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Why Biden's Airstrikes on Iran Militias Matter

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Articles & Testimony

The operation on the Iraq-Syria border could prove more significant than critics allow, but only if the administration keeps showing that there are limits to what it will tolerate in pursuing a new nuclear deal.

On Thursday, U.S. warplanes struck targets in the Albu Kamal region of Syria, a zone on the country's eastern border that is heavily used by Iranian-backed Shiite militias from Iraq to smuggle weapons, exert strategic control, and carry out attacks against various foes in Syria, including the Islamic State. The airstrike hit seven targets, destroying several facilities but causing minimal casualties. According to press reports, President Joe Biden chose a more modest or "middle" target from the suites presented to him by his intelligence community for retaliating against an Iran-backed Shiite militia attack on Feb. 15 in Erbil, in which a U.S. contractor was killed and nine others, including an American serviceman, were wounded.

Rahi Salam, a member of Kataib Hezbollah, was killed in the airstrike, according to Shiite militia media, which nonetheless downplayed the extent and severity of the American reprisal. Critics of the operation, meanwhile, agreed that move was insignificant. The Israelis have launched deadlier strikes in Syria like this every week or so for the past two years, even without antecedent provocations. Nicholas Krohley, a scholar of the militias, flippantly tweeted, "A moment of silence for the Grade II listed, abandoned cement factory on the outskirts of Abu Kamal."

And yet, hitting Iranian proxies in Syria was not as much of an eye roll-worthy operation as has been argued. For one

thing, Biden has signaled he's learned from President Barack Obama's past failures of acquiescing to Iranian belligerence in an effort to curry diplomatic favor with Tehran, which the Iranians correctly viewed as a license to carry on without fear of material consequence. (This is particularly significant in light of this administration's avowed desire to reenter the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the U.S.-led nuclear accord with Iran inked in 2015, which President Donald Trump withdrew from in 2018.)

Furthermore, hitting Iranian-controlled Iraqi assets in Syria spared Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, already seen by the militias as an American hireling (further reporting suggests al-Kadhimi might have shared intelligence about the militias' presence in Albu Kamal with the U.S.), from greater political difficulties at home. It also helpfully spotlighted an awkward question for armed groups created to defend Iraq from foreign occupiers, and which are now legally bundled into Baghdad's central security apparatus: What are they doing in Syria in the first place?

Starting in late 2012, Iraqi Shiite fighters were sent by the thousands to Syria. Some came as volunteers on what they believed was a mission from God to "defend" the Sayyida Zaynab Shrine south of Damascus. Others desired adventure. Still others wanted a paycheck. Whatever the motive, for Iran this mass recruitment and deployment had but one strategic objective: Save the then-embattled regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from a protest movement-turned-incipient Sunni insurgency. By 2016, over 20 organizations were used to mobilize and deploy, at a minimum, 10,000 to 15,000 Iraqi Shiite fighters.

The climax arrived in 2015 and lasted for around two years, coinciding with the intense, Iran-led battles to reconquer Aleppo from Syrian rebels and Sunni jihadists. Since then, open recruitment of Iraqi Shiites to fight in Syria has significantly ebbed, particularly following the cessation of Iraqi operations to crush the Islamic State in Mosul in 2017.

The Iraqi groups that still operate in Syria are primarily centered in Damascus or in areas of eastern Syria near Deir ez-Zor. In fact, this zone has become a major geostrategic hotbed for Iranian activity in the Middle East because it is where the so-called land bridge linking Tehran to the Mediterranean is to be constructed. The land bridge—really a direct line of communication for men and materiel—was a long-held dream of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force expeditionary arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, who was killed in a U.S. airstrike in Baghdad a year ago.

