dangerous for the region, international waters, as well as the security of shipping lines and energy, but [Iran's] path is to create unity and coordination with regional countries."

Rouhani questioned the sincerity of the US claim to be pursuing regional peace. "If they [the Americans] are telling the truth, they'd better not turn the region into a stage of arms race," he said, "if they are after [establishing] security, they'd better get out of the region." He further reminded the US of Iran's steadfast stand during the debilitating war with Iraq. Rouhani concluded that "today's enemies of the country [should] think twice before deciding any attack on our soil and imposing another war on our nation. They don't have the courage to make a move against Iran's great armed forces and nation and will never find that courage."

As before, Tehran relied on the Secretary General of the HizbAllah Hassan Nasrallah to deliver the more explicit and threatening message.

¹ For background see Yossef Bodansky, The Axis of Resistance – Iran's Surge to the Mediterranean, ISPSW Issue No. 646, September 2019



In a sermon back on 20 September, Nasrallah analyzed the situation in the Persian Gulf. He noted that the world reaction to the Houthi strike “clearly showed how expensive is oil once compared to blood. Saudi warplanes continue to kill Yemeni children, but no concrete action is taken (to stop the onslaught).” He stressed the futility of Riyadh’s policies. “Saudi Arabia is highly advised to stop the war on Yemen instead of seeking to purchase advanced air defense missile systems. All costly weapons purchased from the United States cannot protect you from drone attacks.” He warned Riyadh of the American duplicity, explaining that “Trump has commenced a new process of milking the Saudi kingdom. Trump is desperately seeking for a bilateral meeting with his Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani.” Nasrallah emphasized the futility of confronting Iran and its allies. “Continuing the war against Yemen with no [political] solution is pointless. You are starting to pay the price,” Nasrallah warned the Saudis. “One strike knocked out half the oil production, and another strike, you can imagine what it will do,” he taunted. “Don’t bet on a war against Iran because they will destroy you. Your house is made of glass and your economy is made of glass. Like the glass cities in the UAE. ... You have already begun to pay the price of the war against Yemen.” Saudi Arabia “should think well, as a war with Iran will mean their destruction.” Nasrallah concluded by reiterating the regional ramifications of the Houthi strike. “This attack shows the strength of the Axis of Resistance,” Nasrallah exclaimed.

In a 22 September interview with Al-Alam TV, Nasrallah raised the ante by insisting that the HizbAllah has its own reasons for confronting the House of al-Saud. He explained that the “ruling regime of Saudi Arabia has got very old and is spending the last stages of its lifetime.” Riyadh should not complain about its plight because this is a natural outcome of its long-term policies. “In fact, Saudi Arabia was the initiator of hostility against Iran, and its problem with Iran was the same problem it had with other Arab countries, namely, [over] supporting the Palestinian issue and regional resistance movements,” Nasrallah explained. Given this background, Nasrallah stressed, “this is not a proxy war and we believe that Saudi Arabia is hostile to [the] Lebanese resistance forces, regardless of Iran’s position, so our problem with Saudi Arabia has nothing to do with Iran.”

The next day, the 23rd, Iran’s Press TV also published an interview with Nasrallah. He repeated his observation that “the al-Saud regime may be in the final stages of its life, and the incumbent rulers are expediting the regime’s demise through their policies. ... [The] al-Saud regime is old and may be in the final stages of its life because of natural reasons like its cruel measures over the past 100 years and the systematic corruption in the regime, suppression of people, and totalitarianism of its rules.” Nasrallah pointed to the growing anti-Saudi sentiments throughout the Arab World. “We currently see for the first time that ‘Death to al-Saud’ slogan is being chanted in several Arab countries, and we see political and popular powers and governments that take explicit stances toward al-Saud and its interference in the region.” He reiterated Tehran’s long-term grievances against Riyadh. “Saudi Arabia started its hostility toward Iran after the victory of the Islamic Revolution [in 1979] and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, which supported the issues of Arab and Islamic countries.” Hence, Saudi Arabia should not be surprised by Iran’s determination to triumph in the Persian Gulf region to the detriment of Saudi interests.

