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Brazen Drone Strike Against Iraqi Prime Minister

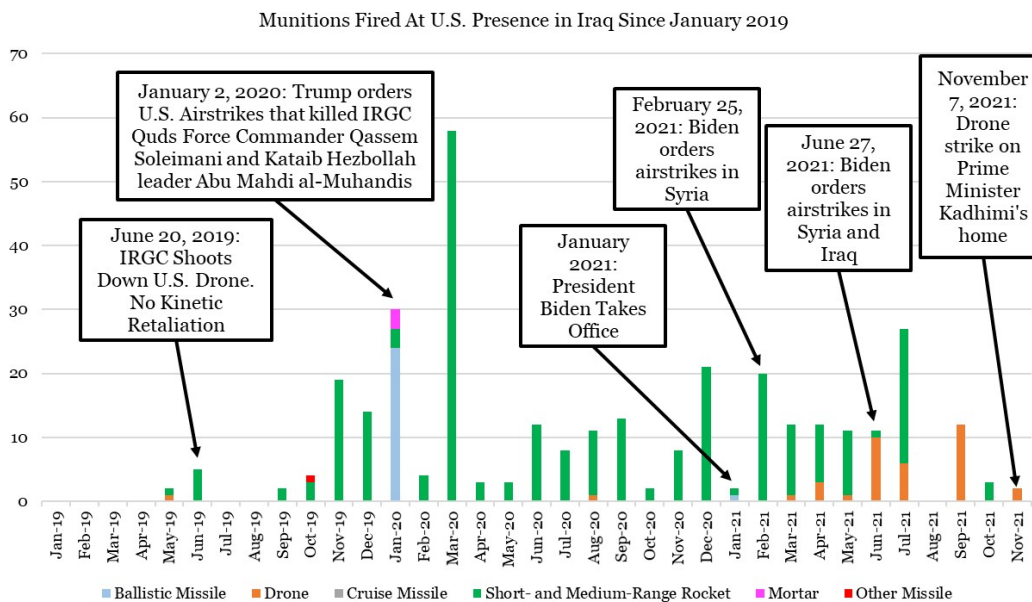
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In a brazen attack, three armed drones targeted the residence of Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi on November 7. The attack was likely launched by Iranian-backed Shia militias in the aftermath of a recent poor electoral performance for pro-Iranian Shia parties. Iranian-backed groups in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have significantly escalated their attacks on U.S. service members, partners, and interests this year, particularly through drone strikes with little overt U.S. response. Deterring attacks in Iraq and throughout the Middle East requires a regionwide strategy that includes strong U.S. military force against perpetrators, cooperation with regional partners, and the deployment of a regional air defense architecture capable of thwarting further attacks.

What Happened?

- Three quadcopter drones armed with munitions targeted [the residence of Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi](#) in the early morning of November 7. Two of the drones were shot down, but at least one hit the PM's home inside Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone. Kadhimi was apparently treated for slight injuries while several of his security detail were wounded.
 - In addition to [condemnation](#) of the attack from The State Department, President Biden [issued a statement](#) that “the perpetrators of this terrorist attack on the Iraqi state must be held accountable” and added that he has “instructed [his] national security team to offer all appropriate assistance to Iraq’s security forces as they investigate this attack and identify those responsible.”
- The attack came after [pro-Iran groups stormed the Green Zone](#) just two days prior on November 5. The Iranian-linked groups were protesting the results of the October election in Iraq in which Fatah, the main militia party, lost two-thirds of its seats.
 - Qais Khazali, the leader of Asaib Ahl al-Haq, one of Iraq’s largest pro-Iran militias, accused Kadhimi of ordering security forces [to fire live rounds at protesters](#) (killing at least one) and saying Kadhimi should “pay the price” for the deaths.
- The drone strike on Kadhimi’s home also follows a similar attack in October on [U.S. forces in Tanf, Syria](#) and [Erbil, Iraq in September](#), neither of which triggered a kinetic U.S. military response that would deter Iran and its proxy militias or degrade their ability to launch further attacks. Instead, the U.S. Treasury Department [sanctioned entities related to Iran’s drone program](#).

