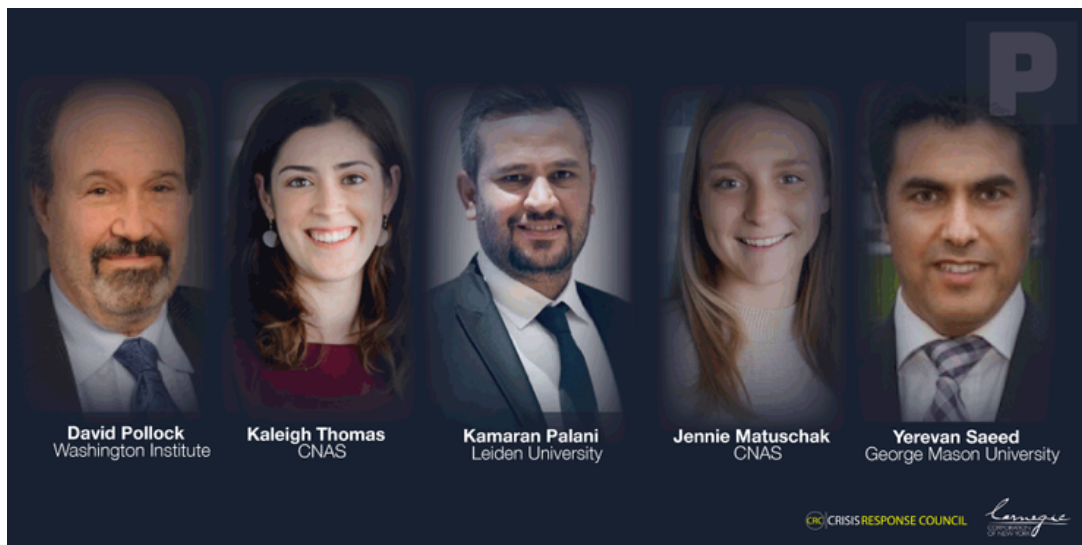


PERSPECTIVES



Rocket Attacks on Erbil: Part 2

Crisis Response Council spoke to experts and asked them to examine the implications of Monday's rocket attacks on Erbil, including their analysis on the impact it will have on stability in Iraq, tensions between the U.S. and Iran, and the campaign to defeat ISIS.



David Pollock, Washington Institute

Much discussion of the recent rocket attack on Erbil, which killed or injured half a dozen civilians at the airport and near the U.S. consulate there, abounds in misconceptions. First, such an assault was not “unprecedented”; a similar one, though on a smaller scale, occurred as recently as last September. So, if left unchallenged, these attacks will almost certainly recur before too long.

Second, the “mystery” of who did it is not really mysterious at all. Compelling circumstantial evidence points to the Asai'b Ahl Al-Haqq militia -- through one of its many fictitious front groups who claimed responsibility, “Saraya Awliya Al-Dam.” Third, the whole debate over whether Iran ordered this attack is mostly beside the point. For Iran clearly has the power, if it

is directly threatened, to stop almost all such attacks, as it demonstrated during the entire period from October of last year until mid-January of this one.

Fourth, the recent tendency in Washington to view such incidents as just an obsolete nuisance, and a distraction from the much bigger issue of “great power” or “near-peer” competition with China and Russia, also largely misses the point. China and Russia, not just Iran, will watch the American response carefully, and gauge their next moves on the larger international chessboard accordingly.

Fifth, the initial coverage and commentary regarding the latest Erbil rocket attack sometimes got sidetracked into arguments about a possible connection with Turkey, given recent tensions with Iraqi Kurdish, Arab, or even Yazidi militias over the PKK presence in nearby Sinjar (Shingal). It is true that some of the same Hashd militias have lately stepped up their profile and presence in that area. It is also true that better coordination between the KRG’s Peshmerga and other security forces there would help mitigate threats from either Turkey or the PKK. But there is no evidence that the attack on Erbil had anything to do with any of that. Rather, it clearly appears to have been another move in Iran’s proxy tactics of pressuring the U.S. and its Iraqi hosts to part ways, while rushing into sanctions relief for Tehran.

