

State Department Misleads on Iranian Aggression

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Last week, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price made the misleading claim, based on limited and unclear data, that Iranian aggression is the result of the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, implying that reaching a deal with Tehran will lead to de-escalation. A comprehensive analysis demonstrates Iranian aggression began well before JCPOA withdrawal and has increased most in the aftermath of the JCPOA agreement and again during the Biden administration's [open-ended negotiations](#). This data suggests the United States and its regional partners are likely to face a rise in Iranian aggression if there is a new nuclear agreement.

What Happened?

- State Department Spokesperson Ned Price argued during his [press briefing on March 31](#) that as a result of “the nuclear shackles of the JCPOA [being] lifted...rather than Iran's proxies be subdued, we have actually seen them emboldened. And you can quantify that in a number of ways...”

Why Is It Important?

- Price's statement, which [other supporters](#) of reaching a new nuclear agreement with Iran have [also articulated](#), is meant to suggest that the JCPOA reduced Iranian aggression and rejoining would do so again.
- This claim is misleading because the data it is based on is limited and unclear, in at least four ways:
 - » It is limited only to U.S. targets.
 - » It is geographically limited to Iraq.
 - » It is unclear and inconsistent in what sorts of attacks are being counted. At times, Price appears to be counting Iranian-linked projectile attacks. Other claims he makes seem to only be accurate if they refer to the total number of munitions used in those attacks.
 - » It ignores geopolitical context.

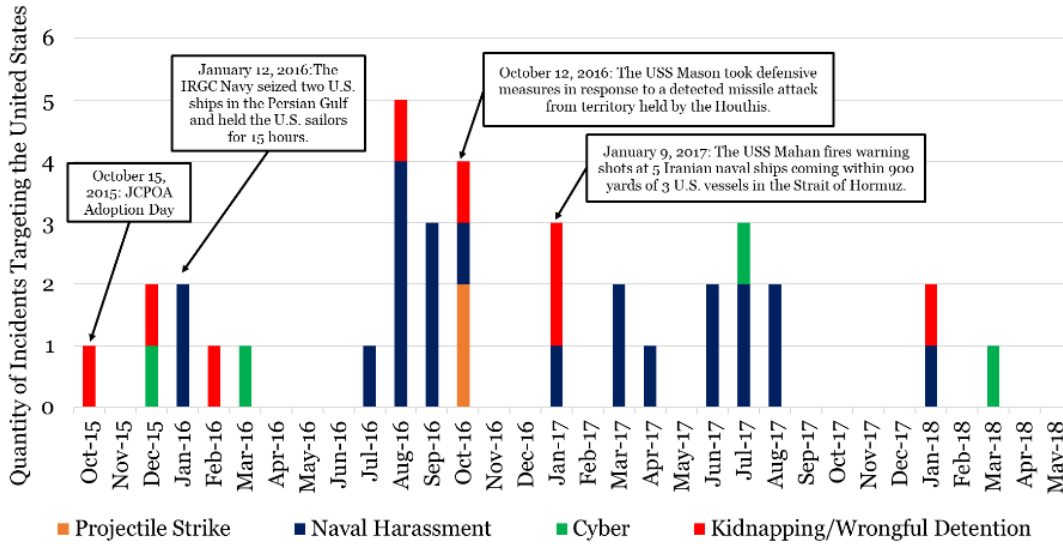
- A more realistic and comprehensive analysis of Iranian aggression should include that:
 - » **Iran has and does attack U.S. partners and interests around the Middle East.**
 - » **Iran has and does conduct malign activity, including against U.S. forces, around the Middle East.**
 - » **Iranian aggression includes a wide range of activities** such as naval harassment, cyber hacking and intrusions, kidnapping and wrongfully detaining Westerners, and provocative weapons tests.
 - » **From 2014 to 2017, Iranian-backed militias in Iraq were preoccupied fighting ISIS**, explaining in part why they did not target American troops who were also engaged in operations against the terror group during this period.
- JINSA has collected data on all publicly reported incidents of Iranian aggression against U.S. forces, interests, and partners in the entire Middle East dating back to 2015. Analysis of this data reveals, as the authors showed in a [previous JINSA NatSec Brief](#), that **Iranian aggression increases most during diplomatic engagement** and suggests **there is likely to be an increase in Iranian malign activity if there is a new nuclear agreement**.

