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Rockets over Erbil: How to Respond to an Iraqi Militia Outrage

by [Michael Knights](#)

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Brief Analysis

Iran-backed militias took the unprecedented step of rocketing a major city and U.S. base in Iraqi Kurdistan, and the Biden administration must quickly find its own formula for restoring deterrence.

On February 15, the city of Erbil (the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, or KRI) was struck with a heavy rocket attack that killed one contractor working for the U.S.-led coalition at Erbil's airport, wounded five more coalition personnel (including one U.S. soldier), and injured at least three local civilians. As many as twenty-eight rocket launches may have been attempted, with more than a dozen rockets landing in the densely populated city, an unprecedentedly reckless strafing of a civilian population center.

Despite efforts to muddy the waters by using “facade” groups to claim responsibility for the attack, Iran-backed militias are likely responsible, given their patterns of publicizing previous attacks. The Biden administration now has the difficult task of crafting a response that is measured but resolute, and must make some key decisions about how to attribute and deter such attacks on U.S. persons and U.S. partners in the future.

The Erbil Rocket Attack

At 21.15 hours (Erbil time), a barrage of 107 mm rockets was fired from a disguised launch vehicle outside an agricultural market five miles southwest of Erbil. The vehicle appears to have entered the KRI from farmland in federal Iraq, either from the Nineveh Plains to the west or from the Sargaran area to the south. The disguise was

ingenious: many farm trucks enter the KRI from federal Iraq to bring foodstuffs to Erbil, and this truck had a hidden set of “pop-up” launch tubes under its cargo bed. The attack was the second recent strike on Erbil, the first being the September 30, 2020, long-range rocket attack near the Erbil airport, which was launched from outside the KRI in militia-controlled Bartella, east of Mosul.

Coalition radar tracked fourteen launches toward northwest Erbil city and the airport, with its coalition base, though the actual number may have been twenty-four. No air defenses were activated, likely to avoid the risk of accidentally striking any high-rise buildings. Two rockets landed on Erbil airport, killing one non-American foreign contractor and injuring five others, plus a U.S. serviceperson. At least three local civilians were also wounded by the eleven known rocket impacts in the city, a miraculously low number considering the busy streets. The Chinese consulate was struck, and other rockets landed near the Palestinian Authority consulate. If one of Erbil’s high-rises had caught fire, the death toll might have been in the scores or hundreds.

Which Group Undertook the Attack?

Responsibility for the attack was claimed at 00.11 hours (Erbil time) by a group known as Saraya Awliya al-Dam (Custodians of the Blood). This group has claimed attacks from time to time: most recently, it claimed the January 25, 2021, roadside bombing of a coalition contractor vehicle in southern Iraq. The group itself is just a media brand—a logo, a Telegram channel, and some tweets. More important are (1) the sequence of media coverage of the attack and (2) its demonstrable ties to at least one Iran-backed militia group, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), which was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States on January 3, 2020.

The Erbil attack occurred at the end of the day, when another AAH media front—Ashab al-Kahf (Companions of the Cave)—claimed to have fired a truck-mounted long-range rocket at a Turkish base in northern Iraq, reflecting recent criticism by Iraqi militias of Turkish military operations to restrict Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) movements in the KRI and Sinjar areas. Iran-backed militias such as AAH have jumped on the opportunity to appear to “defend Iraq” against Turkey, criticize the Iraqi Kurdish leadership, and exacerbate tensions within the KRI over the issues of the PKK, Turkey, and Iraqi Kurdish party politics.

Previewing the rocket attacks by 13 minutes, Ashab al-Kahf then made an online critique of KRI leadership, mentioning Erbil at 21.02 hours; this appears to have laid the foundation for branding the Erbil attack, signaling to internal militia audiences that AAH was about to act against the Kurdistan Region. At 21.38 hours, 23 minutes after the attack, the first propaganda images of the attack were published on Sabereen (an AAH-affiliated media outlet), with AAH channels leading the coverage thereafter. When Saraya Awliya al-Dam claimed the attack, it was neither disputed nor duplicated by other groups, a fact that suggests deconfliction among other Iran-backed militias (such as Kataib Hezbollah) and strong AAH ownership of the event.

