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Middle East drones signal end to era of fast jet air supremacy

Tiny, cheap, unmanned and hard-to-detect aircraft are transforming conflicts across region

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In the history of modern warfare, “own the skies, win the war” has been a constant maxim. Countries with the best technology and biggest budgets have devoted tens of billions to building modern air forces, confident they will continue to give their militaries primacy in almost any conflict.

Tiny, cheap, unmanned aircraft have changed that, especially over the battlefields of the Middle East. In the past three months alone, drones have made quite an impact in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and possibly now Saudi Arabia, where half the

country’s oil production - and up to 7% of the world’s global supply - has been taken offline by a blitz that caused no air raid sirens and seems to have eluded the region’s most advanced air warning systems.

Drones are now an integral part of the inventory of the region’s most advanced militaries, and the also-rans. Non state actors have been clamouring to secure them as well - convinced by the utility of hard-to-detect, dispensable flying toys to be used as weapons of war.

The Israeli military is armed with the latest fast jets and precision weaponry, yet it has turned to its fleet of drones to hit targets in Syria. Deniability has played a big factor - the ability of drones to elude radar and therefore keep targets guessing about who actually bombed them is playing well for Israeli leaders who are trying to prevent an increasingly lethal shadow war with Iran from developing into an open conflict.

Iran too has cottoned on to the strengths of its foes, ramping up its fleet of drones, both the off-the-shelf variety and the cutting edge military version - a key component of which was reverse engineered from a US drone it brought to the ground four years ago.

Iranian proxies have increasingly used variants passed on to them by Tehran. Houthi forces in Yemen, backed by the Iranian military, have previously sent unmanned craft up to 430 miles (700km) inside the kingdom to bomb pipelines.

The damage wreaked then was a precursor of what was to come on Sunday - what appears to be the first full blown drone attack on a strategic site of global significance. The price of global oil has since jumped, as have the chances of a regional escalation, and the US has unlocked its oil reserves for the first time in many years.

The strikes on Saudi Arabia are clear strategic warning that the era of fast jet air supremacy is over. The US in particular will need to take heed. Its sway in the region has in part hinged on its ownership of the skies and the lethal threat its air force poses. The cost of waging a consequential war is not so high after all.