

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

The Truth of the Matter Podcast

“The Attack on Saudi Arabia”

RECORDING DATE

Tuesday, September 18, 2019

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Transcript by Rev.com

Bob Schieffer: I'm Bob Schieffer.

Andrew Schwartz: And I'm Andrew Schwartz of the Center For Strategic And International Studies and this is The Truth Of The Matter.

Bob Schieffer: This is the podcast where we break down the policy issues of the day. Since the politicians are having their say, we will excuse them with respect and bring in the experts, many of them from CSIS, people who have been working these issues for years.

Andrew Schwartz: No spin, no bombast, no finger pointing; just informed discussion.

Bob Schieffer: To get to the truth of the matter on this episode, we'll talk with Dr. Seth Jones. Seth is the former Director of the International Security And Defense Policy Center at the Rand Corporation. He also served as representative for the Commander US Special Ops to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations. He is now the Harold Brown Chair at the Center For Strategic And International Studies. Dr. Jones, thank you very much for joining us.

Seth Jones: Thank you very much.

Bob Schieffer: You put out a report in August which said that the Saudi infrastructure was increasingly vulnerable to an attack from Iran, and it sort of happened exactly the way you said it would. What do we make of this right now? Tell us what this is all about.

Seth Jones: Well, I think there's a political dimension to it, first and foremost, which is Iran has been backed into a corner and views itself as being backed into corner. It's been on the receiving end of punishing sanctions by the United States. Its GDP, according to IMF estimates, International Monetary Fund estimates, will be roughly -5% real GDP growth this year because of the sanctions. Inflation rate is up 40% to 50% this year. And there's, at this point, no serious political dialogue on relief of those sanctions. So I think put in that position, what the Iranians are doing is making noise, and some of that is to get political dialogue on relief of the sanctions. Part of it may also be the Iranians are assuming that if they're suffering right now that they might as well make others suffer along the way.

Andrew Schwartz: Yeah, I was going to say, though, this isn't exactly a cry for help.

Seth Jones: No, this is not just a cry. This is also going on the offense right now.

Andrew Schwartz: Yeah.

Seth Jones: And so the use of projectiles, whether it was Iran directly or indirectly through partners or proxies, this has a punishing impact. I think they wanted to send a very clear message, in this case, to the Saudis and the oil

infrastructure in particular, that they can inflict pain just like the west can on the Iranian economy.

Bob Schieffer: Well, was this aimed at us? Was this a message to us?

Seth Jones: I think it was, in part, absolutely a message aimed at us; that the Saudis are enemies of the Iranians, and there has been significant competition and conflict including in places like Yemen. So this may have been partly aimed at the Saudis, but it was aimed at us. I think the Iranians are smart enough to understand if they had taken a military action, either directly or indirectly, at us, at US maritime vessels, US bases in the region, we would have responded almost certainly with military force. If you hit the Saudis and not us; well, then that's a debate. Do we respond? Do we let the Saudis respond? How do we respond? Cyber operations? I think the Iranians recognize that the way they did this in the target they hit, the Saudis, made the response for the US much more complicated, but they got the message across.

Andrew Schwartz: Well, it's really challenging too because it's infrastructure; it's not people, as you said. And it's Saudi Arabia. It's not as if they attacked Israel, because if they attacked Israel, they'd have Israel to worry about, and they'd have the United States to worry about.

Seth Jones: Yeah. And I think if you look at the recent events, including the journalist, Khashoggi, the Saudis have been a subject of some controversy in the US, including on Capitol Hill. Should we support the Saudis in the war against Yemen? So the Saudis come with some debate within Republicans and Democrats on the Hill. So I think in that sense, how to respond and how to be viewed as supporting the Saudis, I think there certainly will be a line of response in the US, if the US responds directly, that we are essentially doing the work of the Saudis because it was the Saudis that were targeted. That has some political overtones, as well.

Bob Schieffer: Are we certain that this was Iran?

Seth Jones: So what we have seen in terms of evidence so far, is that we know projectiles were used to target infrastructure in Saudi Arabia, Aramco infrastructure including at Abqaiq.

Seth Jones: What we know in the region is that if this were the Houthis, who have said that they did this, the Houthis missile capabilities and drone capabilities, we know, including there are a range of good UN reports on this, are generally coming from the Iranians. If the Iranians did this directly, than it was likely, then ... We'll know it was the Iranians.

