

Reacting Smartly to Harassing Tactics by Iraqi Militias

[Michael Knights](#)

July 29, 2020

As attacks on international targets continue, the United States should help Iraqis take the lead in responding to nonlethal incidents and exploiting militia missteps.

On July 27, Iran-backed militias in Taji, Iraq, fired five rockets at the local military base, which hosts a small U.S. contingent. Indeed, Kataib Hezbollah (KH), Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and other groups are escalating their harassment campaign against the U.S.-led coalition presence using a range of tactics:

- **Attacks on logistical convoys.** According to U.S. military contacts, militias have conducted fifty-one attacks this year on trucks that transport supplies to U.S. and coalition forces and diplomatic sites in Iraq. Almost all of these attacks were carried out with hand-thrown grenades or Molotov cocktails, though some involved gunfire or roadside improvised explosive devices. The attacks have damaged trucks and U.S. materiel, but no American lives have been threatened because the trucks are driven by Iraqi contractors and escorted by Iraqi security companies. Unsurprisingly, Iraqis are becoming less willing to work on such convoys.
- **Rocket attacks.** Militias have conducted at least twenty-seven rocket attacks on U.S. locations in Iraq this year, firing just over eighty rockets and mortar shells. Two U.S. troops and one British servicewoman were killed in a March 11 attack on Taji. And in the July 27 attack, rockets destroyed an Iraqi helicopter at the base and damaged an Iraqi military manufacturing site.
- **Drone threats.** On July 22, security forces discovered a quadcopter drone carrying a small bomb on a rooftop in Jadriyah, just across the Tigris River from the U.S. embassy and the Iraqi government center. Militia drones have previously been flown over the embassy and U.S. bases on a number of occasions.
- **Anti-air threats.** Militias have shot at U.S. helicopters transiting bases such as K-1 in Kirkuk. They have also posted images that claim to show a man-portable air-defense system (MANPADS) being (unsuccessfully) fired at a U.S. Chinook helicopter near the Bismayah training base. In other cases, militia leaders have displayed maps that purport to show radar tracks of coalition aerial transportation routes.
- **Hostage-taking.** The recent three-day kidnapping of German art curator Hella Mewis in Baghdad is a reminder that Iran-backed militias could try to pressure the United States by kidnapping American citizens, including Iraqi dual nationals.
- **Defiance against government authority.** Some militias have demonstrated their defiance with a [constant stream of media and online messaging](#). KH spokesman Abu Ali al-Askari regularly criticizes and threatens Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi and other “enemies.” And earlier this month, KH fighters employed by the Popular Mobilization Forces, an official state organ, were filmed stomping on pictures of Kadhimi, their commander-in-chief. Meanwhile, large militia convoys are [free to drive around the government center](#) and menace Iraqi officials.

Many of these measures are often used in tandem to falsely portray harassing efforts as effective military resistance. For example, militias will often learn of an upcoming coalition redeployment from one base to another, then use their various media platforms to publicly predict that forces will withdraw, then fire rockets at the base, and then record the scheduled redeployment as purported video evidence of successful resistance tactics. This was the case when Bismayah was hit with rockets on July 24—one day before the base was transitioned to full Iraqi operation in a long-announced ceremony.

THE RIGHT RESPONSE TO NONLETHAL HARASSMENT

If U.S. personnel are killed, or if authorities detect new or particularly advanced militia efforts to kill Americans, then a kinetic response would certainly be justified. And whenever such responses are issued, they should be more powerful than the weak retaliation seen on March 13, when U.S. forces struck empty KH-associated buildings after two Americans were killed at Taji.

Yet U.S. options are less clear-cut in other circumstances, so it is important to properly assess and rank militia harassing activities, differentiating between those that require urgent U.S. action and those that are less significant. The current strain of militia harassing attacks appears to be deliberately nonlethal against U.S. personnel, insofar as “aim to miss” rocket attacks at large military complexes have a very low risk of killing or seriously injuring Americans, and no U.S. personnel are present in logistical convoys. This apparent shaping of militia operational choices away from deadly attacks and toward the propagandistic touting of low-impact or fake attacks is arguably a deterrence success.

Yet there are still costs associated with letting such attacks go unanswered. First, some of them do have a residual risk of hurting Americans, which could draw the U.S. and Iraqi government into unwanted crises. Second, harassing attacks are a slippery slope—they build militia confidence and encourage risk-taking behavior that can turn deadly (e.g., if groups firing at U.S. helicopters wind up shooting one down). Third, they pose an even greater risk to Iraqi lives, equipment, and infrastructure. Fourth, even nonlethal attacks damage the Iraqi government's legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens and international partners, potentially undermining Baghdad at precisely the moment it is trying to rein in militia power at Iraq's airports, border posts, and state agencies via workmanlike reforms.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to reignite calls for a full American military withdrawal from Iraq, militias like KH and their partners in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) may seek to draw the United States into a retaliatory cycle. Thus, while Washington cannot ignore the current harassment campaign, it should not overreact either. In broad terms, this means the United States should respond directly and forcefully to lethal attacks but ask the Iraqi government to confront lower-level harassing attacks. Baghdad must be firmly in the lead on the latter issue, with Washington quietly supporting it via the following measures:

- **Convoy security cooperation.** The United States has unparalleled experience running convoy systems on Iraq's roads, so it could quickly and easily provide planning support and training to Iraqi convoy operators. From 2003 to 2011, it operated a system called Tapestry and a coordination hub called the Reconstruction Operations Center, which allowed for secure end-to-end tracking of convoys and a quick-reaction force capability. This model can and should be revived at a smaller scale.
- **Weapons intelligence.** Iraqi authorities should process crime scenes and captured enemy materiel with minimal foreign involvement, and the best way to achieve this is through intensified international training of Iraqi weapons intelligence specialists. Every rocket, drone, video, electronic device, and attack site contains forensic data that can be built into a biometric and pattern analysis system, eventually providing court-quality evidence or, at least, content for public campaigns that name and shame rogue militia commanders. Using international forensic consultancies is another inexpensive way to help the state publicly explain the origin of weapons being used in Iraq.
- **Warning data.** The Iraqi government is now taking preventive action to stop attacks and investigate known terrorist cells. Accordingly, the United States should share warning data about possible attacks through a joint intelligence operations fusion cell specifically focused on militia groups. Even if such cooperation does not always produce arrests, preventing attacks before they begin is far preferable to intercepting rockets in the air or negotiating the return of hostages.
- **Information operations.** Every time militias fire a rocket or attack a convoy, there is a far greater chance they will hurt Iraqi citizens or property than American soldiers or property. Such was the case in Taji this week. The Iraqi government correctly characterized the attack as an assault on three Iraqi targets: the 5th Squadron of the Iraqi Army Aviation Corps; an Army artillery and weapons factory; and the 201st Squadron of the Iraqi Air Force. Officials also noted that valuable and much-needed state property was destroyed. The U.S. government should reinforce this Iraqi messaging, deploring militia attacks against the state and its citizenry. Washington should also prepare for the likelihood that the IRGC will try to help militias avoid Iraqi collateral damage by providing them with more-precise weapons, similar to the drone/bomb combination discovered on July 22.

Michael Knights, a senior fellow with The Washington Institute, has conducted extensive on-the-ground research in Iraq alongside security forces and ministries. He is the coauthor (with Hamdi Malik and Aymenn al-Tamimi) of the recent Institute study [Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces](#).