

As Nuclear Talks Pause, Iran Escalates

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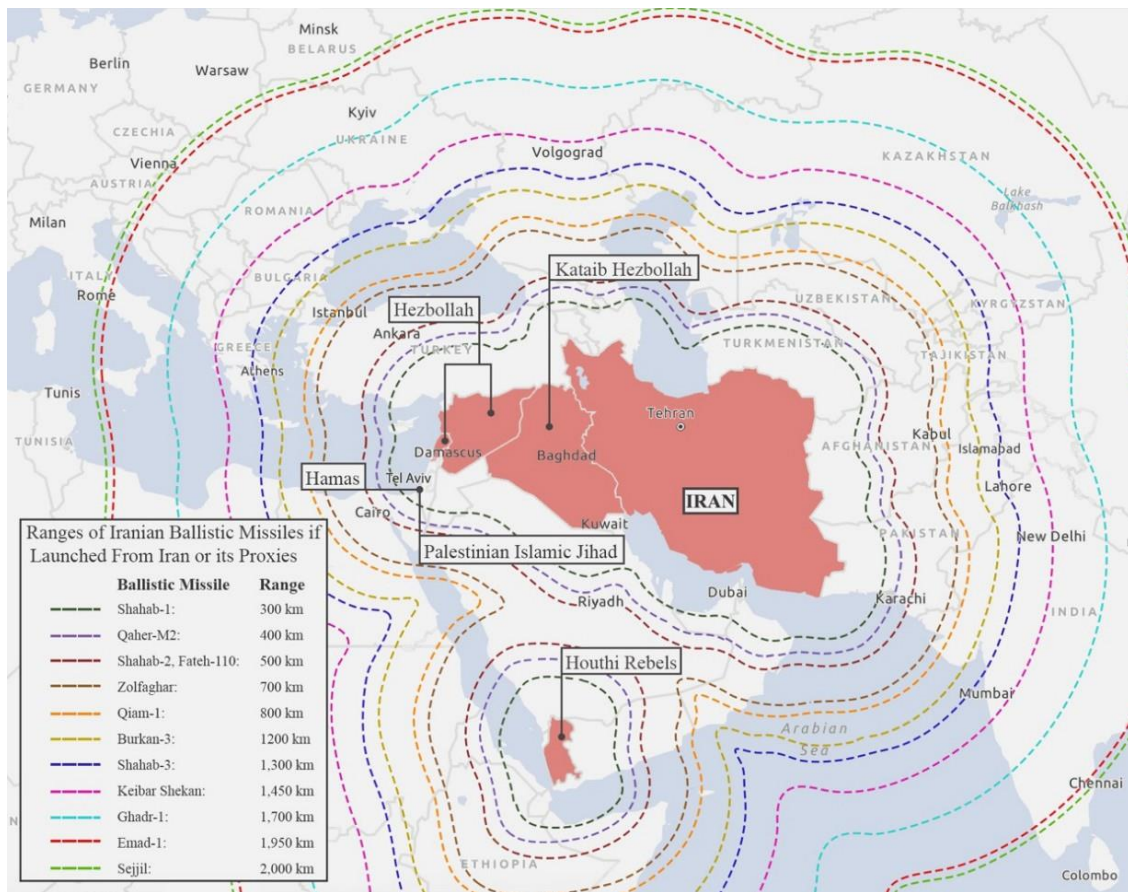
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On March 13, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) fired twelve ballistic missiles from Iranian territory targeting the U.S. consulate site in Erbil, Iraq, marking a major escalation of its already intense pressure campaign against the United States and its Middle Eastern partners. Tehran seeks to test the Biden administration recently announced "indefinite pause" in nuclear negotiations, to push it to return to the table and make further, dangerous concessions, and to exert pressure on Israel to stop its "campaign between the wars" against Iranian regional aggression. Having seen the Biden administration's extremely limited and indirect response to past attacks on U.S. forces, Iran clearly believes that the United States prefers conciliation to confrontation in the face of such attacks. Administration statements denying that this latest attack was not directed at the United States will only further embolden Iran.