ANALYSIS

The measurements Price listed included several misleading statements:*

- *“From 2012 to 2018, there were no significant attacks, there were no attacks against U.S. service members, diplomatic facilities in Iraq.”*
 - » This narrow statement with its numerous caveats appears accurate though it remains unclear.
 - It appears that by “attacks” Price specifically means projectile attacks. It is not clear whether it includes Iranian-backed attacks in Iraq that hit near a U.S. presence or only those that the U.S. government determined were against American targets. It is also unclear if he was discussing the number of specific incidents in Iraq or the total number of munitions fired.
 - However, this statement clearly excludes aggression against U.S. service members outside of Iraq, attacks on U.S. partners in Iraq, and attacks on U.S. partners outside of Iraq.
 - » Contrary to Price’s assertion, **Iran conducted significant and repeated aggression against U.S. forces prior to 2018**, including:
 - Illegally [seizing two U.S. naval vessels](#) in January 2016 after the JCPOA went into effect and detaining the American sailors onboard for several hours.
 - Numerous incidents of harassment of U.S. naval vessels. The State Department [previously stated](#) there were 22 incidents of IRGC fast watercraft engaging in “unsafe and unprofessional” behavior in 2015 and 36 instances in 2016 (although the number of publicly reported incidents tracked by JINSA is lower than these numbers).

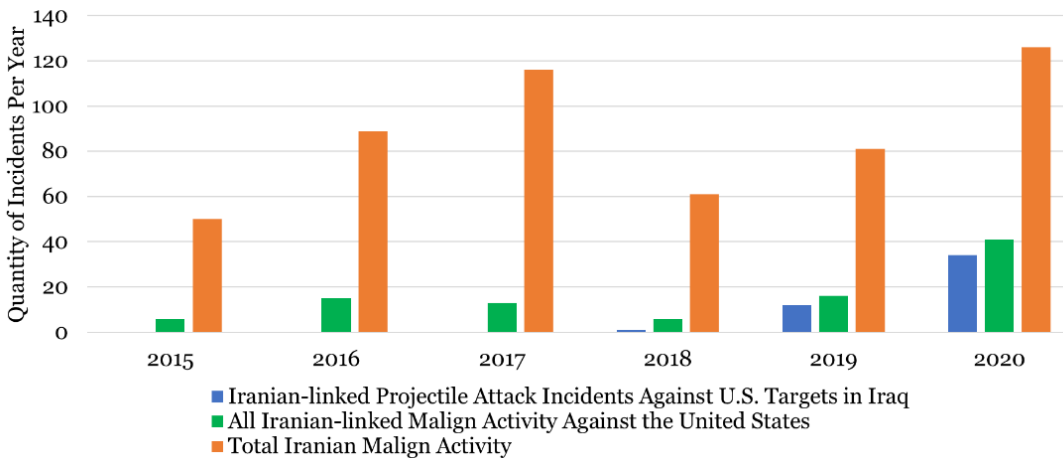
Iran Targeted the United States During the JCPOA



