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Without U.S. Response, Rocket Attacks Continue

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Following a [U.S. statement](#) promising “support for all efforts to investigate and hold accountable those responsible” for a February 15, 2021 rocket attack on a U.S. base in Erbil, Iranian proxies have twice more struck at the U.S. targets in Iraq. Most recently, three rockets struck near the U.S. Embassy in Iraq on February 22, 2021. Such attacks by Iranian proxies are likely to become more frequent and dangerous in the absence of a strong U.S. response. This policy memo from JINSA staff provides details of the recent rocket attacks in Iraq, background on Iranian-backed aggression against Americans in Iraq, and policy recommendations for U.S. officials.

Key Takeaways

- One week after a rocket attack in Erbil, Iraq killed a civilian contractor and injured nine others, rockets struck the Balad Airbase and the Green Zone in Baghdad.
- These attacks are likely part of an Iranian counterpressure strategy that includes [progressively violating the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action](#) (JCPOA) and using proxies to attack Americans in the Middle East with the twin goals of ending U.S. sanctions against Iran and reducing U.S. presence in the region.
- Thus far, the United States has not held Iran responsible for, or punished the militia involved in, these attacks, while continuing to pursue diplomatic engagement with Iran over its nuclear program. This has likely created the perception in Tehran that it has a strong negotiating position, one that can only be enhanced with few consequences by continuing such attacks.
- To deter further attacks and better defend against them should they occur, the Biden administration should:
 - Release powerful, public statements that holds Iran directly responsible for any attack on U.S. or partner interests by an Iranian-backed group and refuse to engage in nuclear diplomacy so long as such attacks persist; and

- Preserve a strong military and diplomatic posture in the Middle East and deploy necessary air defense assets, including the U.S. Army's Iron Dome batteries.

Iraq Rocket Attacks, February 15-22, 2021

- On February 15, 2021, [approximately fourteen 107 mm rockets](#) were shot at a U.S. base in Erbil, reportedly [killing two](#) people and injuring several other contractors, including one American military servicemember. A [previous JINSA memo](#) described the details and implications of the attack.
 - A Shia militia labeling itself Awliya Al Dam [claimed credit for the attack](#). Like other Iranian-linked groups, the militia wants all U.S. troops to withdraw from Iraq and is likely a [front organization](#) for the Iranian-backed groups Kataib Hizballah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba.
 - The Erbil attack was the first since March 2020 to injure U.S. personnel and the first such attack since President Biden took office.
- On February 20, at least [four rockets struck Balad Air Base](#), causing one reported injury.
- On February 22, 2021, [two Katyusha rockets](#) landed inside the Green Zone in Baghdad, causing no reported casualties.
- JINSA previously noted the [possibilities of an Iranian-linked attack](#) during the early period of Biden's presidency that "is not severe enough that Biden feels like he has to respond or is dissuaded from negotiations/sanctions relief."
- U.S. officials [have not publicly attributed](#) the attacks [to any specific group](#), instead pointing to officials in [Iraq's Kurdish region](#) as leading the investigation. However, given the example of previous attacks and Iran's influence with Iraqi Shia militias, it is highly likely that Tehran is responsible by either approving, tacitly allowing, or enabling these attacks.
- When [describing the Erbil attack](#) on February 22, 2021, State Department Spokesman Ned Price said that the administration is "still determining precise attribution, but... we will hold Iran responsible for the actions of its proxies that attack Americans... The rockets fired in recent attacks... are Iranian made and Iranian supplied..."
 - This is a welcome first step but deterring future attacks requires signaling clearer consequences.

Background on Iranian Proxy Attacks in Iraq

- Iranian-backed militia attacks in Basra, Iraq prompted then-Secretary of State Pompeo to [close the U.S. consulate there](#) in September 2018.
- Following the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA in the spring of 2019 and pursuit of a "maximum pressure" sanctions strategy, Iran pushed back against U.S. policy through escalating aggression against U.S. interests, allies, and, ultimately, personnel.
 - After maximum pressure brought Iranian oil sales to near zero in the spring of 2019, Iranian-backed militias in Iraq began almost immediately targeting American positions in Iraq, launching dozens of attacks in the latter half of the year.
- In December 2019, a rocket attack [killed an American contractor](#) in Iraq, further escalating tensions.
- On January 3, 2020, a [U.S. drone strike](#) killed Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's elite Quds force, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the leader of the Iranian proxy militia Kataib Hezbollah and a high-ranking official within Iraq's state-sponsored Popular Mobilization Forces.
- On December 23, 2020, [Trump tweeted](#): "Our embassy in Baghdad got hit Sunday by several rockets. Three rockets failed to launch. Guess where they were from: IRAN. Now we hear chatter of additional attacks against Americans in Iraq...Some friendly health advice to Iran: If one American is killed, I will hold Iran responsible. Think it over."