To avoid signaling acceptance of Iran's escalation, deter further Iranian aggression, and regain leverage in nuclear negotiations, the Biden administration should immediately retaliate against the perpetrators of this attack.

What Happened?

- Iran fired twelve ballistic missiles, likely Fateh-110s, at Erbil, Iraq, with one landing several kilometers from a new unfinished U.S. Consulate and another near the [Kurdistan24 television station](#). No Americans or U.S. government buildings were damaged in the attack.
 - » The attack [demolished](#) the home of president and CEO of Iraqi-Kurdish oil company KAR Group Baz Karim, which is under one mile away from the U.S. consulate.
 - » Iraq's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reportedly [summoned](#) Iran's ambassador to Baghdad to give him Iraq's note of protest over the IRGC's missile attack against Erbil.
- The IRGC [claimed responsibility](#) for the strike with a statement on its official website Sepah news, saying that a "strategic center for conspiracy and mischiefs of the Zionists was targeted by powerful precision missiles fired by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps."
- Seyed Mohammad Marandi, an advisor to Iran's nuclear negotiating team in Vienna, [tweeted](#) after the strike that "This is just the beginning."

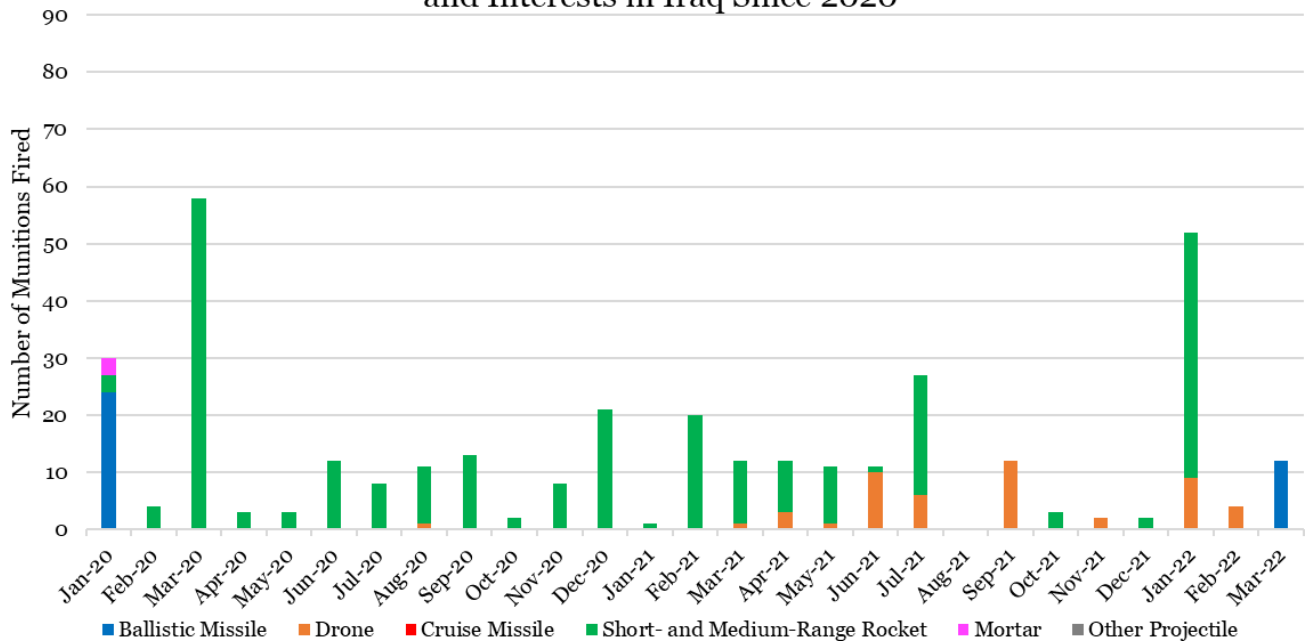


Why Is It Important?