On 23 September, *Kayhan* published an interview with Sheikh Nabil Qaouq, the Deputy Chairman of the HizbAllah’s Executive Council. The Houthi “operation against the Saudi oil facilities ushered in a new era in the region, which [is] not favorable to the US and its regional client states.” Consequently, “Saudi Arabia is in despair, because it has spent hundreds of billions of dollars to purchase weapons and gain US support, but all to no avail.” Meanwhile, “the US administration is now embarrassed and distraught.” Qaouq further noted that “the occupying regime of Israel” is also “alarmed by the severity and accuracy” of the Houthi strikes, and



is now “fearing similar strikes on Zionist targets.” This Israeli dread, Qaouq explained, has an overarching adverse impact on the US posture in the region given Israel’s importance. “The US axis in the region is retreating now as it admits its defeats in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, the besieged Gaza Strip, and Lebanon, and also against Iran.” With the pro-Iran regional camp rising, the US and its proxies “receive new defeats every day, while the Axis of Resistance continues to add to its achievements and victories.” Qaouq focused on the plight of Saudi Arabia. “Saudi Arabia now faces two prospects, either humiliation or defeat. ... If the Saudi regime stays longer in Yemen, it will be humiliated. And if it pulls its forces out of Yemen, there will be a heavy defeat for Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, the Saudi army, and the Arab kingdom’s status in the region,” Qaouq observed. Under such circumstances, he concluded, there is no alternative to accepting the new regional posture - that of the ascent of Iran and the Shiite allies.

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Meanwhile, Tehran started to introduce stronger and more explicit percepts and principles of the evolving Iranian grand strategy.

On 20 September, the authoritative Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda, a protégé of Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei, discussed Iran’s new regional posture in a Friday Sermon. He stressed the Iranian regional dominance because “Iran is the resistance in the region.” Iran is no longer limited to a “geographical location” because all of Iran’s proxies throughout the region are “all Iran” now. “Iran, today, is not only Iran and not limited to a geographical location. Iraq’s Hashd al-Shaabi, Lebanon’s HizbAllah, Yemen’s AnsarAllah, Syria’s National Defense Forces, Palestine’s Islamic Jihad and the Hamas are all Iran,” Alamolhoda stated. “Do you even know where Iran is? Isn’t south of Lebanon Iran? Isn’t HizbAllah Iran? The drones sent by the Yemenis that caused such damage to Saudi Arabia - wasn’t that Iran? You say that (these drones) came from the north and not from the south. South or north - what difference does it make? Iran is both to your south and to your north. Today there is an alert Muslim in every part of this region, (and any place) where a fighting movement exists is Iran and its Imam is Iran and its leader is Iran.”

Also on the 20th, Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, the top military aide to Khamenei, delivered a sermon in Tehran to a select group of senior officials and officers. He analyzed Iran’s emerging regional and global posture. “With the grace of God and thanks to the vigilance and patience of the great Iranian nation and the unforgettable sacrifices of 200,000 martyrs ... the Iranian nation has become an invincible regional power in West Asia,” Safavi said. “The Islamic Republic has turned into a major and invincible power in West Asia and if the Americans are planning any plots in the Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea or the Indian Ocean, Iran will not leave them unanswered. ... If the Americans think of any plots against Iran, the Islamic Republic’s will respond from an area extending from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean,” he warned. “Any anti-Iranian move will overturn the region.”

Safavi explained that one of the key factors facilitating the ascent of Iran is the ongoing global transformation along the principles pursued by China and Russia. Consequently, he stressed, “[the] US’ policies in West Asia and its hegemony are defeated as the world is moving towards multilateralism.” These emerging circumstances enable Iran to expect conducive regional dynamics while seeking a favorable regional posture. “Our policy is to create lasting peace and security in the region and (seek) the withdrawal of foreign forces, and we hope that our trans-regional enemies would know that Iran does not intend to invade (other countries) or expand its territory,” Safavi explained. As for further away nemeses like Israel, Safavi reminded



them of the assertion by HizbAllah Leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah that “any move against Tehran will throw the whole region in a great turmoil.”

Other senior officers elaborated on these themes over the next few days. On 21 September, IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami addressed a select group in Tehran. He assured them that Iran was “ready for any type of scenario” the US and its allies might contrive. Iran was preparing to fight the war on enemy territory. “Our readiness for giving response to any aggression is definitely assured. Now, whoever wishes to turn its land into a battleground is free to start it. But we will never allow the war be dragged into our land,” Salami stated. He stressed Iran’s commitment to a decisive victory. “We will stand till the end because the response to a limited strike will not be limited. We will pursue any aggressor. We are after punishment and we will continue until the full destruction of any aggressor. ... We are result-oriented and good at follow-up. We have proven it. We won’t spare any secure place [for our enemies]. So be careful and don’t make a strategic mistake,” he advised Iran’s enemies.