Seth Jones: What we don't know right now is where these projectiles came from, how much of these were cruise missiles or drones. They had the capability, both directly and indirectly, through the Houthis. So there is a lot of information that we don't know yet, and it's not clear to what degree the Iranians were directly involved, if this was a Houthi attack.

Bob Schieffer: Well, while we have not directly responded, at least not as yet, we've got a lot of people out there, and a lot of military equipment out there, and when I read your report I was stunned. I knew there's an aircraft carrier out there. I knew that we have some fighters and so forth. Tell us about this US military force that's in this region right now.

Seth Jones: Well the US has a range of forces in the region. It recently agreed to send 500 soldiers to Prince Sultan Airbase. It has an Air Force fighter jet squadron, a B-52 bomber strike group. It had deployed about a month ago, the USS Abraham Lincoln strike group. It's got other assets in the region, patriot missile batteries. It's got unmanned intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance assets. It's got a number of other bases in the region with which it use to fly aircraft. It's gotten Naval stations, including in Bahrain. The US has a lot of infrastructure in the region; air, ground and naval, that it uses to conduct day-to-day US central command operations.

Bob Schieffer: One of the things your report points out is how vulnerable the Saudis are, in relation to drinking water; that 70%, is it, of the water there does not come from the ground?

Seth Jones: The Saudis rely, to a considerable extent, on their desalination plants for purifying water that comes from the sea. So what we noted is that there were a number of facilities, desalination facilities, that if the Iranians were to target, would decimate water supplies in Saudi Arabia, including to the capital, Riyadh. They're very vulnerable to attack, and they would have a major impact on the availability of water, which would obviously have a huge humanitarian impact on Saudi society. Those were not hit. What were hit were repairable oil and gas facilities. Targeting a desalination plant would have been much more catastrophic, and I think would have probably raised tensions even further. But it should be noted that there are electricity grids, there are desalination plants, there are SCADA electrical systems; that if this conflict ratchets up, there are a lot more vulnerable targets in Saudi Arabia and Iran that could increase the tension.

Andrew Schwartz: Let's go back to who did it for a second. There's actually a theory that this could of been Iran's military, without the knowledge of Iran's leadership, to try to prevent Iran's leadership from meeting with Donald Trump. Donald Trump said he was open to meeting with the Iranian leaders under the right circumstances. Do you buy that?

Seth Jones: I think that unless we find evidence that suggests that that was the case, in which case there would be intelligence picked up of debates within the Iranian leadership that would indicate that; diplomats might talk about that. But when Iran operates, it generally operates, especially for such a major strike like this, I think in general, the Supreme Leader would have almost certainly had to sign off on this action. I mean, this is a major attack. If someone were to act this way in Iran without getting a sign off from the Supreme Leader, then I think that would be ... Especially something that would likely put Iran on the trajectory towards a war; in general, it would be

a very costly and probably unlikely mistake that someone in Iran would make without the awareness of the Supreme Leader.

Andrew Schwartz: Despite what people see on TV,, we don't have cameras on all corners of the earth, so we don't know exactly where these missiles came from exactly what they are, but there has been some reporting, based on satellite imagery, that shows that there were some pretty precise hits, and there were some very similar hits on targets that show very precise burrowing down into the infrastructure. So that suggests long range missiles, not drones from the Houthis and Yemen, as was originally reported. So we think, with some evidence, that this had to have been cruise missiles.

Seth Jones: Yes. Or, at least that cruise missiles were a likely component of the targeting. There have been a number of reports that there were a mixture of projectiles used to target infrastructure. The cruise missiles would give you a lot more precision in those targets.

Bob Schieffer: You know, when I was working full time at CBS News, we had an Executive Producer, was later became the President of the CBS corporation, Howard Stringer. And Howard, when he was producing the evening news, insisted that every story include what we came to call the Stringer Paragraph. And that is, telling our viewers why this is important to you. Why is this important to America?

Seth Jones: Well, I think it's important for a couple of reasons, at least to put in context. One is the tensions between the United States and Iran have certainly ratcheted up. In the most recent National Defense Strategy, the Trump Administration highlights its main global and regional competitors as the Chinese, the Russians, the Iranians, and the North Koreans. So the Iranians have been identified as a major competitor of the United States.