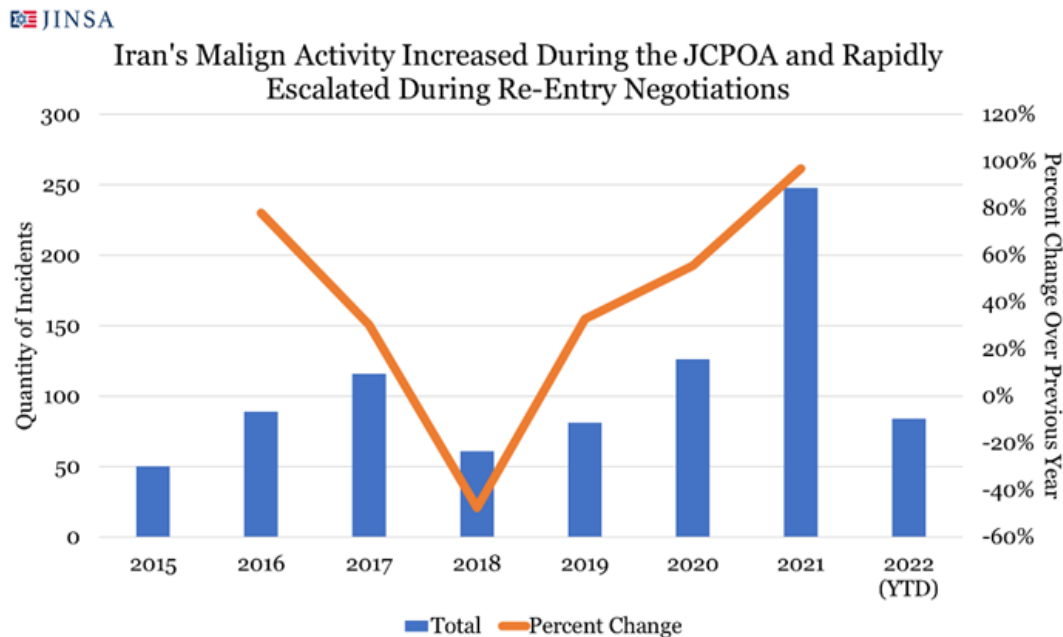
» Taking into account all forms of Iranian aggression across the entire Middle East, **Iranian regional aggression increased every year from 2015 to 2017, more than doubling in the span of three years**, including:

- Striking [America’s Kurdish partners](#), launching a [large attack](#) against Camp Liberty in October 2015 that killed Iranian dissidents, and [targeting the site again](#) in 2016 that caused several injuries.
- Beginning, and significantly increasing, projectile attacks on Saudi Arabia launched principally by its Houthi allies in Yemen. In 2017, 86 munitions were fired at Saudi Arabia –this number nearly tripled in 2018 (229) and then almost doubled again in 2019 (426).

Iran Engaged in Significant and Increasing Aggression Before 2018

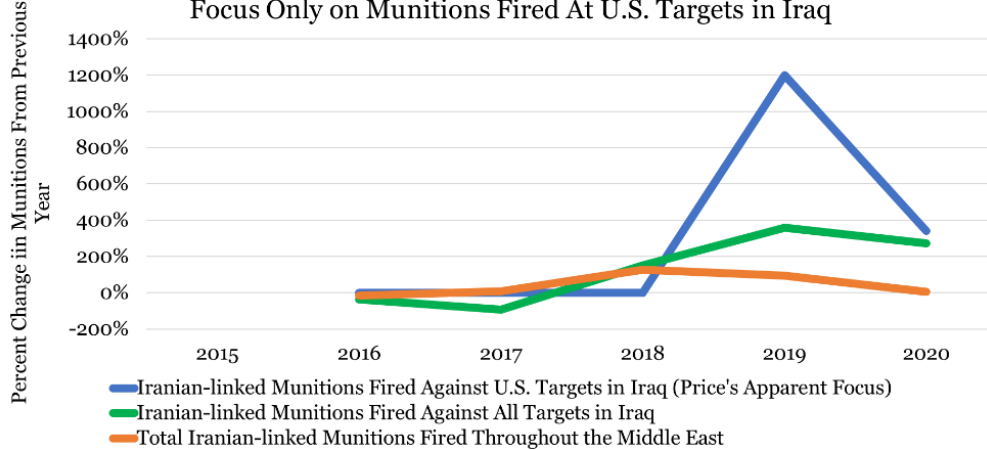


- “That changed in 2018.”
 - » Again, this statement ignores broader regional trends. Overall, according to JINSA data, Iranian regional aggression declined 47% in 2018.
 - » There was, however, a 150% increase in the number of Iranian-backed projectiles fired at U.S. service members in Iraq that year.