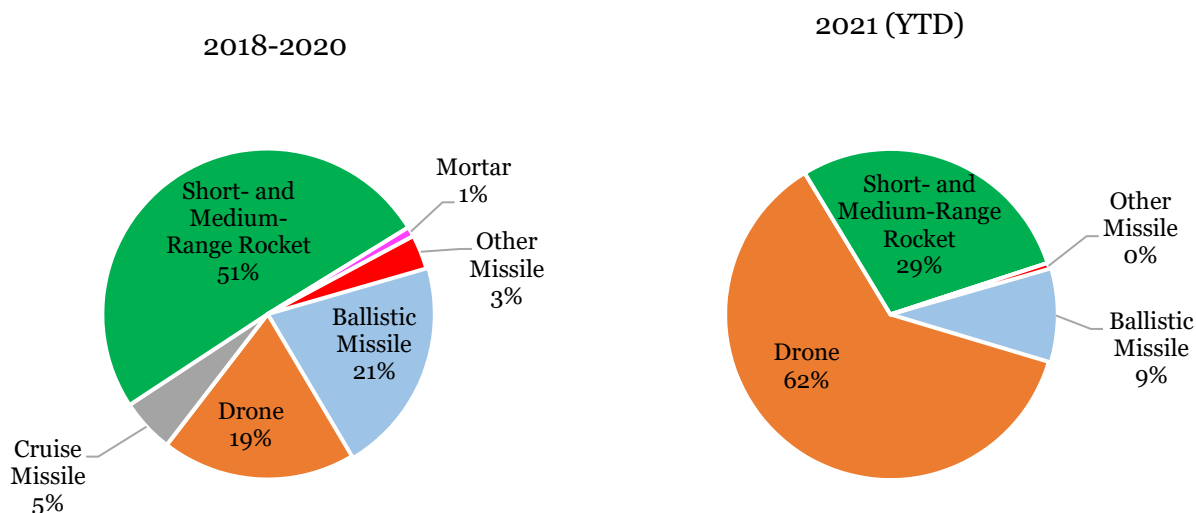
- Kadhimi is a former Iraqi intelligence chief who came to office with the intention of constraining the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), or Hashed al-Shaabi, but has struggled to accomplish this objective. The PMF is an Iraqi state-sanctioned group composed of several militias that formed in 2014 to combat the Islamic State. The Iranian-backed militias that dominate the PMF operate both as Iraqi paramilitaries, with their own political parties, and as Iranian proxies, with leading groups like Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and Kataib Hezbollah functioning as anti-American resistance that have [previously attacked U.S. servicemembers and diplomats](#).
 - Kadhimi has successfully separated from the rest of the PMF the [four Holy Shrine units](#), or Atabat, who are beholden to Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Najaf and the Iraqi army rather than to Iran and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRGC).
 - Kadhimi has sought (with limited success) to cut down on [corruption and smuggling](#), including by strengthening the Iraqi state’s control over border crossings with Iran and Syria, which the PMF uses to transport weaponry and fighters, and conduct illicit commerce.
 - Efforts to hold the PMF accountable for its violent actions have been less successful. For example, Qassim Mahmoud Musleh, head of the PMF in Anbar Province, was arrested on May 27 on terrorism charges but [released in early June](#) because of insufficient evidence, and after the militias had staged a major show of force near Kadhimi’s headquarters.
 - On October 31 and November 1, Iraq’s supreme court [sentenced two men to death](#) for killing two journalists. According to a statement from the Iraqi Supreme Judicial Council, the men “confessed to all the details of this crime with a motive of destabilizing the country and spreading terror in the hearts of people and demonstrators.” The convicted felons were affiliated with Kataib Hezbollah and worked as part of a “network of 16 people responsible for assassinations,” according to Iraqi security officials.



Why Is It Important?

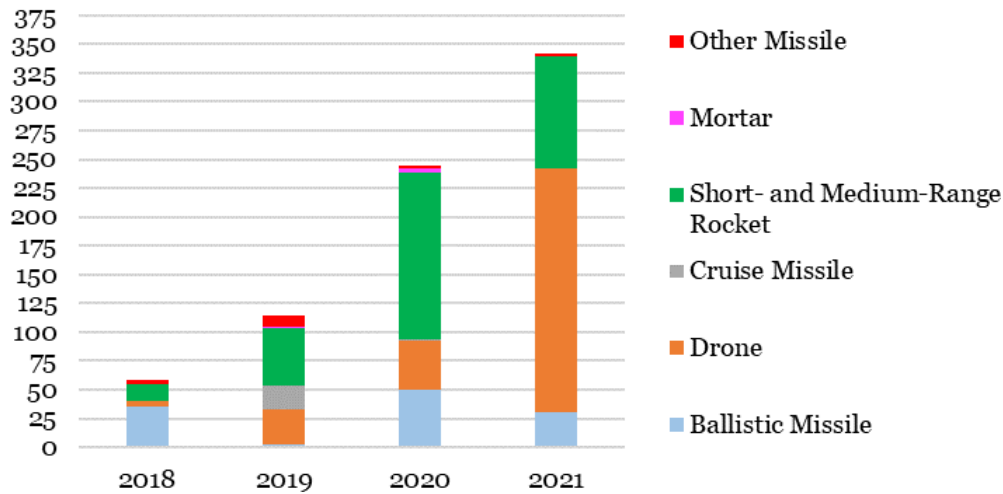
- Targeting Kadhimi in such a bold attack signals a major escalation. Iranian-backed Shia militias in Iraq have targeted U.S. service members, diplomats, and Iraqi security forces and intelligence officers but never sought to use lethal force against a senior Iraqi official, let alone the prime minister.
 - No group has claimed responsibility yet, and it appears that the Iraqi paramilitaries and Iran are trying to distance themselves from the attack, despite their likely culpability, due to the clear redline it crossed and outrage it triggered. Kataib Hezbollah [claimed](#) that “no one in Iraq has even the intention to lose a drone on a former prime minister.”