Implications and Options for U.S. Policy

- Iran perceives concessions as weakness, not an invitation to dialogue. The lack of a strong U.S. reaction to previous rocket attacks created a permissive environment in which Iranian-backed militias believe they will face no consequences for continuing to target U.S. facilities in Iraq. The sum total of the U.S. reaction need not be immediate, but continued failure to respond to these attacks will encourage more frequent and dangerous aggression by Iran and its proxies.
 - A similar dynamic is also playing out in Yemen. Following the Biden administration's decisions to [end offensive support for the Saudi campaign](#) against Iranian-backed Houthis, as well as removing [that groups' terrorist designation](#), the Houthis have responded by [escalating attacks amidst diplomatic pressure](#) to end the war.
- These Iranian provocations are occurring as Iran is pressing the Biden administration for sanctions relief and a return to the 2015 nuclear deal as well as seeking to further reduce U.S. presence and influence in the Middle East.

- Iran simultaneously pursues political, military, and nuclear tools as part of a widespread and asymmetric pressure campaign to influence U.S. and European policy.
- From Iran's perspective, the objective of these attacks was likely:
 - One, to learn how the Biden administration will respond to similar attacks—what crosses the new administration's red lines and what is it willing to let pass to continue diplomatic engagement;
 - Two, to push the administration towards a faster return to the JCPOA and sanctions relief based on the promise of further such attacks.
- According to a [New York Times report](#) from February 20, 2021, "several Pentagon officials and senior military officers said it was unclear what the Biden team's red lines were when it came to protecting American personnel in Iraq from Iran or its proxy fighters."
- President Biden should fulfill his promise in a [CNN op-ed from September 2020](#) to "continue to push back against Iran's destabilizing activities, which threaten our friends and partners in the region.... If Iran chooses confrontation, I am prepared to defend our vital interests and our troops."
- To put an end to these attacks and stop further Iranian escalation in pursuit of negotiating leverage, President Biden must make clear that any Iranian-linked aggression makes diplomacy less, not more likely.
 - The United States should issue a public statement that it will hold Tehran directly responsible for any attacks by Iranian-backed groups on U.S. and partner positions, that such attacks, even if they do not kill an American, will face a forceful U.S. reaction, and that no negotiations can occur so long as such attacks persist.
- To protect U.S. bases and personnel, the U.S. Army should rapidly fast track the testing and deployment of two Iron Dome batteries for deployment to Iraq.
 - Patriot and Counter-Rocket, Artillery, and Mortar (C-RAM) batteries currently provide air defense for U.S. positions in Iraq. However, the C-RAMs, which respond to the short-range mortars and rockets that Iraqi militias have been favoring, are not as effective as the Israeli Iron Dome. The United States provided funding to develop the system and recently acquired two batteries, which are [still undergoing training and testing procedures](#).
- Biden should halt redeploying any military personnel or assets from the Middle East, particularly those in Iraq.

Timeline of Major Proxy Attacks and U.S. Responses

9-28-18	• Trump State Department announces closure of Basra base after Iranian-backed attacks.
Spring '19	• Rocket attacks escalate after maximum pressure sanctions on Iran.
12-27-19	• K-1 Air Base in Kirkuk attacked with Katyusha rockets.
12-29-19	• U.S. airstrikes targeted Kataib Hezbollah facilities in Iraq and Syria.
1-3-20	• U.S. airstrike killed Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.
1-8-20	• Iranian ballistic missiles hit Al Asad Airbase.
3-11-20	• 15 Katyusha rockets struck Camp Taji on Soleimani's birthday.
3-13-20	• U.S. attacked Kataib Hezbollah facilities in Karbala and Babylon areas.
3-14-20	• Over 24 rockets struck Camp Taji.
6-8-20	• Near daily rocket attacks in Iraq begin.
6-10-20	• Rocket attack landed near the Green Zone in Baghdad.
6-13-20	• Katyusha rocket fired at Camp Taji.
11-19-20	• Iranian-backed militias resumed attacks in Iraq by targeting the Green Zone.
12-20-20	• 21 rockets targeted the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.
2-15-21	• 14 rockets targeted the U.S. base in Erbil.
2-20-21	• 4 rockets hit Balad Air Base.
2-22-21	• 2 rockets hit near U.S. embassy in Baghdad.

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