Part and parcel with Soleimani's still-extant project was stationing Quds Force-controlled Shiite militias along this area, allowing them to slip with ease in and out of the Albu Kamal area via its Iraqi counterpart border town, al-Qaim. Among the hardcore groups deployed there are Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Kataib Hezbollah (one of the militias targeted Thursday), Saraya al-Jihad, Lebanese Hezbollah, as well as an Iranian-run Afghan and Pakistani faction. All have smuggled advanced weaponry through this crucial gateway, and, to ensure the longevity of their operations and the fealty of the local communities they must navigate, they've even reportedly offered payments to local Sunnis to join their paramilitaries or even convert to Shiism.

In recent years, however, the presence of the militias in a foreign country has grown increasingly unpopular in Iraq, particularly among a restive and young Shiite population who view it as not only a sap on Iraqi resources but also as ample demonstration that native Iraqis count for little more than cannon fodder for the Quds Force's strategic ambitions. Kataib Hezbollah, in particular, is a central spoke in Tehran's wheel of aggression in Iraq and therefore a source of enormous resentment among Iraqis. To the Pentagon, it's one of the most notorious terrorist outfits in Iraq.

The group was founded in 2005 and soon took to pioneering advanced weapons, such as the explosively formed penetrator that ripped through U.S. armored vehicles during the U.S. occupation of Iraq. The U.S.-registered terrorist

organization has been at the center of Iran's efforts to attack U.S. forces during the American occupation, recruiting fighters for Syria, and is currently a major node in Iranian efforts to grow and control multiple officially recognized Shiite militia groups. One of its founders and a key Soleimani aide, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, was killed along with Soleimani in the Jan. 3, 2020, U.S. airstrike near Baghdad International Airport. In December 2019, Kataib Hezbollah was also struck by U.S. forces for its involvement in menacing the U.S. Embassy and its threats against U.S. personnel.

The other named group targeted by U.S. forces on Thursday, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, is simply a splinter from Kataib Hezbollah. It was formed in early 2013, ostensibly due to a leadership dispute within the ranks of its parent organization. Since then, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada has posted candidates for Iraqi parliament in national elections and recruited thousands of fighters for combat in Iraq and Syria, all while remaining completely under Iranian control. The Master of the Martyrs Brigade, as the group's name translates into English, likely had a role in the Saraya Awliyah al-Dam front group's strike on Erbil, given its influence with local groups in that area.

While Biden might have campaigned on renewed diplomacy with Iran, he's also indicated that reentering a nuclear deal won't be quick or easy and caveated such a contingency on curtailing Iran's regional misbehavior. Iran has always understood that its real power rested with its proxy groups across the region. It's a smart assumption, predicated on the historical fact that Iran was able, in the last half decade, to extend its influence well beyond its borders with impunity, counting on America's desperation for a nuclear deal. In other words, it got to do much of what it wanted a bomb to do, without the benefit of a bomb.

A month into existence, the Biden White House has no doubt also learned an important lesson: The Middle East is greatly transformed from what it was before Trump became president. Turkey has emerged as a major interventionist power, one increasingly at odds with Iran in northern Iraq. Gulf states, meanwhile, have normalized their relations with Israel in either de jure or de facto manners. And with the destruction of ISIS's "caliphate" in Syria and Iraq has come a new slate of socioeconomic grievances aimed at central governments and the non-state or para-state structures keeping them afloat. Containing Iran, in short, means undermining the militias, and it seldom matters where along the Soleimani "land bridge" one finds them, as the Israelis know all too well.

Biden may want to revive the Iran nuclear deal, but he's telegraphed that he won't do so at any cost. If this defensive action in the desert of eastern Syria is more than just a one-off, it will represent a welcome about-face from the errors of 2015.

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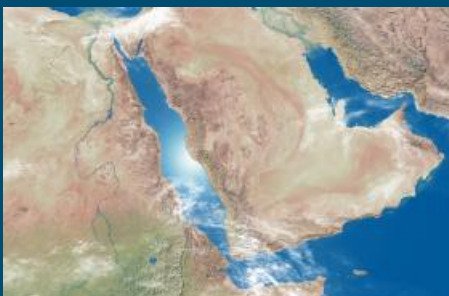


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