- A spokesperson for Iran’s Foreign Ministry [released a statement](#) condemning the attack and claimed that the country “supports Iraq’s stability, peace and security,” ignoring that its partner militias undermine each of these elements.
- General Esmail Qaani, Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force, quickly visited Baghdad on October 8 likely to deescalate tensions and reassert control over the PMF. According to [sources close to Kadhimi](#) who spoke with *Arab Weekly*, “Tehran sent Qaani to Baghdad after it learned that Kadhimi harboured serious intent to target the leaders of the Shia militias loyal to Iran, as they were the leading suspects in the assassination attempt.”
- Iran has [encouraged its partner militias](#) to target U.S. service members, partners, and interests in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Israel, and in the [maritime domain](#). Despite its regional aggression, negotiations with the United States about returning to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement are set to [resume in Vienna on November 29](#). The last round of negotiations was in June.
 - JINSA’s [Erasing the Leverage Deficit: How to Keep Tehran from the Bomb](#) report released in October presented a comprehensive strategy for a “Plan B” should negotiations fail.
 - Iranian-backed militias in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have increasingly favored drones as their weapons of choice. According to [JINSA’s Iran Projectile Tracker](#), drones account for 62 percent of the munitions that militias with ties to Iran have fired this year compared to just nineteen percent of the projectiles they fired between 2018-2020.



- According to data compiled by JINSA, drones are the increasingly preferred method for Iran and its partner militias to attack U.S. personnel and partners. They have launched 343 projectiles to date in 2021, including 212 drones, compared to 244 projectiles during all of 2020 with only forty-three drones.

