



Ongoing Missile Attacks in Iraq: Targeting Foreign Troops and Exposing EU Absenteeism

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INTRODUCTION

“Since the end of October 2019, a series of more than 25 different missile and rocket attacks have taken place on Iraqi military bases that host foreign troops around the country. None of these attacks have been claimed by any group, but US-intelligence services¹ have traced back many of the attacks to Kata’ib Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed militia that has been formally recognized as a terrorist group by the United States.² Future attacks on Iraqi bases hosting foreign troops could be foreseen, particularly as military personnel are being transferred around the country to adapt to these threats as well as improve the capacity of the Iraqi military forces.

The European Union has remained largely absent in responding to these ongoing attacks, which only further implicates the disconnect between EU Member States’ actions abroad and the political responses from the EU institutions.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Iraqi military bases hosting foreign troops have been repeatedly targeted over the last several months, with little-to-no response from the European Union.
- Consolidation of foreign troops onto fewer military bases could have future implications on the susceptibility of these military bases to missile and rocket attacks.
- The role of the European Union remains unseen. Its failure to respond to most of these attacks exemplifies a disconnect in the military operations of Member States and the political decisions at the EU level.
- The safety of military personnel must be continually re-evaluated as the dynamics between the US and Iran impact the security of foreign military personnel in Iraq.

¹ Alex Ward, “The US Retaliatory Strikes on an Iran-Backed Militia in Iraq, Briefly Explained,” Vox, March 13, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/3/13/21178125/us-attack-iraq-iran-hezbollah-pentagon>.

² US Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Designates Individual

Entity Posing Threat to Stability in Iraq,” US Department of the Treasury, 2009, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg195.aspx>.

While EU Member States have a significant role in improving the security situation in Iraq, the role of the EU as an intergovernmental institution remains minimal, apart from the External Action Service's advisory mission of civilian security sector reform (EUAM Iraq). Aside from the fact that the EU does not have a specific military role in Iraq, the European Union has a vested interest in ensuring security in Iraq. The EU's role in Iraq exists mainly through the form of distinct Member States' commitment to individual partnerships with the Iraqi military forces, the NATO Mission Iraq (NMI)³, or as a partner of the international coalition, through Operation Inherent Resolve.



Map 1: Locations and Frequencies of Attacks
Source: BIC Primary Data

Strategic Attacks on Iraqi Military Bases:

Repeated attacks throughout military bases in Iraq are indicative of growing tensions between Iran (and their various militias in Iraq) and the United States. These tensions have jeopardized the presence of foreign troops and their ongoing commitments to improve the security sector and combat terrorism within the country. The goals of these international missions remain the same, despite ongoing tensions in the region, prolonged periods of anti-government protests and continued attacks on military bases.⁴

The thousands of non-US foreign troops that are present in Iraq are at risk of future attacks, such as the one that killed a soldier from the UK and severely wounded a Polish soldier on 11th of March.⁵ The series of attacks that have taken place consistently over the last five months, have been carried out within the same military bases, all of which host troops from the international coalition, and NATO forces. These military bases include the Green Zone in Baghdad, the Taji Military Base, al-Balad Air Base, Basmaya Camp, Ein al- Assad Base, Qayyara Base, the K-1 Military Base, and the Erbil Military Airbase.⁶ (See Map 1 above).

Furthermore, following the assassination of Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani, the Iraqi government voted to expel foreign troops from the country.⁷ While this resolution did not come to fruition, and was actively denounced by the United States⁸, who said they would remain in the country despite the decision of the Iraqi Parliament, the international coalition has long planned to consolidate its presence in Iraq to fewer military bases over time.⁹ Since February, the

³ The NMI is led by a Canadian General, with a leadership team coordinated by the US, Turkey, Spain and the United Kingdom. The NMI is a non-combat mission that conducts activities at military bases in the Baghdad area, Taji and Basmaya.

⁴ "NMI | NATO Mission Iraq," NATO Mission Iraq, 2018, <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/nmi>; "About CJTF-OIR," Operation Inherent Resolve, 2018, <https://www.inherentresolve.mil/About-CJTF-OIR/>.

⁵ Jared Szuba, "US and UK Identify Soldiers Killed in Camp Taji, Iraq Rocket Strike," The Defense Post, March 13, 2020, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2020/03/13/iraq-us-uk-soldiers-killed-taji-rocket-attack/>.

⁶ "Iran Targets US Troops with Missile Strikes," BBC News, January 8, 2020, sec. Middle East, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51028954>.

⁷ Ahmed Rasheed and Ahmed Aboulenein, "Iraqi Parliament Backs Government Push to Expel Foreign Troops - Reuters," Reuters, January 5, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-parliament/iraqi-parliament-backs-government-push-to-expel-foreign-troops-idUSKBN1Z407Z>.

⁸ Dan Lamothe, Mustafa Salim, and Liz Sly, "Trump Administration Insists U.S. Troops Will Remain in Iraq," The Washington Post, January 8, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

⁹ Shawn Snow, "US Re-Positioning Some Troops from Smaller Bases in Iraq Following Deadly Rocket Attack," Military Times, March 16, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2020/03/16/us-re-positioning-some-troops-from-smaller-bases-in-iraq-following-deadly-rocket-attack/>.

international coalition has withdrawn from three military bases: the al-Qaim Base, near the Syrian border; Qayyarah Military Base, near Mosul; and the K-1 Military Base in Kirkuk.¹⁰ Two of these three bases have been subject to attacks over the last several months, which could impact the locations of future attacks. As foreign troops are relocated to different bases in Iraq, the bases still hosting foreign troops could be more susceptible to attacks.