Also on the 21st, the IRGC Deputy Commander Rear Admiral Ali Fadavi emphasized the new stature of Iran. “Today defending the values of [the] Islamic Revolution does not know any geographical boundaries and many people want to sacrifice their lives in the path of truth.” The next day, the 22nd, the Commander of the Iranian Army’s Navy Rear Admiral Hossein Khanzadi also warned Iran’s enemies of the dire consequences of attacking Iran. “In case of any miscalculation and aggression by the enemy, [the] Army’s Navy, along with other armed forces of the country, will give the most crushing reaction in the shortest time possible,” he explained. “Today, the Islamic Republic of Iran’s defense power is at its highest possible level and [the] forces of [the] Army and [the] IRGC are ready to defend [the] marine borders of the country.” Khanzadi belittled the threat posed by the US and its allies. “No one should worry at all about the theatrical and fake coalitions that they form under the pretext of regional security. This region’s security is established by the Islamic Republic of Iran and the regional states’ naval forces.”

Addressing the Iranian parliament on 24 September, the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Bagheri articulated Iran’s Persian Gulf strategy. He separated between efforts to reconcile with the regional Arab states and the possibility of a major war with the US to the detriment of the US’ local allies. Tehran sees no difference between economic sanctions and the use of force. “Today, enemies, who are fearful of a war with Iran, have taken the path of economic terrorism,” Bagheri explained. The only viable issues are the specter of escalation and the Iranian fierce response. “We have repeatedly told our enemies that we will stand strong against acts of aggression and the same response that was given to the intruding (American) drone, and intruding UK fleet and ship will be given to any other aggressor. Result of aggression against Iran will be destruction and captivity,” Bagheri asserted.

Bagheri contrasted the Iranian resolve to defeat any US and allied forces with the absence of animosity toward any of Iran’s neighbors. Iran is convinced that “Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which are leading conspiracies against [Iran] in the region, are Islamic countries and have lost their path. They should return to the path of Islam and come closer to Iran. That is when we will have a secure and prospering region.” This will surely happen once the Arab states pulled away from under the US influence and became true to their Islamic selves. Bagheri offered military cooperation to the Arab and Muslim worlds as part of mutual security arrangements and agreements. “(Now that) we have an independent defense industry in Iran today, these (military advances) belong to the Muslim world and everyone should know that regional security is provided by the cooperation of regional countries,” Bagheri stated. Tehran is eager to bring the Persian Gulf crisis to an



amicable solution that must include the banishment of the US and its Western allies so that Tehran can focus better on the implementation of Iran's regional surge.

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For Tehran, the Persian Gulf is but a component of Iran's true regional strategy and aspirations as articulated by Khamenei back on 11 September. On 22 September, the immensely powerful Speaker of the Parliament Ali Larijani put everything in context - combining the Persian Gulf strategy with the surge to the Mediterranean strategy. Larijani stated that the formation by the US of "a coalition to create so-called security in the Strait of Hormuz" is "a new means for plundering the region." Iran will not permit this to continue. "The security of the Strait of Hormuz finds meaning with the security of other international waterways. Iran won't let the Persian Gulf become a playground for adventurism. Iran believes that this measure [the US-led coalition] is the start of an operation to destroy regional security," Larijani said. Tehran is urging the Arab states across the Persian Gulf to adopt a mutual security regime that will replace the US. "The regional countries, themselves, are capable of establishing security and the Islamic Iran's Armed Forces do not allow the Persian Gulf to be played with [as a tool] to create insecurity in the region."

However, Larijani emphasized, the primary source of threats to Iran and its allies is not the US operations in the Persian Gulf but rather the US-Israeli cooperation in Syria and Iraq. The US objective is "to prepare [the] domination of the occupying regime in Tel Aviv over regional states." A major instrument in this conspiracy are the US-sponsored Jihadist forces in Syria and Iraq who operate against Iran and its local proxies. "America is now helping terrorists and this is not a secret to us. But they should know that Iranian forces gave a heavy blow to terrorists in the region. Terrorists endangered the lives of Muslims. But the West should know that terrorist groups like ISIL will one day fly at them." Ultimately, however, Iran considers Israel to be the main threat to Iran's regional interests. "Tel Aviv is acting as the main enemy of the countries of the Middle East," Larijani stated. "The Islamic Republic of Iran is a friend and brother of all regional countries while the Zionist regime is a major enemy of Muslims." This determines Iran's strategic priorities. "We know that our main duty today is to defend the oppressed Palestinian nation" - that is, to fight Israel.

Larijani concluded by highlighting Iran's great achievements to-date. "Our armed forces are stronger than ever. Security of Islamic Iran and the region is provided by our forces which are great assets for the region. When Iraq and Syria had been plagued by terrorism, it was our armed forces which defeated them. Despite the authority and power that the Iranian military has, Iran has never invaded a country in the past 40 years." Larijani repeated Tehran's urging for the entire Arab World to build new relations of friendship, cooperation and confidence with Iran. "We emphasize that Islamic and Arab countries are our brothers and we wish to have good ties, in areas of culture and economy, with our neighbors." The mutual challenge is in evicting all "foreign entities" from the region - starting with the US and Israel. "It is necessary to use [all] our energy power to counter outsiders and Zionists," Larijani asserted.