Seth Jones: So I think what this does, this ratchets up the tensions, increases the possibility either of outright war, or at least an escalation, to the current conflict right now. And so that has implications on warfare. It's got implications on global oil, including the price of oil. So I think for a range of reasons, this should matter to Americans. If the US gets into a war with Iran, Iran has the capabilities to conduct assassinations in other areas of the Middle East. People should remember the 1980s, the US, including US Marines, were on the receiving end of Iranian-linked Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Iranians have targeted Israeli and Jewish locations, including in Latin America. And it was not that long ago that the US publicly revealed an Iranian linked assassination against the Saudi Ambassador in Washington at Cafe Milano, of all places.

Andrew Schwartz: Right up the street.

Seth Jones: So I think this does have implications for the US, including economic ones, as well.

Andrew Schwartz: You know, Bob and I don't go to Cafe Milano unless we're invited to a thing. It's not like our hangout.

Seth Jones: I used to go to Cafe Milano until the assassination plot, and then I had decided there's probably safe, more low-profile places to go.

Andrew Schwartz: [crosstalk 00:12:18] In line with the Stringer Paragraph, you mentioned the world's oil supply. This incidence cut global oil supplies by about 5%, so far, and it knocked out Saudi's capability of about more than 50%, which is five and a half million barrels of daily crude a day. They produce about 11 million barrels of crude a day. How long is it going to take them to get back online? And for Americans we're going to have some higher oil prices, but what does it really mean for the rest of the world, as well?

Seth Jones: It's not entirely clear how quickly the Saudis are going to be able to get everything up and running. I mean, my understanding is the damage has been somewhat limited, meaning it may take days and weeks rather than months to get much of the oil now pumping through various components of facilities, like Abqaiq.

Seth Jones: For broader global implications, what it may also mean, including for countries like the United States, is to increasingly focus on its own sources of oil, whether it's directly in the US or with neighboring Canada, rather than having to rely on an area, the Middle East, which has been prone to severe conflict. So what it may do, is countries may look to the Russians for sources, because they've got capabilities along these lines; areas other than the Middle East.

Andrew Schwartz: Along these same lines, the United States has to be thinking about its options. What do we do? The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an ally of sorts, and the Saudi Arabians have just been attacked. Trump initially said that the United States is locked and loaded, depending on what we hear from the Kingdom, and he's continued to say ... He's hedged his bets back and forth and he's saying it kind of depends on what the Kingdom tells us they want to do. That's an interesting formulation for a United States President to say it depends on what the Saudi Arabia Kingdom tells us they want to do. But what are really the United States' options, here, towards Iran in this case?

Seth Jones: Well, there are a couple. One is there would be a direct US response. And that would mean the attack is against Saudi infrastructure, but the US responds. And it may do it with Saudi Arabia, could do it by itself. The US has a lot of options in that sense. It's got direct military responses. We know there were options on the table; the President said so. He called one, in particular, off. It would have involved, among other things, airstrikes against surface-to-air missile locations on Iranian territory. The US has also conducted offensive cyber operations, including recently against Iran. So there are those kinds of options. The US has also taken down Iranian aircraft, including drones in and around the region. So there are various types of direct responses that the US could take.

Seth Jones: It could also operate with, or largely through, partners in the region. So we could see a response where the US provides intelligence to the Saudis, and the Saudis conduct a response; a attack against Iranian infrastructure in Yemen, for example. The Iranians have intelligence operatives in Yemen. So there are ways that the Saudis could respond.

Seth Jones: I think what the US has to be careful about, though, is that the US was not attacked directly, in this case. It was a partner. And so does it make sense for the US to respond directly if Iran attacked the Saudis? I think that's one of the major questions right now.

Bob Schieffer: I noticed in your report, you talked about how it was important for us not to say that we're for regime change. Why is that?

Seth Jones: I think the issue at the core of this ... I mean, it's easy, I think, to get sucked into the back and forth, day-to-day tension between Iran and the United States and Iran and Saudi Arabia. But at the core of this is a much bigger political issue. The US is concerned about a nuclear program. It's concerned about the Iranian missile program and the activities of the IRGC Quds Force.

Seth Jones: There was a political process in place that had led to a nuclear deal under President Obama that the Trump Administration backed away from and walked out of. European countries still are committed to this ,as are the Russians, and are the Chinese. So there is a broader political road that the US could take to negotiate with the Iranians on a range of these issues that concern the US.

Bob Schieffer: Was this because of our withdrawing from that agreement?