The justification and descriptions of the attack contain interesting clues with regard to a motive. The attack is improbably being portrayed as a strike on Harir Air Base, a facility housing U.S. special forces thirty miles northeast of Erbil, which exceeds the range of the rockets by twenty-five miles. Likely intending to please Iran, Saraya Awliya al-Dam’s statement that “there is no safe place for U.S. forces” in Kurdistan echoes justifications of the previous anti-U.S. rocket attack in September 2020. The statement also improbably attributes any damage in Erbil city to U.S. counterrocket interception systems; this is also demonstrably false, as the defenses were not activated. The claim does, however, underline the militia’s desire to distance itself from reckless endangerment of civilians.

Overall, the attack appears to have been another effort by AAH to demonstrate its position as the leading resistance (*muqawama*) faction, in competition with groups such as Kataib Hezbollah (which is arguably suffering internal schisms and focusing more on nonkinetic actions) and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (which is trying to increase its profile and credit with Iran). AAH has consistently demonstrated its appetite to mount attacks on U.S. forces that

carry an appreciable risk of killing Americans.

Implications for U.S. Policy

U. S. classified intelligence tends to quite quickly discern the level of Iranian involvement, which will inform the Biden administration regarding Tehran’s role in the incident. Whether Iran intends such a test or not, the result is the same—the Biden administration must now either craft a response that looks firm and able to deter, or suffer an early loss of credibility in the eyes of regional partners. The U.S. government faces a delicate quandary in Iraq, which was always a likely venue for an [early test of the Biden administration](#). The administration wants to deter attacks on U.S. persons and U.S. partners, while setting a different tone from the Trump administration’s frequent recourse to military threats, occasional lethal retaliation, and imposition of new sanctions. Such goals set the bar very high for the new administration, and will certainly test its ingenuity and creativity.

The administration’s first priority should be to more closely monitor the actions of Iran-backed militias, in order to generate publicly sharable evidence of the provenance of attacks such as the Erbil rocket strike. The United States can use its internal intelligence capabilities and the powerful open-source analytical community to link together the propaganda “fronts,” such as Saraya Awliya al-Dam and Ashab al-Kahf, to major terrorist and militia movements, such as AAH.

These connections should be publicly “outed” by the U.S. administration, in partnership with other coalition nations, Iraq, the Kurds, and perhaps even the United Nations Security Council. This kind of bright spotlight will not only signal to the militias that the United States is paying attention and knows where to address retaliation, but also caution militias to consider their actions. At the very least, U.S.-designated terrorist and AAH leader Qais al-Khazali should have his U.S.-based social media accounts seized and closed, including his still-operational Twitter account.

A second priority for the administration should be to signal that the United States holds Iran indirectly responsible for events such as the Erbil rocket attack. Tehran needs to be held privately accountable by Washington, whether the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps ordered the Erbil attacks, cued up the plan and left AAH to decide the timing, or is loosely capable of curbing attacks by groups like AAH. The point is that Iran *can* restrain such groups. The Biden administration should privately signal that sanctions relief and negotiations are conditional upon a cessation of new outrages by Iran-backed militias—notably, drone attacks on Riyadh by Kataib Hezbollah, rocketing of major cities by AAH, and Houthi efforts to kill the entire Yemeni cabinet and seize Yemen’s main energy hub. Iran *can and should* rein in these militias, which it armed and developed, as a sine qua non before renewing negotiations with the United States in good faith.

Michael Knights, the Bernstein Fellow with The Washington Institute, monitors the activities of Iran-backed militias in Iraq and Yemen. ❖



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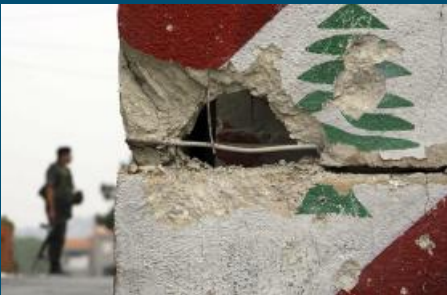


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