- Despite statements by administration officials to the contrary, this ballistic missile strike was a direct Iranian attack on the United States marking a massive escalation that seeks to test whether President Biden is willing to risk the collapse of nuclear negotiations by responding with deterrent force.
 - » When targeting inside Iraq, Iran has typically relied on its Shia militia proxies in Iraq and Syria who have typically relied on short- and medium-range rockets or drones as opposed to the larger firepower that twelve ballistic missiles offer.
- The attack comes as nuclear negotiations with Iran reach an impasse, reportedly due to long-outstanding Iranian demands, such as the lifting of the IRGC from the U.S. State Department Foreign Terrorist Organization list, as well as last-minute [Russian demands](#) that the United States provide waivers on the sanctions it imposed after the invasion of Ukraine.
 - » American officials have indicated that they [will not trade exemptions](#) to Ukraine-related sanctions on Russia to save the JCPOA and could explore a nuclear agreement that does not involve Russia if they do not relent on these sudden demands within the next week.
 - » As Iran has done since nuclear negotiations began, Iran is signaling that its regional aggression is separate from its willingness to discuss its nuclear program.

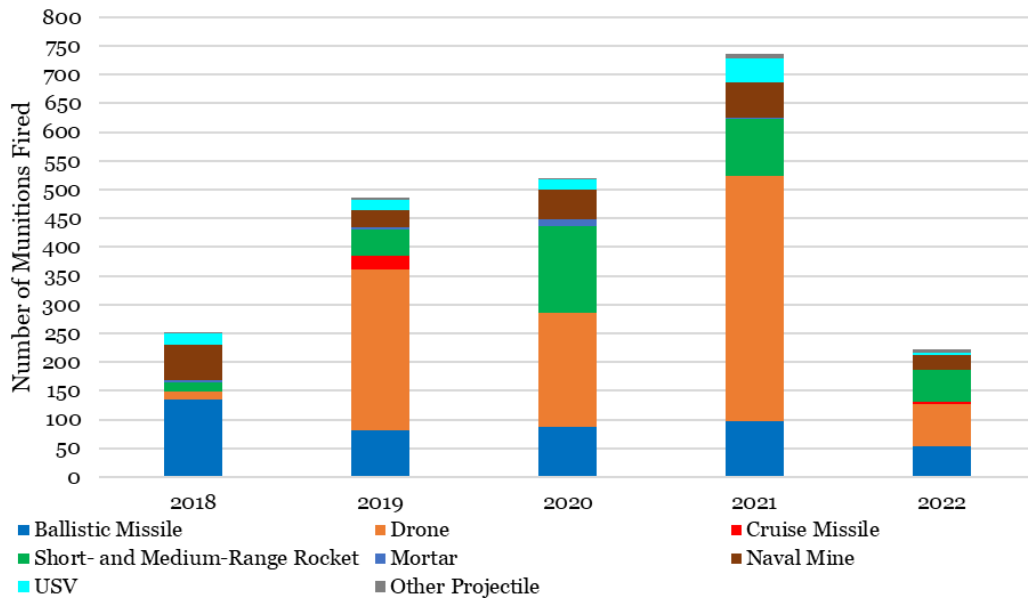
- Several events also likely contributed to Iran’s decision to launch the missiles.
 - » Pro-Iranian media claimed that the attack was in response to an alleged Israeli strike in mid-February that caused a fire at an [IRGC drone base](#) in Mahidasht, Iran.
 - » Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), Iran’s official state news, claimed the attack was in response to an Israeli strike that recently killed two IRGC officers in Syria. IRNA and other Iranian media outlets have claimed without evidence that Israel’s Mossad has secret bases in Iraq.
 - In April 2021, when explosive-laden drones [targeted](#) a location near the Erbil airport, Iranian media [reportedly](#) claimed, again without evidence, that they hit a secret Israeli base and wounded Mossad agents, just as they are claiming now.
 - An October 2021 armed drone strike on an American military base at Al Tanf in southern Syria was also [reported](#) as Iranian retaliation for Israeli airstrikes in Syria, according to American and Israeli officials.
 - » On March 10, the United States [seized the cargo](#) of two tankers accused of transporting Iranian oil.
 - » The attack occurred shortly after the birthday on March 11 of former IRGC Quds Force Major General Qassem Soleimani, who died in a U.S. airstrike in January 2020. The missiles struck Erbil at around 1:20 am local time, the same time that Soleimani died. Iran conducted a similar ballistic missile strike in retaliation for Soleimani’s death on January 8, 2020 that also landed approximately 1:20 am.
 - » Iraqi political parties are currently undergoing tense political talks to form a government after the October elections. Shiite cleric Modtada al-Sadr, who has vowed to form a government that includes Kurds and Sunnis but leaves out Iran’s allies, [tweeted](#) “Erbil is in the crosshairs and fire of the coward and losers.”
 - Tehran is engaged in a systemic effort to weaken America’s strongest anti-Iran partner in Iraq, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).
 - There is potential for the United States and its European and Middle Eastern partners to exploit the growing divisions within Iraq over Iran’s malign influence that have been growing since the elections, where pro-Iranian parties fared poorly.
- Iranian-backed groups have fired over 950 projectiles, including roughly 500 drones, at U.S. service members, Arab partners, and interests in the Middle East since Biden took office in January 2021. This is roughly a 33% increase over the same period from January 2019-March 2020.
 - » During this time, there have been over 180 strikes in Iraq, including a [drone strike](#) against the Iraqi prime minister.
 - » While American and partner forces have struggled to detect and intercept low-flying drones, U.S. radar certainly would have detected a ballistic missile and therefore has proof of Iranian culpability.
 - » The United States has deployed Patriot batteries in Erbil previously, although it is [unclear if they are still present](#) or why they did not activate if nearby.