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

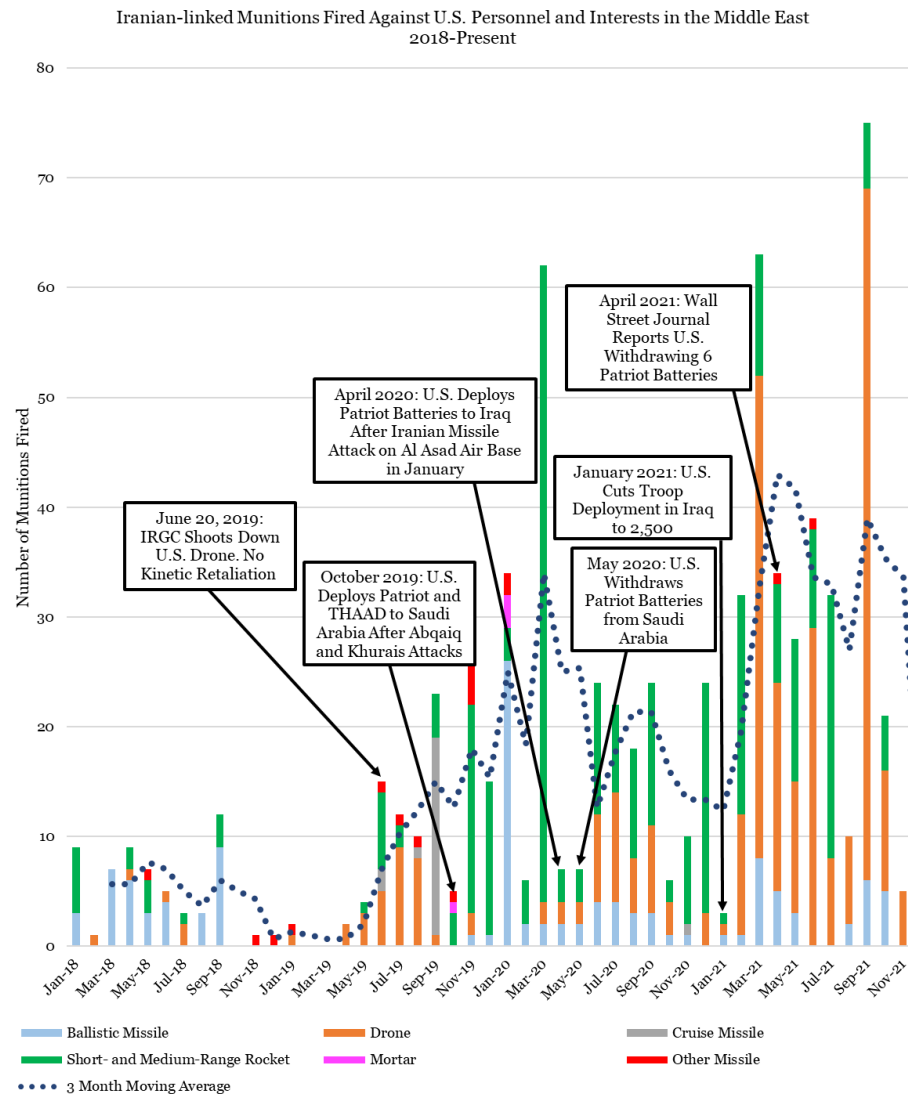


- Ideally, Iraq would have the capabilities to respond to security threats on its own, and the first U.S. option should be to support the Iraqi government and armed forces with intelligence and logistical support to bring those who ordered and conducted the attack to justice. Additionally, U.S. military support is still necessary to help deter Iran and Shia militias from undermining the Iraqi political process.
- President Biden’s use of military force has been too limited and inconsistent to have a deterrent effect or degrade the capabilities of Iran and its Shia proxy militias.
 - President Biden ordered airstrikes on February 25 in Syria and again on June 27 in Syria after Iranian-backed groups targeted U.S. forces in Iraq. However, the targets in each strike were primarily infrastructure, including a border control point and weapons storage facilities, that did not significantly degrade the militias’ personnel or leadership. The majority of Iranian-linked attacks on U.S. service members and interests have not triggered a military response.
 - After each of the U.S. airstrikes, Iranian-backed militias [continued to target positions in Iraq](#) hosting U.S. service members, unambiguous evidence that they failed to deter further attacks.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- If the Iraqi government proves incapable of holding Kadhimi’s would-be assassins to account, President Biden should consider using the opportunity to order airstrikes against Iran-backed militias that degrades their ability to acquire, store, launch, and control drones and is strong enough to deter further attacks, including by targeting leadership elements and their Iranian support structure.
- Any retaliation should be conducted in consultation with Kadhimi and trusted elements of the Iraqi army, and with a commitment to support them should Iran and its proxies respond by significantly escalating their violent attacks against the Iraqi state.
 - Out of sensitivity to Kadhimi’s difficult domestic situation, the U.S. should consider framing any attack as retaliation for the October 20 attack on American troops at Tanf—for which U.S. officials said they reserved the right to respond at a time and place of U.S. choosing.

- Military force must be strong enough to signal to Iran and its militia proxies that a new U.S. strategy to their escalating attacks is now in place, one that will impose a much higher price for their future transgressions.



- The U.S. State Department in coordination with the Department of Defense and intelligence agencies should launch an information campaign tying Iran to the drone strike and other projectile attacks. The objective should be explaining that Iran and its partner militias do not respect the will of the Iraqi people or serve their interests.
- The Biden administration should adopt a regional strategy to preempt, deter, protect against, and respond after Iranian-backed projectile attacks with consistent military force, weapons interdiction operations, and joint training alongside regional partners, as argued in a [previous JINSA NatSec brief](#).
 - [Gray zone operations against Iran](#) can minimize the risks of escalation through deniable means that fall below waging conventional warfare, while still signaling America's credible military options to Tehran and its partner militias.
 - The United States does not need to publicly acknowledge cyber-attacks, sabotage, and targeted airstrikes or other military actions to deter the Iranian leadership or its proxies.

Similar to Israel's airstrikes against Iranian weapons proliferation in Syria, the United States should maintain plausible deniability for its military force when possible.

- The Pentagon should maintain existing U.S. air defense systems in the Middle East and assess whether its deployments are sufficient to intercepting the growing frequency and capability of Iranian-linked weaponry, especially drones.
 - The U.S. Army should expedite the deployment to the Middle East of the two Israeli Iron Dome systems it has acquired and is [testing in Guam](#). The Pentagon should also procure Israel's David's Sling medium- to long-range air defense system. In the United States, Raytheon coproduces the Iron Dome as the SkyHunter and David's Sling as SkyCeptor.
- Congress should hold public and classified hearings investigating the significant escalation of attacks on U.S. service members, partners, and interests in the Middle East this year.
 - Legislators should question Pentagon and CENTCOM officials about plans to deter Iranian-backed groups from launching strikes and to improve air defenses in the region.
 - CENTCOM should provide an assessment to Congress of whether its deployed air defenses, including counter-unmanned aerial system (C-UAS), lack sufficient capability to protect U.S. forces and interests. The Pentagon should deploy air defenses to address protection gaps.
 - Congressional hearings should examine the current state of C-UAS capabilities and legislators should authorize emergency funding to increase protection, as necessary.