From this perspective, the responses to the Erbil attack so far are a mixed bag. On the positive side, U.S. officials spoke out quickly, forcefully, and at a very high level, with the Secretaries of State and Defense both denouncing the attack and vowing to maintain the U.S. strategic partnership with Iraq and with the KRG. This was correctly complemented by a multilateral diplomatic approach, including supportive statements from European and UN officials.

But on the negative side, U.S. statements have so far avoided any specifics. A better idea would be to say, first, that any plans for further drawdowns of American troops in Iraq, and their replacement by forces from other NATO countries, are now off the table. Second, that any thoughts of lifting or easing sanctions against Iran are now on indefinite hold until Iran stops these proxy attacks. This would avoid repeating the earlier, costly mistake of trying to isolate the Iran nuclear issue from all its other misbehavior around the region – in effect, succumbing to nuclear blackmail. And third, that any such attacks on any friendly targets, not just lethal attacks against Americans, will henceforth be included in this calculation. This will erase the harmful impression that the U.S. somehow accepts non-lethal attacks against Americans, or even lethal attacks on its local partners.

Also, too often overlooked in this discussion, the responses of both the KRG and the Iraqi government could be improved. They both understandably face tremendous cross-pressures: from each other, and from Iran, Turkey, internal militias, economic crisis, and their own aggrieved populations. Nevertheless, the responsibility for security is primarily their own – which means that they need to patch up at least their bilateral differences on urgent security matters faster, and stop entangling those issues with broader territorial, constitutional, or budgetary ones.

Finally, to the extent that both Erbil and Baghdad still want U.S. and other Western support, they should refrain from egregious anti-democratic behavior, such as assaulting peaceful protesters or jailing journalists. That kind of provocation is not just unnecessary and embarrassing. It also undermines their international standing, leaving them both more at Iran’s mercy and inviting more attacks like the one just seen in Erbil.

Kaleigh Thomas and Jennie Matuschak, Center for a New American Security

The rocket attack on a U.S. airbase in Erbil is a pivotal first test for President Biden and his foreign policy team on how effectively it can balance countering Iranian aggression, while preserving the possibility of reengaging Iran on the nuclear issue. To successfully deter Iran from future aggression, the administration need not mount a direct military response or punitive economic measures against Iran. However, it must signal that the United States is willing and capable of retaliating against attacks on U.S. facilities and personnel. Any additional action taken by the administration should avoid escalation to preserve space to engage Iran diplomatically.

The Biden administration should refrain from waging tit-for-tat attacks with Iran that skirt on the edge of needless escalation as seen during the Trump administration during the early months of 2020. The White House should also avoid aggressive rhetoric that could further intensify the situation. Instead, the Biden administration should respond quietly through multilateral mechanisms, including its regional alliances and diplomatic backchannels, in an effort to de-escalate tensions and avoid veering its big picture diplomatic strategy off-course.

The attack also reaffirms the need for a meticulous and deliberative approach to U.S. troop withdrawal in Iraq. As the U.S. Department of Defense recently announced in a Global Posture Review, there is an opportunity to re-baseline U.S. military presence so that it appropriately matches and responds to the variety of Iranian threats while minimizing the risk to American and partner personnel. Historically, changing U.S. force presence has not altered Iran's calculus in targeting U.S. forces and interests in the Middle East while remaining under the threshold of war. Therefore, the Biden administration should prioritize restructuring U.S. military posture to more sufficiently deter Iran.

