

Al-Qaeda Attack on Abqaiq: The Vulnerability of Saudi Oil

[Simon Henderson](#)

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The February 24 attack by al-Qaeda on Saudi Arabia's giant oil processing facility at Abqaiq failed. At least two of the attackers were killed, along with two security guards. On February 27, Saudi authorities said they had killed another five terrorists linked to the Abqaiq attack in a clash in Riyadh, and they were interrogating a further suspect. The failure of the attack and the reported success of the subsequent counterterrorist operation give the impression of Saudi efficiency, but it should at least as much serve as a warning. The planned attack, targeting the world's largest oil exporter, should give impetus to President Bush's determination, declared in his January State of the Union address, to wean the United States off foreign oil.

The Abqaiq incident was the first direct attack by al-Qaeda on a Saudi oil installation, although Osama bin Laden, in a December 2004 audio message, had called for attacks against oil, and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, repeated the call in autumn 2005. In a website message claiming responsibility for the Abqaiq attack, "al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula" said it was part of al-Qaeda's "war against the Christians and Jews to stop their pillage of Muslim riches and part of the campaign to chase them out of the Arabian peninsula."

Conflicting Reports

According to official Saudi statements, security precautions worked. Two vehicles were stopped at a checkpoint. Guards opened fire and both vehicles blew up, apparently because of the explosives they were carrying. Unofficial reports quoted by news agencies speak of the vehicles bearing Saudi oil company logos with drivers in uniform getting through one set of gates and being stopped by suspicious guards at a second. Several hours of gunfire followed the explosions, according to these reports, suggesting other terrorists giving covering fire or acute nervousness by guards.

However, initial reports are not always the full story, as illustrated by recent terror episodes in Saudi Arabia. When the U.S. consulate in Jeddah was attacked in 2004, the reaction of the Saudi security forces was initially praised. Subsequently a clip of the security video footage of the attackers' car trying to enter the consulate gate was broadcast by an American television network; it showed members of the Saudi national guard abandoning their weapons and running away.

In theory, Saudi oil facilities are among the best guarded installations in the kingdom. The state owned company, Saudi Aramco, employs what is effectively a private army to provide security. Saudi Aramco's force reportedly is backed up by eight different official security agencies, but this is possibly a recipe for confusion. As it is, the previously all-powerful Saudi interior minister, Prince Nayef, is reported by diplomats to have been politically sidelined. In the Saudi tradition, no official statement has been made, but many of Nayef's previous responsibilities have been transferred to his son -- the assistant minister -- Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, now effectively the minister for counterterrorism.

Abqaiq is an important symbolic target but a difficult installation to knock fully out of commission. It is the largest oil processing plant in the world and handles more than half Saudi Arabia's daily exports. Stretching over a wide area, the processing plant removes water, gas, sulfur, and other impurities from freshly pumped crude oil so that it can be loaded onto tankers for shipment across the world. Apart from being well protected by fences and electronic security devices, it is also said to have been designed with built-in redundancy, meaning damage need not reduce the quantity of oil processed. Besides ground attack, Saudi authorities are said to have anticipated the possibility of a hijacked aircraft being crashed into the plant. Saudi air force F-15s are reported to be on continual standby.

Saudi authorities will likely be relieved that at least the two terrorists killed in the initial attack were known to authorities beforehand -- their names were on a most wanted list released last year. So far, diplomats say, every al-Qaeda attack in the kingdom has been forensically linked to known networks. Officials in the kingdom are said to be dreading the "bleedback" from Iraq of battle-hardened Saudi jihadist fighters who might be unknown to the Saudi security agencies. The Saudis are also well aware that beating the challenge of al-Qaeda requires more than just effective intelligence and counter measures. Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, the assistant interior minister and effective counterterrorism chief, has told diplomats that only 20 percent of the problem can be tackled with police work; the other 80 percent must be combated by countering the deviancy of al-Qaeda's interpretation of Islam.

Challenge for U.S. Policy

Saudi Arabia is proud of its reputation as a reliable oil supplier as well as its status as the largest supplier of crude oil to the world market. With exports of other major producers like Nigeria and Iraq affected by insurrection, the official U.S. interest is that Saudi exports should be maintained and make up for any market shortfall. Hence, presumably, the fulsome praise in the aftermath of the attack by U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia James Oberwetter, who posted a message on his embassy website giving "considerable credit" to the Saudi Government and Saudi Aramco. "When [the security systems] were needed, those systems worked," Oberwetter wrote.

But Washington must be keenly aware that Saudi oil production remains extremely vulnerable to sabotage. A Saudi police raid on a terrorist hideout last year reportedly uncovered copies of maps and plans of the prestigious, newly producing field of Shaybah. At particular risk also must be the estimated twelve thousand miles of pipelines in the kingdom. Blowing up pipelines in Iraq has been a visible sign of the insurgency; though the pipeline damage is often quickly repaired, the attacks have contributed to the lack of recovery in Iraqi oil exports.

Last week President Bush spent two days traveling and giving speeches about his new energy policy, noting, "Some of the nations we rely on for oil have unstable governments or fundamental differences with the United States." That formulation carefully avoids naming Saudi Arabia, which is apprehensive about his plans. The Abqaiq attack, though unsuccessful, should serve as an additional argument for advancing as quickly as possible to the target of reducing dependence on oil from unstable regions.

Simon Henderson is Baker fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy and Gulf politics, and author, with Patrick Clawson, of the 2005 Institute Policy Focus Reducing Vulnerability to Middle East Energy Shocks: A Key Element in Strengthening U.S. Energy Security.