

# How the U.S. Can Stop the Surge of Deadly Rocket Attacks in Iraq

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



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**Congress and the Trump administration should privately agree to some ground rules for timing deterrent strikes on truly high-value targets, while quietly deploying more force-protection assets like Patriot missiles.**

In the early hours of Friday, U.S. and British aircraft conducted multiple airstrikes on the missile storage sites of the Iraqi militia group Kataib Hezbollah (KH), a pro-Iranian group that was also hit by unclaimed airstrikes in Syria the day before. Until Wednesday, when a rocket attack killed two Americans and one British service member on a sprawling base north of Baghdad, there hadn't been much noise from Tehran since its reprisal in early January after the U.S. killed Qassem Soleimani. This week's attack, which was meticulously planned and clearly not the work of the ramshackle remnants of the Islamic State, changed that. A truck with two rows of rocket-launching tubes discreetly installed in the flatbed approached the base undetected and fired the rockets in one sudden salvo.

As someone who has gotten lost while walking around the maze of concrete barriers that make up the 15-square-mile Camp Taji base, I can attest to the great accuracy of the strike. Taji is massive, and the strike hit at just the right moment and just the right spot, probably guided by a drone or human agent.

The next day, KH, the Iraqi Shiite militia closest to Iran, praised the attack as an act of the pro-Iranian "resistance" against U.S. "occupation," a surefire sign that pro-Iranian militias were behind the strike and the Shiite militia version of "humble bragging." By that stage, either U.S. or Israeli aircraft had already struck back at KH and other Shiite militias, albeit just over the border in Syria late on Wednesday, killing around two dozen fighters and wounding many more. The strikes, and the subsequent round launched very early Friday morning, were reminiscent

of the United States' retaliatory attacks in late December on KH after the militia group caused the last U.S. death in Iraq in a rocket attack on December 27.

Friday morning's strikes may not be the end in a new tit-for-tat cycle that has the potential to spark a wider conflict. Iran is escalating through its Iraqi militias because it wants to raise pressure to evict U.S. forces from Iraq and to threaten Iraqi leaders ahead of next week's selection of a replacement for resigned Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdal-Mahdi.

As U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said on Thursday: "You don't get to shoot at our bases and kill and wound Americans and get away with it." But how can deterrence be established quickly to end the cycle of attacks and prevent further loss of American lives?

## ONE COUNTRY, TWO ENEMIES

**T**he deaths of two U.S. personnel—one military, one contractor—at Taji comes days after the March 8 deaths of two U.S. Marine special forces operators in a firefight with the Islamic State in northern Iraq. The two episodes underline the complexity of what the U.S. military is attempting to do in today's Iraq.

The mission of Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR, or the coalition, for short) is still to defeat the last remnants of the Islamic State. In recent weeks, the coalition has ramped up its special forces raiding alongside Iraqi commandos, achieving significant successes against Islamic State leadership targets.

When the U.S. gets on a roll, triggering new raids on the basis of data from laptops and phones recovered in each prior raid, terrorists face the most unrelenting foe in the world. But boosted effectiveness comes at a cost of added risk, as the March 8 deaths illustrate.

To complicate matters, Iran-backed militias like KH are seeking to lever the U.S.-backed coalition out of Iraq by any means necessary, regardless of the coalition's contribution to the anti-Islamic State struggle. Militias like KH sought the removal of international forces long before they killed an American on December 27, before they themselves were struck on December 29, and before their patriarchs, Iranian General Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi militia chieftain Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, were killed by the U.S. on January 3 in a Baghdad drone strike.

## WHAT IRAN'S MILITIAS WANT

**N**ow the militias are doubling their efforts, including issuing warnings to Iraqi officials and soldiers to distance themselves from the coalition (which they did not). In recent months, KH has threatened Iraqi MPs to vote to remove U.S. forces (enough of them resisted this call to prevent a vote with quorum) and threatened Iraq's president Barham Salih if he met with President Donald Trump at the World Economic Forum (he met Trump anyway).

Now KH is also issuing statements vetoing certain candidates for Iraq's imminent selection of a new prime minister, suggesting which candidate should be picked (current premier Adel Abdal-Mahdi), and explicitly suggesting how the country's most senior religious leaders should rule on the matter. This is all unprecedented territory in Iraq, particularly the openness of the threats, similar to Iran's recent elections where the regime blocked over 7,000 candidates for Parliament and invalidated a third of sitting MPs from seeking reelection.

## RESTORING DETERRENCE

**T**he U.S. has clearly not yet deterred the militias from killing Americans and the result is that U.S. forces in Iraq are not being protected by either the Iraqi government or, ultimately, by our own government. This is not a sustainable situation. What can change?

- **U.S. withdrawal from Iraq.** One option is always to leave, which is what Kataib Hezbollah, Iran's Revolutionary Guards, and the Islamic State want us to do. The historical track record suggests we might just be drawn back in later,

under even less favorable circumstances, possibly even to fight an Iraq that is under Iran's control.

- **Take the low road.** A second option is that we can play Iran and its militias at their own game, and simply kill a lot more of them in a rolling campaign of elimination. This is well within our capabilities and might result in a dramatic and long-lasting reduction of Iran's influence in Iraq, but there is also a risk—though not a certainty—that this galvanizes anti-Americanism.
- **Take the high road.** A final option is that the U.S. can somehow play the victim and the responsible actor in this drama and limit its retaliation to immediate and proportionate strikes, largely outside Iraq to reduce the risk of Iraqi nationalist responses.

Last night's strikes on KH missile and rocket bases were an attempt to take the high road, but the lack of large secondary explosions suggests that KH had evacuated its valuable weapons long before the strike. Iran's militia proxies in Iraq can trade empty buildings or even two dozen of their own rank and file for three Anglo-American fatalities all day, every day. This a game we will lose.

The right approach probably lies somewhere between the high and low roads, with very prompt, decisive and unclaimed attacks demonstrated against some senior Iraqi militia leaders in order to make others think very seriously about their personal future. But high-value leadership targets—which Iran and the militias do value—are generally not available to hit the day after Americans are killed: they are keeping their heads down. Congress and the administration need to sit privately and agree to some ground rules (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/establishing-a-response-ratio-for-iranian-and-proxy-attacks>) for the use of military force that allow the U.S. military to delink the timing of deterrent strikes, so that we can strike the right targets when they become available, to deter militia attacks that are highly likely to come otherwise.

In parallel, the U.S. should toughen its mindset, quietly bringing the force protection assets into Iraq that it needs (i.e., Patriot missiles and anti-rocket close-in defenses) without further consultation with an Iraqi government that would rather adopt a “don't ask, don't tell” approach. And finally, the U.S. should let the militias keep over-reaching, keep showing their hand as would-be dictators under Iran's control, while the U.S.-led coalition keeps helping Iraq to defeat the Islamic State. This is a game we can win.

*Michael Knights is a senior fellow with The Washington Institute. Since 2003, he has conducted extensive on-the-ground research in Iraq alongside security forces and government ministries. This article was originally published on the Politico website (<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/13/iraq-airstrikes-shiite-militias-islamic-state-128210>).* ❖

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