Meanwhile, Iran continues to focus on fighting Israel as the most important facet of confronting the US-Israeli conspiracy. The possibility that Israel would support the US operations in the Persian Gulf raised the urgency of confronting Israel to a higher level. On 21 September, the Commander of the Iranian Army Major General Sayyed Abdolrahim Mousavi stressed the point. "The Persian Gulf is our home and we will not allow a regime like the Israeli regime to enter our home." He warned that "any wrong move by Tel Aviv will even shorten its life." Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda warned that any attempt to "trespass [Iran's] border" would lead to "Israel becoming dust in half a day."



However, as repeatedly stressed by Khamenei, the Iranian top priority and all-out commitment are sustaining and strengthening the “Axis of the Resistance” and particularly the on-land access to the Mediterranean they provide. The struggle over this access, rather than the Persian Gulf, is the most explosive clash point. “The objective of both Israel and the US is ultimately aiming to cripple, weaken and subjugate Iran, its allies and all those groups and countries who reject US hegemony in the Middle East, in particular Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq,” wrote Elijah Magnier. Iranian and Shiite officials reiterate that Israel is the primary objective in this context. This is because it is Israel that is actually challenging the consolidation of the on-land access to the Mediterranean through repeated bombings and raids. And, as reiterated by Safavi, Nasrallah and many other leaders, any move against Tehran and/or its vital interests “will throw the whole region into a great turmoil.”

With tensions rising quickly, the Hashd al-Shaabi immediately started to implement the concrete resolutions reached during the secret visit to Baghdad of Qods Force Commander Major General Qassem Soleimani back on 16 September. Two days later, on the 18th, the Hashd al-Shaabi launched operation “The Will of Victory” under the command Colonel Qassem Masliyah of the Qods Force. The objective of the operation was to have sizeable units of the Hashd al-Shaabi seize Iraq’s borders with Saudi Arabia and Jordan, on top of the Iraqi border with Syria that they already control. In key points along both borders, the Hashd al-Shaabi are to build staging facilities for surges by Shiite forces against Riyadh from the north and Jerusalem from the east. The actual seizure of the entire borders with Saudi Arabia and Jordan was completed on 21 September. The Hashd al-Shaabi deployed several thousands of mechanized forces along with artillery and support units. The local Iraqi units withdrew peacefully.

Meanwhile, the IRGC started to transfer dozens of ballistic missiles to the Hashd al-Shaabi. Initially, these missiles would be deployed in Diyala province. To reduce their vulnerability to Israeli strikes, the missiles were dispersed among numerous bases and concealed sites. These missiles are intended to both replace the losses caused by the recent Israeli bombings and to increase the arsenals in accordance with the contingency plans for the forthcoming surge and escalation by the Axis of the Resistance. The Iranians also started delivering supplies for the newly announced air force of the Hashd al-Shaabi. The first weapons delivered were “anti-drone weapons” and a wide variety of anti-aircraft guns.

Official Baghdad was not oblivious to both operation “The Will of Victory” and the massive resupply effort. Hence, on 22 September, Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi announced a new “restructuring initiative” for the Hashd al-Shaabi that will expedite and smooth their “ongoing integration into the Iraqi Army.” Abdul-Mahdi appointed Falah al-Fayyad of the Hashd al-Shaabi to be in charge of implementing these steps. Baghdad’s rhetoric notwithstanding, the real objective of the new initiative is to provide fig-leaf legitimization for the audacious surge of the Hashd al-Shaabi, the dramatic changes along Iraq’s borders, and the Iran-controlled war preparations.

Politically, Tehran continues focusing on stocking anti-US sentiments in order to compel the US out of the greater Middle East. The 14 September Houthi strike on the Saudi oil installations was a major contribution to this effort. However, the focus remains on the surge of Iran and its Axis of Resistance to the Mediterranean, and the relentless struggle with Israel to make this happen. The two foci of Iranian operations are intertwined, though. Iran is convinced that once the US withdrew from the greater Middle East- Israel would no longer enjoy free hand to strike with impunity Iranian and Iran-Proxy targets throughout the region. Till then, Iran will keep consolidating the Shiite Crescent and escalating the relentless push westward despite Israel’s strikes



while simultaneously intensifying the challenges to the US where it hurts - striking the US' Persian Gulf protectorates and their hydrocarbon infrastructure. If this dual track approach fails to deliver the anticipated results quickly, Tehran will escalate further - ordering Iran's proxies to strike US forces and vital interests throughout the greater Middle East. Iran is adamant on winning and is ready to pay whatever price it takes. Presently, Iran's strategy is succeeding.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

About the Author of this Issue

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

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