Iranian-linked Munitions Fired At U.S. Service Members, Partners, and Interests in Iraq Since 2020



- President Biden’s limited and inconsistent use of force in response to previous Iranian-backed projectile attacks has not deterred further aggression by the Iranian regime. While Iran knows with certainty that Israel will respond if attacked, Iran is making a calculation that there is less of a risk to attacking U.S. interests and it is not clear how the United States will respond. There is also the potential that the United States blames its partner, Israel, for the attack near U.S. assets and personnel and then pressures the Israelis to decrease their attacks.
 - » Biden [ordered airstrikes](#) in Syria on February 25 and on June 27 in Syria and Iraq after Iranian-backed groups targeted U.S. troops in Iraq. However, the American response targeted the groups’ infrastructure and has not slowed their attacks.
 - » An [attack on U.S. forces](#) in Tanf, Syria during October did not trigger a U.S. kinetic response.
 - » In January, Iranian-backed groups [launched multiple attacks](#) in the days surrounding the second anniversary of Soleimani’s death targeting positions with a U.S. presence in Iraq, including Al Asad Airbase, Balad Airbase, and the Baghdad Diplomatic Support Center (BDSC), a State Department facility at the Baghdad airport. While U.S. air defenses intercepted several of drones involved in these attacks, the wave of aggression did not trigger a U.S. military response.

Iranian-linked Munitions Fired Per Year Against U.S. Personnel and Interests in the Middle East 2018-Present



- U.S. government officials have denied that the United States was the target of the attack. The denials appear to be an effort to minimize the strike and create a justification for not retaliating
 - » National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan effectively denied that the U.S. was targeted in the attack, [saying](#), “this attack targeted a civilian residence in Erbil, the Kurdistan Region’s capital city, without any justification.”
 - » State Department Spokesperson Ned Price [condemned](#) the attacks, acknowledging that they emanated from Iran and violated Iraq's sovereignty, but added, “we have no indications the attack was directed at the United States.” The statement also called for Iran to cease its attacks and interference in Iraq’s internal affairs.
 - » Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman claimed during an interview with Bret Baier on Fox News that “We do not believe that the [U.S.] consulate was actually the target of this [Iranian missile attack].”
 - » Though the U.S. government is denying that the consulate was the intended target, an Iraqi official [initially](#) said it was.
- These administration claims do not hold up to scrutiny; Americans and U.S. facilities were at least among the targets that Tehran was willing to hit when it chose to launch the twelve ballistic missiles.
 - » So far, what is known about where the missiles actually landed—including the house of a Kurdish energy CEO—do not suggest that they were targets with any strategic or military value to Iran. This means the intent of the Iranian strike cannot be judged by what was actually struck, but by what target they might have been trying to hit.