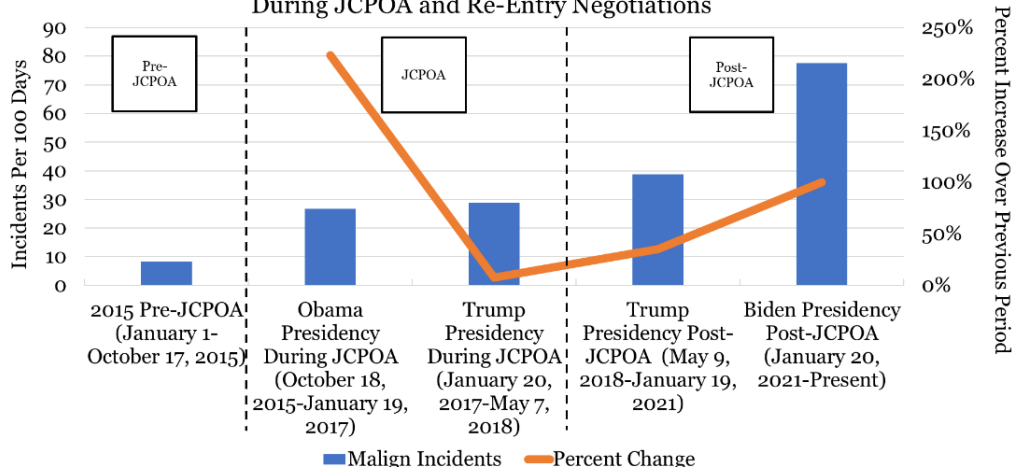
- “...between 2019 and 2020, the number of attacks from Iran-backed groups went up 400 percent.”
 - » Again, it is unclear exactly what types of attacks and against whom is being referred to. For the statement to be accurate, Price would have to be referring to a different metric than used in his previous claims: total munitions fired against American troops in Iraq as opposed to the number of specific incidents of projectile attacks. Open-source data collected by JINSA show a 341% increase in total munitions launched targeting locations with a U.S. military or civilian presence in Iraq from 2019 (39 total munitions launched) and 2020 (172).
 - If he meant incidents with a U.S. presence in Iraq, as his statement would imply, there were 12 incidents during 2019 and 34 in 2020, which is a 183% increase.
 - If he meant the total number of munitions fired by Iran-backed groups, regardless of target, in Iraq, there was a 274% increase during this period from 46 to 172.
 - If he meant all incidents of Iranian-linked aggression in Iraq, there was a 127% increase in the total number of from 15 to 34.

Price's Claim of a 400% Iranian Escalation in 2020 Appears to Focus Only on Munitions Fired At U.S. Targets in Iraq



