

Responding to Iranian Harassment of U.S. Facilities in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

Tehran has reportedly told its militia proxies to be ready for escalation, so Washington must prepare to maintain a full presence in Iraq even under potentially increased fire.

On May 19, Iraqi Shia militia members fired a rocket from east Baghdad toward the International Zone, the capital's diplomatic and governmental center. The munition missed the U.S. embassy and joint U.S.-Iraqi military facilities by a wide berth, but the strike's timing sent an unmistakable message: that Iranian militia proxies have full operational freedom to send warnings to the United States, regardless of Iraqi government pleas for restraint. The nonlethal incident should not be blown out of proportion, but it does underline the need to stay focused on the militia threat, continue sending strong deterrent messages, and be prepared to operate under these conditions without further evacuations of U.S. personnel.

RECENT IRANIAN PROXY ATTACKS

The Pentagon calculates that Iranian-provided weapons killed at least 608 U.S. persons in Iraq between 2003 and 2011, including signature systems such as rockets, explosively formed penetrators (EFPs), improvised rocket-assisted munitions (IRAMs), rocket-propelled grenades, and large-caliber sniper rifles. These attacks abated after 2011, but Iranian-backed harassment later recommenced as tensions with Tehran increased under the Trump administration:

- **Lethal EFP attack on U.S. troops.** On October 1, 2017, an American soldier was killed and another wounded by an EFP. A U.S. investigation concluded that the attack had been launched by an Iranian-backed militia after an American advise-and-assist mission expanded into Camp Speicher, a site that militia leaders wanted to exclude U.S. forces from.

- **Harassment of Basra consulate.** The U.S. consulate in the energy hub of Basra closed on September 29, 2018, following two rounds of **rocket fire on the complex** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/washington-should-reverse-its-retreat-in-basra>) that appeared to deliberately avoid causing damage or casualties. Previously, Iranian-backed militias threatened Iraqi locals who had been identified on social media as interacting with the consulate; fighters were also suspected of preparing to strike consulate vehicles as they drove around Basra.
- **Rocket attacks on Baghdad diplomatic facilities.** In September 2018, the embassy complex suffered two rounds of apparent warning fire; as in Basra, the rockets seemed to miss deliberately.
- **Rocket attack after presidential visit.** On December 27, 2018, two 107 mm rockets targeted the U.S. embassy complex a day after President Trump visited al-Asad Air Base in Anbar, causing no damage.
- **Foiled rocket attack on al-Asad.** On February 2, 2019, Iraqi forces acting on U.S. intelligence foiled attackers who aimed to fire three 122 mm rockets at American facilities in Anbar.
- **Rocket attack on Qayyara Airfield West.** On February 12, three 107 mm rockets were fired at U.S. facilities in Nineveh. Members of an unspecified Iranian-backed militia were arrested.
- **Rocket attack on Taji.** On May 1, two 107 mm rockets were fired at the Taji military training complex, where U.S. personnel provide divisional headquarters-level training. Two members of the Iranian proxy group Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) were arrested.
- **Rocket fire on the International Zone.** The May 19 attack involved a single rocket fired from a highway median close to the University of Technology in Baghdad. It landed in an open parade ground 1 km north of the U.S. embassy, strongly suggesting that it was intended to miss. The attack came right after a meeting in which President Barham Salih asked Iraq's top leaders to pledge that they will renounce foreign influence and support the government's invitation to coalition advisors.

RISING THREATS, RISING VULNERABILITY

The renewed attacks come at a time when Iranian-backed militia capabilities in Iraq are growing and the U.S. presence is becoming more vulnerable. Since American forces withdrew in 2011, militias have developed more advanced offensive capabilities, including accurate long-range tactical rockets. Previously, Iranian proxies used unguided rockets and short-range “barrack-buster” IRAMs to saturate U.S. bases from up to a dozen kilometers away. Today, after years of Iran arming the militias to fight the Islamic State, they are able to launch long-range tactical rockets from tens of kilometers away with sufficient accuracy to strike individual U.S. facilities on Iraqi bases.

If Tehran takes the next step and **provides the same type of precision-guided weapons** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/if-iran-deploys-missiles-in-iraq-u.s.-israeli-response-options>) it has sent to the Houthi rebels in Yemen (e.g., the Badr-1P missile), then Iraqi militias would be able to strike very specific parts of U.S. facilities within three meters of accuracy. Such weapons can be fired from civilian trucks and at far longer distances than 107 mm or 122 mm rockets, which U.S. forces are capable of detecting as they are being set up. Tehran **demonstrated its long-range precision strike capability** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-missile-attack-in-iraqi-kurdistan-could-backfire>) when it targeted the exact room where Iranian Kurdish oppositionists were meeting in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) on September 8, 2018.

