

Iran's Missile Attack in Iraqi Kurdistan Could Backfire

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Brief Analysis

The IRGC has fired a literal shot across the KRG's bow, but the brazen violation of Baghdad's sovereignty may ultimately benefit Tehran's opponents.

A few minutes after the start of a leadership meeting on September 8, the headquarters of the Kurdistan Democratic Party-Iran (KDP-I) came under missile attack. The next day, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps claimed responsibility, saying it had launched seven surface-to-surface missiles at a compound on the outskirts of Koysinjaq in Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government. According to the IRGC-linked Tasnim News Agency, the compound was "used for training anti-Iran terrorists and hosted a meeting of terrorist leaders." Seventeen people were killed and forty-nine injured, including civilians. The compound also houses the headquarters of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI), which has conducted recent attacks on IRGC targets in Iran. Yet the missiles primarily hit members of the more passive and pro-dialogue KDP-I, raising questions about Tehran's claim that the operation was purely a counterterrorism measure.

SIGN OF ESCALATION?

Iran used Fateh-110 missiles in the attack, which have a range of 300 kilometers. They were launched by mobile units near Urmia in northwest Iran, over 100 miles from their target in Iraq. IRGC drones filmed the attack and assessed damage. Six of the missiles hit the compound, with one striking the exact room where the forty-member KDP-I leadership committee was meeting—no mean feat in a large building with more than 200 rooms. Iran claims that the Fateh-110 has a circular error probable (CEP) of 10 meters (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-missile-strikes-reveal-potential-military-weaknesses>) at its maximum range, which would make it fully capable of such precision if the IRGC had the requisite intelligence about the meeting's location and time. Tehran was also no doubt aware that missing the building and hitting the nearby urban center of Koysinjaq would have resulted in greater casualties and a political row. Even so, it remains unclear whether the result was a

function of precision or sheer luck.

The night before the attack, three Kurdish activists were executed in Tehran, and Iranian troops have reportedly been massing on the KRG border, creating fears of a potential ground offensive. Although Iran has targeted the Kurdish opposition in Iraq with assassinations and car bombs in recent years (e.g., a December 2016 attack that killed seven dissidents), Saturday's strike was qualitatively different in its timing, boldness, and message. Iran had not launched missiles across the border since 2001, when it fired between 44 and 77 Scud missiles at camps belonging to the opposition group Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK). And in 1996, it hit the Koysinjaq compound with Katyusha rockets as part of a campaign to occupy large swaths of Iraqi Kurdistan.

ONE ATTACK, THREE AUDIENCES

Tehran may be using the strike to send three different messages. First and most important, it seems to be signaling the international community about its regional intentions and capabilities, since hitting a scantily protected training and refugee camp with powerful missiles would probably qualify as overkill to any credible observer. Unlike Iran's embarrassingly off-target missile attacks in Syria last year, the results of Saturday's operation indicate precise targeting, acute timing, and accurate intelligence. Given the recent reports that Iran is stationing missiles in Iraq and Syria, such capabilities would represent an increased threat to U.S. assets in the region as well as to Israel and the Gulf states.

Second, Tehran may be trying to intimidate citizens and politicians in Iraq, where anti-Iranian sentiment is on the rise during the latest election cycle. As leaders in Baghdad and Erbil horse-trade to determine who will run the next government, the Koysinjaq strike could be a warning that Tehran cannot be sidelined and will do what it must to protect its interests there. The pro-Iran camp is on the defensive—as late as last week, an alliance of former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki and Iranian-backed Shia militias was close to taking the lead in the post-election sweepstakes, but now the news is dominated by extraordinary sights like the sacking and burning of Iranian diplomatic facilities.

Meanwhile, the Kurds have been emboldened of late by Washington's more forceful diplomatic efforts in Iraq, including an August 30 phone call from Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to KRG leader Masoud Barzani—their first such conversation since the United States opposed the KRG's ill-fated 2017 independence referendum. Following that vote, Iraqi Kurdish parties fell deeper into Tehran's orbit as Iran helped Baghdad push KRG forces out of Kirkuk and its oil fields. Striking the KDP-I may be Tehran's way of warning the Kurds that they are once again overstepping. Indeed, a KRG statement after the attack condemned the strike but also called on Iranian Kurdish groups not to use KRG territory as a launching ground for attacks on Iran—something Iran has persistently asked Erbil to do.

Such statements are more understandable when one considers that Iran and Turkey regularly attack villages in KRG border areas where opposition groups operate, resulting in the displacement of local populations, diplomatic embarrassment, and ongoing difficulty with attracting and keeping international businesses in Iraqi Kurdistan. KRG leaders have been unable to stem such attacks despite their largely good relations with Ankara and Tehran—a significant concern because each incident blunts their Kurdish nationalist credibility ahead of the KRG elections slated for September 30.

Ironically, the Koysinjaq strike may inadvertently push KRG leaders closer to the federal government, since border protection is technically Baghdad's sovereign prerogative. They may even add this issue to their list of demands in government formation negotiations. Yet Baghdad's ability to meet this request could be limited given its long-fraught relations with the KRG and the difficulty of standing up to its two stronger neighbors.

The third message behind this weekend's attack may be intended for Kurdish opposition factions inside Iran, who

have sought to boost their relevance by hitting regime and IRGC targets. These groups could sense a noose tightening around the regime's neck, as U.S. sanctions worsen the country's already dire economic situation and protests continue to occur in various cities. Some Iranian Kurdish leaders have visited Washington in recent months to better understand the Trump administration's policy toward their country and find a foothold within it. In response, Tehran seems bent on eliminating opposition political leaders and disrupting opposition military plans.

RISKS FOR TEHRAN

Iran's bold attempt to solve its Kurdish opposition problem could backfire. The recent warming of relations between Tehran and Ankara has unsettled Iraqi Kurds, many of whom believe the two countries may be planning a joint attack on their respective opposition groups in the KRG. To protect themselves—politically and perhaps literally—leaders in Erbil might ask Iranian opposition forces to leave their bases in Iraq and return home. Ultimately, that would not be good news for Tehran. The combination of attacks abroad, persecution at home, and ongoing economic hardships would give Iranian Kurdish fighters fertile ground to recruit new personnel inside the Islamic Republic, all at a time when the regime is isolated internationally and fragmented politically. Yet they have little chance of transforming themselves from a sitting duck into an effective insurgency unless they get past their often-petty factionalism.

Tehran may also have exposed its missile programs to further international sanctions. The regime has threatened all summer that it would retaliate against factions responsible for killing IRGC members, citing an unclaimed July 21 attack that killed eleven personnel at Iran's Marivan border post. Yet targeting a meeting of opposition political leaders deep inside Iraq casts serious doubt on Tehran's claim that its missile program is purely defensive in nature. The weekend strike might further alienate the Iraqi public as well. Their anger at Iranian interference was already at its highest point since Tehran-friendly parties assumed power in Baghdad years ago, as manifested last week when rioters burned the Iranian consulate in Basra. At minimum, the missile attack was an affront to their country's sovereignty at a time when Iraqi nationalism is on the rise.

As for the U.S. and international reaction, Vice President Mike Pence quickly condemned the attack in a phone call with KRG prime minister Nechirvan Barzani. The United Nations should do the same—all it has done thus far is “take note” of the attack in a September 9 tweet. To demonstrate that there is a cost for attacking the KRG, Washington could take a closer look at Iranian banking and currency purchasing activities there. Firm U.S. backing might also help Iraq's more responsible Kurdish and Arab leaders to stand up to Iran.

Bilal Wahab is the Nathan and Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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