Seth Jones: I wouldn't say it was necessarily just because of the US withdrawing. I think it was at least partly a US decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal. An increase in the sanctions, so that's a separate issue, although they are linked; and no political dialogue right now. So I think if you're looking at the situation from Tiran's standpoint, it has very few alternatives. Its economy has been decimated right now. There's no political dialogue, there's no hope, there's no light at the end of this tunnel. And I think that's why this issue is a big front and center. And I think that the likelihood that the US is going to get regime change in Iran is close to zero. So this is why I think the US needs to ... It needs to make it very clear this is not about regime change, per se, this is about what the Administration has largely said: missiles, Quds Force activities in the region, and a nuclear program.

Andrew Schwartz: Would another option for the United States to be to gather the world around this incident and say we need to do something to A, stop Iran from these kinds of activities; and B, bring them back into some form of dialogue so going forward, we're all talking instead of having this kind of activity?

Seth Jones: Yeah. I think at the very least, having the countries involved in the nuclear deal, the major European powers, the Russians, the Chinese and the

Americans involved in discussions with Iran on these issues would be a good place to start. I mean, it's worth noting that there's been a lot of tension building. We identified between July 2016 and July 2019, 250 attacks; mostly coming from the Houthis in Yemen against Saudi critical infrastructure, including Ras Tanura, including the facilities at Abqaiq, itself. So this is not coming out of nowhere. This is just much larger than what we've seen in the past. And I think this stuff will continue if there is not some progress on the political end.

Andrew Schwartz: Yeah. Meanwhile, today, Iran's Supreme Leader said that no Iranian official at any level will have any dialogue with any US official, unless they come back to the nuclear deal. So we're back to square one, here, and it seems like we're at a standoff.

Seth Jones: Well, I think we are at a standoff. I think the question is, can the US restart negotiations that at least includes the nuclear deal? And even if the US makes some changes to the nuclear deal, the US may want to add additional elements to that. The missile program that Iran has and has just shown what it can do, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, the paramilitary arm of Iran that trains a range of the terrorist and militia groups in the region. So I think at least coming back to the nuclear deal, letting the US add other elements to discussions is the way forward, here.

Bob Schieffer: Where do you see this going right now?

Seth Jones: I think the question is how serious is the US about negotiating right now? And does the US want to go back to something that looks like the nuclear deal that the US walked out of last year? The US may be in a position with the National Security Advisor, John Bolton departing last week, probably among the most hawkish elements of the Administration, there may be, now, some more room to negotiate. It's probably something that he was not supportive of, in general.

Andrew Schwartz: do you think the Iranian's timing had anything to do with Bolton leaving?

Seth Jones: Unclear right now. I mean, there are plenty of other hawks in the Administration on Iran. Probably not, actually. I think they've had this capability. And as I said earlier, there have been over 250 strikes against Saudi facilities in the past. So this has been going on for some time.

Bob Schieffer: So what will you be looking for? I mean, what do you think we ought to have our ears open to and-

Seth Jones: Well, I think the first thing is more information, particularly as the US and the Saudis and potentially other partners, including the British, make intelligence public. Who conducted the attacks? What were the projectiles that were used, and where they cruise missiles? Where were they shot from? So that's one, is to get a better sense of this.

Seth Jones: And the second is how does the US respond? Does it do it directly? Does it do what we would call a proportional response? Somewhat like what was just hit? Or, does the US escalate? The US conducts attacks against a Iranian infrastructure in Iran, that is almost certainly escalation. Because now it's the US going directly against the Iranians. Or, does the US let the Saudis respond because they were the ones targeted?

Seth Jones: So those are the two most significant things that I would look at near-term. The third issue is do we see at least public discussions about a restart of negotiations with Iran? And I think that would get us out of this tit for tat environment we're in, and actually put us on a path towards potentially resolving this.

Andrew Schwartz: Do you think we have a cohesive set of policies in place in the United States right now towards Iran?

Seth Jones: No, in the sense that the US has communicated a range of steps, and the Secretary Of State has done this, and the President's key Iran person has done this in the State Department, Brian Hook.

Andrew Schwartz: Brian Hook.

Seth Jones: They have communicated a range of steps. I think a number of those steps, the Iranians will never budge on. So I think the question is, can the US, A, communicate a list of steps that Iran actually may be willing to negotiate on? And second, can the US get its major partners and allies involved in that? And this has been one of the biggest problems with the US approach, is its major allies in Europe are not on board with where the US is. So the US is operating largely on its own right now, and I think that is probably the single biggest challenge.

Bob Schieffer: Dr. Jones, thank you for bringing us the truth of the matter. I'm Bob Schieffer.

Andrew Schwartz: And I'm Andrew Schwartz.

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