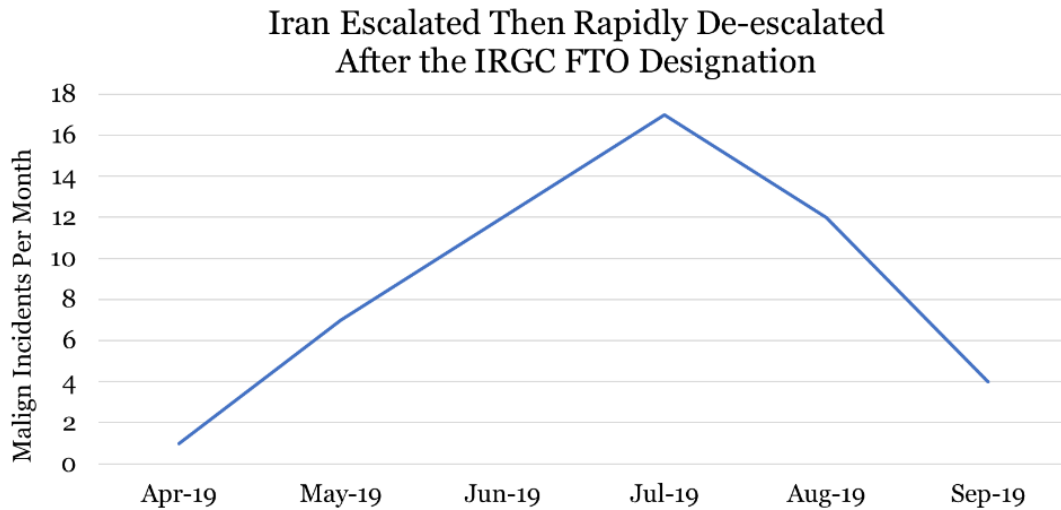
- “This was in the aftermath of the decision to abandon the JCPOA. It was in the aftermath of the decision to apply the FTO designation to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. It was in the aftermath of the killing of Soleimani, the IRGC chief.”
 - » Iranian aggression did not begin with any of these events and its escalations after each were short-lived.
 - » The greatest increases to Iranian aggression in the last seven years have happened as a result of U.S. diplomacy—adopting the JCPOA in 2015 and seeking to re-enter it in 2021. Withdrawal from the JCPOA, while it did lead to an uptick in aggression, had a much more modest effect.
 - Iranian aggression **more than tripled after the adoption of the JCPOA** in October 2015 compared to the first ten months of that year.
 - Following President **Trump’s withdrawal from the deal, Iranian aggression increased by 38%**.
 - Once President Biden entered office seeking **to rejoin the JCPOA, Iranian aggression doubled**.

Largest Increases in Iranian Malign Activity Occurred During JCPOA and Re-Entry Negotiations



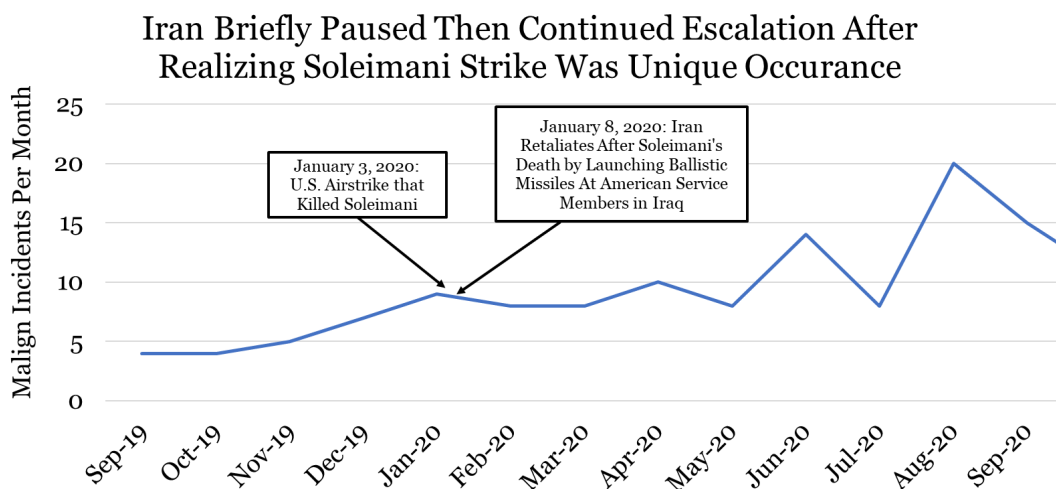
- » Following the April 2019 FTO designation of the IRGC, Iranian aggression increased 212% over three months (until July 2019), before decreasing 76% over the next two months.

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- » The Soleimani strike shows that Iranian aggression is tied to U.S. passivity, not action.
 - Five days after the U.S. Strike that killed Soleimani, Iran retaliated by firing at least 12 ballistic missiles at American service members in Iraq, injuring about one hundred. Then, Iran decreased its activity by 56% for 2.5 months, until March 2020, presumably waiting to see if the United States would take further action.
 - Only once Tehran became convinced the Soleimani strike was a unique occurrence rather than the beginning of a new, aggressive U.S. policy, did it increase its attacks again.

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*JINSA data reflects incidents that were publicly reported. Actual number of incidents is likely much higher.