As stated in his campaign, Biden's broad, long-term strategy toward Iran seeks to de-escalate tensions through diplomatic engagement, to include returning to the JCPOA and lifting sanctions. But this attack creates yet another point of friction between the United States and Iran, and threatens the realization of the administration's objectives. This incident indicates that Tehran has loosened the leash on its affiliated militias, which means escalatory actions may become more likely in the coming weeks and months—especially until the Biden administration takes significant steps toward reentering the JCPOA or an alternative course of action. As Iran's growing missile capabilities can range several U.S. military bases in the region as well as those of U.S. allies and partners, these are targets for Iranian aggression. Such attacks by Iranian proxies maintain Tehran's plausible deniability while testing the nascent Biden administration.

But escalation is often a two-way street: the Biden campaign may have called for de-escalation with Iran, but that doesn't mean Iran is ready to ease tensions just yet.

Kamaran Palani, Leiden University

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq has not officially accused any actor or country of being behind the attacks, but behind closed doors and through the region's media channels point directly to pro-Iranian armed groups or proxies in Iraq. The main motivation behind these attacks may be to test the Biden administration, but for Erbil the threat is part of wider issues and

complex disputes with these groups. These groups have maintained an entrenched presence along the Kurdistan Region's border, and in territories disputed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi government since 2017. They have also militarized ethno-religious minorities in Kirkuk, the Nineveh plains, and Sinjar.

The threat and challenge Iran-aligned militias pose is significant: both the 30 September 2020 rocket attacks and Monday's attack were launched from these territories. The current Iraqi government, led by Mustafa al-Kadhimi, faces the same threat from these groups, who create chaos, weaken the unity of the Iraqi state, and promote an Iranian agenda in Iraq. For these reasons, countering the threat presented by these groups must form part of a wider strategy to address the political, security and administrative disputes between the KRG and the Iraqi government.

The Kurdish leadership and people are today uncertain of whether they will receive rapid and comprehensive support from the U.S. in the face of these attacks. As a result, the leadership must work closely with the Iraqi government in Baghdad, with which they share a common interest in containing pro-Iran groups. Given the deep structural, political, legal, and financial disputes between the two governments, the involvement of international actors to facilitate this cooperation is essential. Such an approach will not just be central to addressing the "Katyusha threat" of the pro-Iranian groups in the short-term, but also to medium-term efforts to secure the return of populations who have remained internally displaced since 2014, through the reconstruction and stabilisation of Nineveh, the normalisation of the situation in Kirkuk. It will also be critical to attempts to protect vulnerable ethno-religious minorities in the Nineveh plains and Sinjar, and to holding security actors across these territories accountable to local populations.

Yerevan Saeed, George Mason University

The Erbil rocket attack is a consequence of the October 2017 offensive by Iran-aligned militias that drove Kurdish forces out of Kirkuk and the disputed areas, and replaced them with militias outside of the control of the Baghdad government who are now capable of striking Erbil. Although the rocket attack is viewed as a larger U.S.-Iran showdown in Iraq, its implications are far greater for the credibility of the Biden administration, which has vowed to revive and strengthen U.S. alliances and defend them.

Failure to hold the perpetrators of the attack accountable will result in further attacks, and possibly further large-scale attacks. The militia groups responsible for the attack have strategically consolidated their position, and increased their military, financial and political power in Kirkuk and other disputed areas in recent months. This presents a long-term strategic threat to the Kurdistan Region - an ally of the West - and coalition forces based at Erbil International Airport. The Biden administration should consider coercive responses that deter these militias from conducting further attacks.

Forcing these groups out of the disputed territories should be a priority for the Biden administration, particularly through the mediation of a joint KRG-Iraqi government security mechanism, as part of which Kurdish forces play an effective part in the disputed areas. Reducing the influence of anti-U.S. and Iran backed militias in the disputed areas will provide the KRG with the capability to protect Erbil from future attacks, and guarantee the safety of coalition personnel and advisors based in the Kurdistan Region. The redeployment of Kurdish forces into the areas where Iran-aligned militias now operate and launch these

attacks, as part of an agreement with the Iraqi government, is the only viable way forward to eliminate the threat these groups present.



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