



By: TA | AP Insight

Attacks by Iran and the Houthis on Saudi Arabia carried out with the help of Russian satellites



Iranian-backed militias carried out a precision strike last month, hitting the pumping stations of **Saudi Arabia's** most important oil pipeline. Days later, another attack hit a Saudi military air base, damaging an Italian fighter jet inside a hangar.

Crucial to the strikes' success was what was happening in the skies overhead: For days beforehand, a constellation of Russian spy satellites converged over the pipeline and the air base to gather intelligence.

A private geospatial intelligence firm said it examined 40 missile and drone attacks against Saudi Arabia by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen and **militias in Iraq** between July 1 and Oct. 19. In every case, the firm found the same pattern of Russian government and military satellites orbiting above the areas for days before and after.

"What we found is a 100% match" between the satellite activities and strikes, said **Nawaf Obaid, founder of Geneva-based AURORAH Geosignal Intelligence**.

The findings illustrate how Russia is believed to be helping Iran and its allies in the region target Saudi Arabia's oil and military infrastructure in attacks that have helped raise global energy prices.

Three officials, including one from Saudi Arabia and another in the top ranks of the Houthis, as well as a private intelligence analyst, told The Associated Press that the Houthis and other Iranian allies have benefited from Russian intelligence, as well as Chinese capabilities.

Iranian advisers in the field analyzed and transferred the intelligence to their allies, according to AP reporting.

The Saudi Foreign Ministry's deputy minister for public diplomacy, Rayed Krimly, told reporters last week that Iran and the Houthis receive intelligence from "elements in Russia and China, even commercial elements sometimes."

"We do discuss these matters regularly with China and Russia, and we will continue to do so," he said.

Russian officials had no immediate comment when asked about the allegations, including AURORAH's findings.

Russia and Iran have a longstanding military cooperation arrangement, including **transferring drone technology**.

While Russia has not been directly involved in the wars in the region, U.S. and European officials have said Russia has shared intelligence with Iran.

Iranian-backed groups were able to carry out pinpoint strikes

On the morning of Sept. 10, multiple drone strikes from Iraq hit three critical pumping stations along Saudi Arabia's East-West Pipeline, immediately interrupting the flow of oil. The 1,200-kilometer (746-mile) pipeline across the kingdom has been a vital alternative route for getting its crude to market amid Iran's attacks on shipping in the Strait of Hormuz.

The pumping stations are vital to moving oil through the pipeline, which rises more than 1,100 meters (3,608 feet) in altitude as it goes from eastern Saudi Arabia across the Najd Plateau then back down to the kingdom's western coast on the Red Sea, said Obaid, a fellow at King's College Department of War Studies who also served as an adviser to various Saudi officials from 2004 to 2016.

"This is where the militias out of Iraq decided to strike," he said.

Beginning in July, his firm observed 11 of Russia's Cosmos 2600 series satellites concentrating on those three sections of the pipeline.

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A week later, King Fahd Air Base in Taif, Saudi Arabia, was hit with multiple projectiles fired by the Iranian-backed Houthis.

Along with hangars at the base, an Italian air force Eurofighter Typhoon jet was damaged, according to the Italian Defense Ministry.

The Italian military has had assets deployed in Saudi Arabia for years as part of the U.S.-led coalition's campaigns in Iraq and Syria.

In both those cases, Obaid's firm monitored a 50% increase in the number of Russian satellites orbiting above the targets during a 72-hour period before and after the strikes, compared with July.

Notably, the Taif attack precisely hit the Italian warplane rather than Saudi ones stationed at the same base, suggesting "highly specialized intelligence support that the Houthis and Iranians simply don't have," Obaid said.

The Houthis have warned foreign powers not to help Saudi Arabia.

A clear pattern of satellites is visible

AURORAH used open-source information as well as other intelligence sources to identify 72 Russian reconnaissance satellites out of more than 11,000 spacecraft orbiting the Earth, Obaid said.

It then tracked their trajectories and maneuvers while comparing them to military

activity on the ground.

The firm has not intercepted actual transmission of intelligence to Iran or its allies, Obaid said.

Instead, the firm has established a definitive pattern of Russian satellite positions and reconnaissance activity around strategic targets ahead of strikes, indicating that intelligence is being collected and transferred for Houthi and Iraqi militia targeting, he said.

The intelligence system behind the weapon is becoming as important as the weapon itself - Nawaf Obaid

Obaid said the same satellite patterns also occurred in connection with Iranian strikes on U.S. bases in the Middle East during the U.S.-Iran war that began in February.

"That is the fundamental transformation in the regional military balance: The intelligence system behind the weapon is becoming as important as the weapon itself," he said.

Adam Marsh, vice president of technological solutions at California-based Leolabs, an orbital intelligence firm, said the massing of satellites is what one would expect to see for purposes of collecting intelligence.

The Russians can deny they are doing it, he said, but he noted there is only a general policy and no regulatory body: "How would you stop anybody?"

Satellite intelligence has also helped Houthis in their fight inside Yemen

An official briefed on investigations in Saudi Arabia into recent attacks said intelligence showed that Russian satellites had helped Houthis and Iraqi militias strike sensitive targets, including the pumping stations on the

East-West Pipeline.

The official spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to journalists.

The satellites also helped strikes by Iran in March on Saudi Arabia's Prince Sultan Air Base, where a U.S. surveillance aircraft was severely damaged, and on a CIA unit inside the U.S. Embassy complex in Riyadh, the official said.



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The investigations found that missiles and drones used by the Houthis in their strikes had Russian- and Chinese-made components, the official said.

Russian satellite intelligence has also helped the Houthis in the dramatic advances they made against Saudi-backed opponents in Yemen's civil war, according to Obaid and a Houthi leader.

AURORAH identified satellite configurations over targets in connection to an Oct. 15 Houthi strike on the presidential palace in Yemen's southern port city of Aden and a nearby command center used by the Saudi-led coalition, as well as a strike on a government recruitment center in the province of Shabwa that killed 75 new recruits, Obaid said.

Iranian advisers on the ground in Yemen have been providing the rebels with data based on Russian satellite intelligence to help in targeting, a senior Houthi leader told the AP.

The leader spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the confidential role of the advisers.

Mzahem Alsaloum, a security analyst who has followed Iranian-backed groups for nearly a decade and now runs a private intelligence firm, said the advisers use Russian spy satellite information to provide Iranians with target lists and operational information.

The Houthi leader also said the Iranians provided the rebels with more advanced equipment, including systems for piloting drones and for helping missiles evade air defenses.

The equipment was developed by the Iranians, bought commercially or provided by Russia and China, he said, though he did not know whether those countries were aware the equipment was being used in the Yemen war.