- » Not only did the missiles land in close proximity to the new U.S. consulate building in Erbil, but Americans [live and work in the area](#) surrounding the consulate. Iran must have been aware of this.
- » Iran has previously claimed to be attacking Israeli sites in Iraq when it in fact intends to threaten targets hosting U.S. troops.
- Members of Congress have responded to the attack by calling on the Biden administration to rethink its open-ended nuclear negotiations with Iran.
 - » Representative Elaine Luria (D-VA), a Navy veteran who is the Vice Chair of the House Armed Services Committee, [tweeted](#) that “If reports are accurate, the Biden Administration must withdraw its negotiations with Iran. We cannot re-enter a failed JCPOA to further empower Iran and threaten global security.”
 - » Representative Lisa McClain (R-MI), who also serves on the House Armed Services Committee, [tweeted](#), “The IRGC is claiming responsibility for the attack targeting the US consulate in Erbil. It's clear Iran is no friend to the United States, and Biden should not be negotiating with terrorists.”

What Should the United States Do Next?

- President Biden should retaliate directly against the Iranian perpetrators of these ballistic missile strikes and consider a range of military, cyber, economic, and diplomatic responses.
- The Pentagon, with Middle Eastern and Western allies, should redeploy to Iraq available air defenses that are capable of intercepting short-range ballistic missiles, such as Patriot batteries.
 - » There is understandable urgency to bolster air defenses in NATO member countries due to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, but most of this re-posturing has involved forces and assets already within the area of responsibility of European Command (EUCOM). Given the persistent threats in the Middle East, the Department of Defense should avoid redeploying CENTCOM air defenses to EUCOM.
 - » The United States should also be canvassing its partners in NATO and the Middle East to make air defense assets available to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).
 - Sullivan [told CBS’s “Face the Nation”](#) after the attack that “We are in consultation with the Iraqi government and the government in Iraqi Kurdistan, in part to help them get the missile defense capabilities to be able to defend themselves in their cities.”
- The Biden administration should walk away from open-ended nuclear negotiations with Iran that will reportedly include [lifting terrorism-related sanctions](#) on the IRGC, the group that oversees Iran’s widespread attacks across the Middle East.
- The Biden administration should also immediately brief members of Congress on the attack and response plans.

- Congress should demand that the White House make Robert Malley available for open hearings on the current state of the Iran negotiations and the recent attack, including clarifying previous statements about the United States not being the target.
- At the upcoming House and Senate Armed Service Committees' Central Command (CENTCOM) posture hearing, legislators should ask:
 - » What does CENTCOM believe was the reason and target of Iran's ballistic missile attack?
 - » What is the current status of U.S. and partner air defenses in the region, particularly with regards to counter-drone systems?
 - » What has CENTCOM done to deter, preempt, or protect against the significant increase in Iranian-backed projectile strikes?
 - » How has Iran's regional influence changed during the JCPOA negotiations?
 - » How has CENTCOM prepared alongside its partners for Iranian aggression to extract concessions in nuclear negotiations and Iranian-backed activity after the talks end either with a deal or failure?
 - » What is the expected impact of lifting the IRGC designation and whether Iranian-backed regional aggression will decrease as a result?
- The State Department should discreetly work with regional partners to encourage the KRG to pressure the Iraqi government to proactively defend Iraqi sovereignty and call for a United Nations Security Council meeting and resolution to condemn the attack. Iraq and the KRG should take similar steps with the Saudi- and Egyptian-led Arab league to increase international condemnation for Iran's aggression.
 - » The United Arab Emirates, another U.S. partner that has recently faced a wave of attacks from Iran, currently sits on the UNSC and would likely support such a resolution.