Unparalleled Iranian Attack on Kurds

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On September 28, Iran launched its single largest bombardment in decades—using 93 ballistic missiles and drones—against Kurdish targets in neighboring Iraq, killing at least 13, including a U.S. citizen. This escalation comes amid increasingly widespread protests against the Iranian regime following its killing of Mahsa Amini, a Kurdish Iranian woman. Iran is falsely blaming—and attacking—Kurdish militants and outside forces, like, Saudi Arabia and Israel, to portray the protests as an ethnic struggle or external manipulation, rather than the grassroots, nation-wide anti-regime movement they have become. Tehran is also flaunting its capability to strike targets beyond its borders with impunity—perhaps in a warning to both protestors and outside actors who would support them. The last time Iranian-backed militia killed an American citizen in Iraq in 2020, President Trump responded with airstrikes against the group responsible. A forceful and direct U.S. retaliation to this recent attack—together with greater support for Iranian protestors—is needed to stop Iran from continuing to kill U.S. citizens brazenly, attack other countries at will, and terrorize its own people.
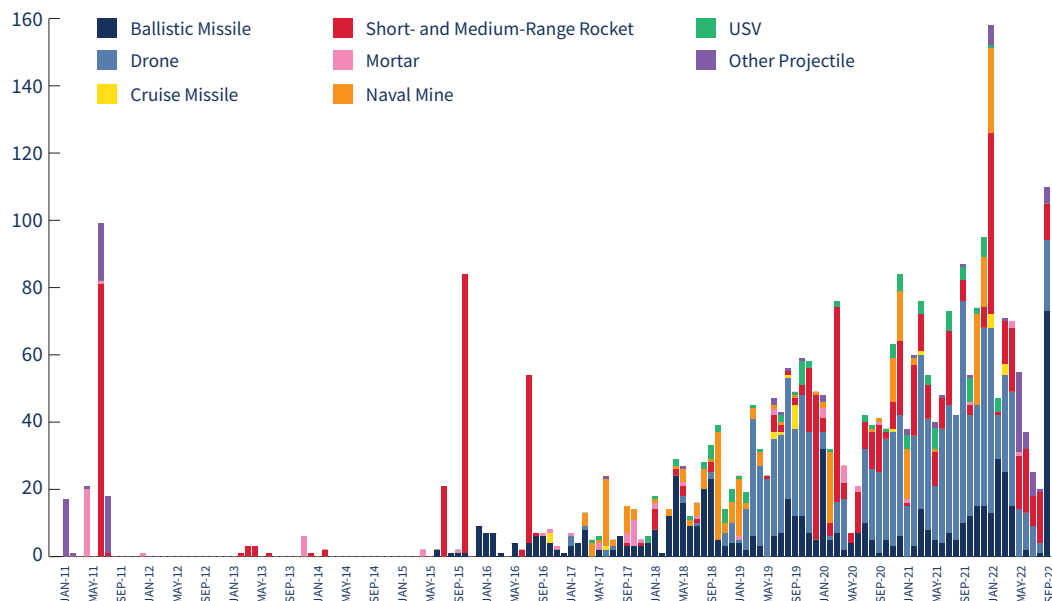
What Happened?

- On September 28, Iran claims it launched seventy-three ballistic missiles at forty-three sites in the Kurdish regions of Iraq. U.S. Central Command scrambled F-15 aircraft to shoot down an Iranian Mohajer-6 UAV headed toward Erbil, Iraq, where American troops are stationed. Nevertheless, the attack killed at least 13 people, including an American citizen named Omar Mahmoudzadeh residing in the area, and injured at least 58.

  » The strikes were the latest in a series of Iranian attacks against targets in Iraqi Kurdistan in recent days that began with an artillery bombardment on September 23.

  » U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan condemned the attacks and argued that "Iran cannot deflect blame from its internal problems and the legitimate grievances of its population with attacks across its borders."

  » Iran's attacks in Kurdish regions during September have targeted opposition groups, including Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI or KDPI), Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK), and Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan.

    – Mahmoudzadeh moved from the United States to Koya, Iraq in 2019 to join the PDKI, according to his family, but maintained U.S. citizenship and had an American passport.

  » Iranian state media reported the use of Fath 360 ballistic missiles and Shahed-136 loitering munitions, the same UAV that it recently provided to Russia.

- Iranian media has [blamed](#) the increasingly [widespread and deadly protests](#) that have broken out since the murder of 22-year-old Iranian Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini on September 16 on "outside forces," specifically Israel and Saudi Arabia, who it claims are attempting to take away Iranian territory to create an "independent Kurdistan." The regime has frequently made this claim when it faces domestic problems.

Why Is it Important?

- While Iran has targeted Iranian Kurdish groups operating in Iraq for years, the unprecedented size of the regime's attacks is a reflection not of the threat the militants pose but of the regime's desperation and brazenness. It fears the protests and is willing to do anything to try and quash them, fueled by a belief that it can perpetrate violence—internally and externally—with impunity.

  » By claiming it fired a historically large number of ballistic missiles and UAVs, Iran is demonstrating its capabilities and impunity to operate without fear of deterrent reprisal.

    – The ninety-three munitions that Iran claims to have fired on September 28 combine to the largest coordinated attack that [JINSA's Iran Projectile Tracker](#) has recorded, which covers data since 2011.

    – Since Iran began attacking Iranian Kurdish groups inside of Iraq on September 23, it has launched over 100 munitions at targets in Iraqi Kurdistan. This is the largest single sustained wave of attacks, whether by Iran or one of its proxy groups, that JINSA has documented since 2011.

