

JINSA's Gemunder Center for Defense and Strategy

Implications of Rocket Attack in Erbil

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A rocket attack in Erbil, Iraq on February 15 killed a civilian contractor and left another nine injured. While attacks by Iranian-backed groups on Americans have become common, it is the first such test that the Biden administration faces as they pursue nuclear negotiations with Tehran. This policy memo from JINSA staff provides details of the recent rocket attack in Erbil, background on aggression against American positions in Iraq, and policy recommendations for U.S. officials.

Key Takeaways

- A rocket attack on Erbil is the first military test the Biden administration faces from Iran and its proxy militias. Iran hopes its regional aggression will pressure Washington to reenter the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement that President Trump left in 2018.
- This latest escalation is most likely part of an Iranian counterpressure strategy against U.S. sanctions that includes [progressively violating the JCPOA](#) and using proxies to attack Americans in the Middle East. Tehran's perception about the strength of America's response could determine its negotiating position and the likelihood of further attacks.
- To deter and prepare for Iranian or Shia militia aggression in Iraq, President Biden should:
 - Issue forceful, public declarations that any Iranian aggression against American or partner interests will neither go unchecked nor give it negotiating leverage; and
 - Maintain a strong military and diplomatic presence in the Middle East and deploy necessary deterrent and defensive assets.

Erbil Rocket Attack, February 2021

- On February 15, 2021, approximately fourteen 107 mm rockets were fired at a U.S. base in Erbil, killing one non-American civilian contractor and injuring eight civilian contractors, and one American military servicemember, according to the [spokesman for Operation Inherent Resolve](#).
- A Shia militia group calling itself Awliya Al Dam took [credit for the attack](#) and claimed to fire 24 rockets. The group seeks the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and is likely a [front organization](#) for the Iranian-backed groups Kataib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba.
 - According to [General Frank McKenzie](#), Commander of U.S. Central Command, “in the last several years, Iran has imported significant combat power into Iraq, and into Syria as well, that could be employed by Kataib Hezbollah...” and the group has “a variety of front organizations that are associated with them that they use to try to control or hide the contribution back to Kataib as well, when they choose to strike.”
- JINSA previously noted the [potential for an Iranian-linked attack](#) during the early phase of Biden’s presidency that “is not severe enough that Biden feels like he has to respond or is dissuaded from negotiations/sanctions relief.”
- Shortly after the attack, Secretary of State Antony Blinken [released a statement](#) that he was “outraged by the attack” and “reached out to Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani to discuss the incident and to pledge our support for all efforts to investigate and hold accountable those responsible.”

Background on Iranian Proxy Attacks in Iraq

- In 2019, following the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the JCPOA 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.
- Starting with a December 2019 rocket attack that [killed an American contractor](#) in Iraq, Iranian proxies have repeatedly fired rockets at U.S. bases and personnel (see timeline).
- The Trump administration attempted several approaches to limit Iran’s targeting of U.S. personnel in Iraq.
 - 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. This provoked a measured Iranian reprisal and then secured several months of calm.

- 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.”
- The Erbil attack is the first attack since March 2020 to cause injuries to U.S. personnel and the first such attack under the new Biden administration.
 - It comes at a time when, Iran is pressing the Biden administration for sanctions relief and a return to the 2015 nuclear deal, including enriching uranium above 20 percent, its most significant nuclear escalation in a decade.

Implications and Options for U.S. Policy

- One of the JCPOA's weaknesses was the belief that Iranian behavior could be siloed, with Iran's nuclear enrichment separate from its regional aggression. In understanding this rocket attack, such segmented thinking should be rejected.
 - As shown through its nuclear enrichment and expansion of proxy attacks throughout the Middle East during 2019 and 2020, Iran simultaneously pursues comprehensive, asymmetric pressure to attempt to change U.S. policy: using political, nuclear, and military tools all at once.
- The objective of this attack was likely twofold:
 - To ascertain the new administration's resolve, redlines, and priorities—what does it care about, what will it respond to, and what Iranian actions are they willing to let slide; and
 - To pressure the administration into faster return to JCPOA and sanctions relief with threat of further Iranian attacks.
- President Biden should live up to 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.”
- The Biden administration should make clear to Tehran that attacking U.S. and partner positions will not make it more likely to rejoin the JCPOA and will instead meet a forceful response, even if the attacks avoid killing Americans.
 - Trump drew a redline at the death of Americans, but Biden should make clear with a public statement that this is not the minimum triggering event to U.S. military force.
 - As with Trump's inaction after Iran began its escalating attacks in summer 2019, doing nothing will only encourage more frequent and more dangerous Iranian pressure.

- Biden should avoid further drawing down personnel and assets in the Middle East, particularly those in Iraq, while taking into account security concerns for civilian staff.
- To prepare for further proxy attacks, the Biden administration should consider:
 - Moving missile defense assets to CENTCOM's area of responsibility (AOR); and
 - Sending a procession of high-level U.S officials to Baghdad and other partner capitals.

Timeline of Major Proxy Attacks and U.S. Responses



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