Another major step forward for Iran's proxies is the use of drones. These systems can now be used to surveil U.S. patterns of movement within and outside bases, adjust fire during bombardments, drop munitions on U.S. facilities (as done in al-Tanf, Syria, in June 2017), or crash into missile defenses (as seen in Yemen).

At the same time, U.S. personnel in Iraq are becoming more vulnerable. Advisors now operate at a broader range of

bases in order to better help Iraqi counterterrorism troops launch intelligence-driven raids on Islamic State cells in rural areas. Moreover, these bases tend to be small, in close proximity to Iran's proxies, and less than two hours' drive from the Iranian border, assuming operatives ever seek to kidnap U.S. personnel.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Given its voluminous and definitive intelligence on the matter, the U.S. government is firmly convinced that Iran recently told Iraqi militias such as Kataib Hezbollah, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, and AAH to be ready for conflict. This order may have been issued in case the United States escalated after last week's apparent [Iranian-sponsored attacks on Gulf tankers and pipeline facilities \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rumors-of-war-responding-to-iranian-pushback-in-the-gulf\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rumors-of-war-responding-to-iranian-pushback-in-the-gulf), though AAH was reportedly preparing to strike U.S. forces even before then. Whatever the case, Washington should take the following steps to firm up its posture in Iraq before tensions with Iran spike again:

- **Continue senior-level messaging.** When Secretary of State Mike Pompeo paid a snap visit to Iraq on May 8, he sent a potent message that the United States would exercise its right to self-defense if attacked by Iranian-backed militias. This type of engagement is vital—Iraq needs a stable, high-level U.S. interlocutor who can stay on the Iraq case indefinitely.
- **Continue being clear about consequences.** After receiving Pompeo's message, Baghdad apparently signaled Iran to avoid further actions against U.S. personnel in Iraq. Yet given the rocket fire this weekend and Tehran's long track record of harassment, Washington should keep reinforcing this message. And if a militia strike in Iraq causes U.S. casualties or comes too close for comfort, the United States should target the offending group in order to maintain credibility. Syria may be a less provocative location in which to conduct such strikes, so as to prevent any criticism for striking on Iraqi sovereign territory (Iranian-backed often groups operate in both countries). This entails closely checking attribution data, since some militias may be anxious to misdirect blame onto rival groups.
- **Beware recurrent crises.** During the 1990s, the United States suffered through multiple "cheat and retreat" crises in which Saddam Hussein obstructed UN inspections, goaded Washington to build up its forces, then retreated back to compliance. This was exhausting at the time, and it would be equally exhausting to evacuate nonessential staff from U.S. diplomatic facilities every time Tehran and its proxies make new threats. Doing so will only disrupt U.S. officials and systems while undermining U.S. influence. Even in the shadow of the 2012 Benghazi incident, the United States needs to make greater preparations to comfortably "shelter in place" even in regional hotspots—the exact purpose for which its hugely expensive fortified diplomatic facilities were designed. Washington cannot wield local influence with allies or exercise maximum pressure on adversaries if its risk tolerance is zero.
- **Consider exceptions for Kurdistan.** While Iranian missiles can reach the KRI and Iranian agents may have some access there, it is still far safer than any other part of Iraq—largely because the KRI security forces do not include any Iranian-backed militias. Thus, even if U.S. evacuations are deemed unavoidable elsewhere, Washington should leave its KRI contingents fully intact. This would send a valuable lesson to Baghdad about how to protect the U.S. presence.
- **Share intelligence.** If Washington knows that specific militias are involved in attacks, it should share this intelligence widely, including in the public realm. Likewise, if Iranian-provided missiles are present in Iraq, the evidence should be discussed with Iraqi officials—and then publicly if this backchannel proves unprofitable. The more evidence Washington shows, the more its adversaries and partners in Iraq will respect its ability to tell when U.S. redlines are being overstepped. Specific intelligence sources and methods can still be concealed during such disclosures, and those that cannot are often known to Iranian authorities anyway.

Michael Knights, a senior fellow with The Washington Institute, has visited Iraq multiple times annually since 2003. ❖

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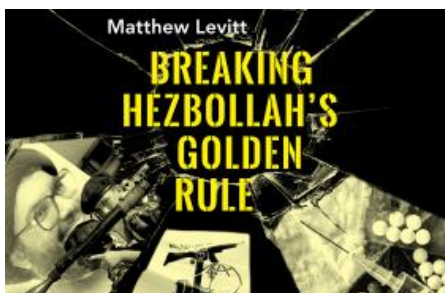
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