    – The attacks also make September 2022 the second highest month on record in terms of the number of Iranian-supplied munitions fired, only surpassed by January 2022. That month, Iranian-backed groups launched over 150 munitions but at a wide variety of geographically distinct targets, including strikes against targets in Iraq hosting U.S. military personnel, Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia, and a barrage of drones and missiles targeting the previously safe United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Iranian-linked Munitions Launched Against U.S. Personnel, Arab Partners, and Interests in the Middle East 2011-Present   JINSA

Legend:
- Ballistic Missile
- Drone
- Cruise Missile
- Short- and Medium-Range Rocket
- Mortar
- Naval Mine
- USV
- Other Projectile

- » In addition to trying to blame Kurdish militants for the current unrest—and, by extension, seeking to depict the protestors as ethnic provocateurs—the strikes are likely meant to communicate strength, and the threat of similarly lethal action at home, to the protestors while signaling outside powers to refrain from supporting the protests.

- American failure to retaliate would encourage Iran to use greater violence against protestors inside Iran, to continue attacking Kurdish groups outside the country, potentially putting more Americans at risk, and launch even more dangerous attacks that further probe the willingness of U.S. officials to respond. If the United States fails to respond, Tehran may gather it can kill or injure American civilians abroad if it avoids targeting areas with a U.S. military presence.

- Iranian-backed UAV, missile, and rocket attacks pose the greatest immediate threat to U.S. service members, partners, and interests in the Middle East. Iran and its partner militias routinely fire projectiles at American troops and the civilian infrastructure of America's Middle Eastern partners. Tehran's proliferation of UAVs not only enhances the capabilities of its partner militias to strike proximate targets but also enables them to attack from multiple points of origin throughout the region and beyond it.

  - » Iran and its partners have already fired over 590 munitions at U.S. troops, partners, and interests in the Middle East in 2022, including nearly 190 UAVs, according to JINSA's Iran Projectile Tracker. In comparison, these groups fired over 740 and over 430 UAVs in 2021. They launched nearly 520 and nearly 200 UAVs in 2020.

- The United States has repeatedly drawn a redline against Iran or its proxies killing U.S. citizens.

  - » In May 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reportedly delivered a private message to Iran that any attacks by Iranian or proxy forces that killed an American would trigger a U.S. military counterattack. The Trump administration responded with military force when Iran crossed this redline, but Iran and its proxies were able to launch over fifty attacks against targets with a U.S. military presence that stayed below this threat by not killing Americans.

  - » On December 27, 2019, Iranian-backed Kataib Hezbollah launched rockets at the IK-1 airbase in Kirkuk, Iraq, killing a U.S. military contractor and injuring four U.S. service members. Shortly thereafter on January 3, 2020, President Trump ordered the airstrike that killed Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani, who as head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force directed the regime's proxy efforts abroad, as well as Kataib Hezbollah's commander, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

  - » In a series of tweets on January 5, 2020, Trump lowered the threshold of the redline to any attack against Americans by signaling "if Iran strikes any Americans, or American assets… Iran itself, WILL BE HIT VERY FAST AND VERY HARD…. If Iran attacks an American Base, or any American, we will be sending some of that brand new beautiful equipment their way…and without hesitation….They attacked us, & we hit back. If they attack again, which I would strongly advise them not to do, we will hit them harder than they have ever been hit before!"

    - – However, Trump continued to use military force only after U.S. deaths. After Iran shot down a U.S. drone, Trump called off airstrikes on Iranian soil in June 2019 only minutes before they were set to take place.

» After Iranian-backed militia in Iraq killed two American troops and a British soldier, President Trump ordered retaliatory airstrikes retaliation in March 2020 against five Kataib Hezbollah weapons storage facilities.

» To date, President Biden has ordered five limited strikes on Iranian-backed groups in Iraq and Syria in response to attacks on U.S. troops there, although there have been over 70 similar attacks to which his administration did not respond. Biden's redline has been lower than Trump's, ordering U.S. retaliations to some, but not all, attacks that did not have casualties, but he has calibrated those responses to avoid killing militants unless there are American injuries.

  – Biden has not issued a redline similar to Trump's with regards to Iran killing or targeting Americans. When ordering airstrikes, he has framed them as an effort to "protect American and coalition personnel."

What Should the United States Do Next?

• Since Iran, not one of its partner militias, is directly responsible for the recent attacks, the United States cannot merely retaliate against proxies but instead should respond directly against the Iranian regime itself.

  » Demonstrating that it is able and willing to target Iran itself, perhaps against IRGC drone bases, can serve not only to deter further Iranian aggression but also signal to the Iranian people that the regime is weak and vulnerable.

• The Biden administration should pursue a Plan B policy toward Iran that includes halting the unproductive negotiations over its nuclear program followed by comprehensive diplomatic, economic, and military pressure to impose direct costs on Iran and not solely its proxies. This should include:

  » Consistent, forceful military action to preempt and respond after Iranian-backed aggression to provide clearer signaling that Iran cannot conduct or enable attacks on U.S. targets with impunity;

  » Bolstering Israel's capabilities, as the force who is most actively engaged in deterring and degrading Iranian activity, through the expedited delivery to Israel of KC-46 aircraft refueling tankers, precision-guided munitions (PGMs), fixed-wing combat aircraft like the F-35, and additional Arrow, David's Sling, and Iron Dome batteries as well as their interceptors.

• As argued in this JINSA NatSec Brief, the Biden administration should support the Iranian protestors by mounting international pressure on the regime and enabling companies to provide communication and internet access inside of Iran.