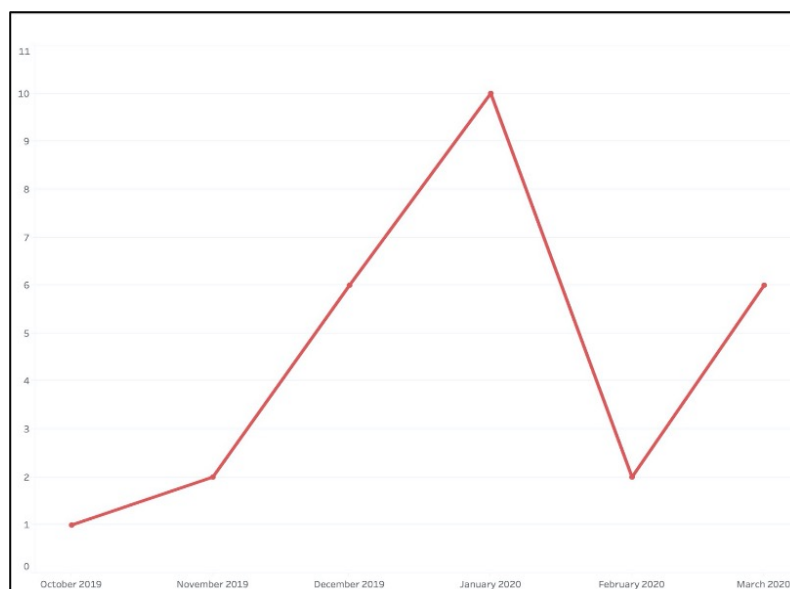
These departures may not be strategically timed with the continued attacks on bases around the country, but Iraqi security forces have transitioned into positions of control over the bases and could be less susceptible to attacks without the presence of foreign troops. The pattern of attacks on military bases hosting foreign troops could result in future escalations in these locations, as coalition forces are moved from smaller bases in Iraq to the larger bases hosting foreign troops. It should be noted however, that the departure of foreign troops from these military bases does not ensure the safety of these areas to future attacks, or other threats, such as terrorist activity.

The EU's Response: Absenteeism in the Face of Crisis

Following the escalations that resulted from the killing of Soleimani in early January, many European countries temporarily removed their soldiers from Iraq for safety reasons.¹¹ However, once these troops returned, the rocket attacks on many of the bases continued, as can be seen by the uptick in the number of attacks in March 2020 (Figure 1). The continued number of attacks has several implications¹², including the growing desire to end US involvement in Iraq. While the NATO and

international coalitions remain in the country at the request of the Iraqi government, the disconnect between the government and the various Iraqi militias that are present throughout the country demonstrate diverging perspectives for the role that the international community should have in the Iraq.

Figure 1: Number of Attacks on Military Bases by Month
source: BIC Primary Data



Of the nearly 30 attacks that have been recorded since the end of October, the EU has made official statements on only two accounts. In one of the more recent attacks, on the 11th of March, 2020, three soldiers, including one British military personnel, were killed in one of the most deadly attacks of foreign troops on an Iraqi base in years.¹³ The lack of a proper response, from any high ranking official in the EU institutions, including European Commission Vice President and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell and the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, prove once again how absent the EU remains on many foreign affairs. The only other response from the EU

¹⁰ Brian Everstine, "U.S. Forces Withdrawing from Key Operating Bases in Iraq," *Air Force Magazine* (blog), March 17, 2020, <https://www.airforcemag.com/u-s-forces-withdrawing-from-key-operating-bases-in-iraq/>; Elizabeth Hagedorn, "US Coalition Transfers Another Base to Iraqi Security Forces," *Al-Monitor*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/us-coalition-transfer-base-iraq-security-forces.html>.

¹¹ John Vandiver, "Germany, Other NATO Allies Move Soldiers out of Central Iraq," *Stars and Stripes*, January 7, 2020, <https://www.stripes.com/news/europe/germany-other-nato-allies-move-soldiers-out-of-central-iraq-1.613791>; Nickolaj Nielsen and Elena Sanchez Nicolas, "3,000 Troops from 19 EU States in Iraq. Will They Stay?," *EUobserver*, January 8, 2020, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/147065>.

¹² Following escalations in January, Kata'ib Hezbollah warned the Iraqi government that they would give them the opportunity to diplomatically expel foreign troops from Iraq, before they would launch a massive military offensive against the US and foreign troops. https://twitter.com/Yossi_Mansharof/status/1216669067962146816

¹³ Alissa J. Rubin and Eric Schmitt, "Rocket Attack Kills Three U.S. Coalition Members in Iraq," *The New York Times*, March 11, 2020, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/11/world/middleeast/us-troops-killed-iraq-rocket-attack.html>.

was after the series of attacks following Soleimani's murder, in which a high-level meeting was called.¹⁴ From these attacks that have taken place in past months, only one –where a UK soldier was killed– warranted an explicit response from the EU. This level of absentness demonstrates either a disconnect in the communication between the various missions in Iraq, which involve troops from EU countries, and the various EU bodies, or a lack of responsibility for the military personnel of EU Member States.

While the EU continues to take a stance on matters such as the ongoing protests in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon, they have failed to recognize the severity of threat that these attacks impose on the troops of European countries. Furthermore, the inability of the EU to recognize and condemn these attacks demonstrates the disconnect between the military actions of EU Member States outside of the EU, and the political involvement at the EU level.

CONCLUSION

The number of attacks that have taken place since October 2019, on Iraqi military bases with a foreign troop presence severely threaten the future of international involvement in the country, as well as the overall security situation of Iraq. As these unclaimed attacks continue, and tensions between the United States and Iran may rise again, the involvement of EU troops in the country may no longer be viable, due to the safety and security concerns of the military personnel who are present is a mainly advisory capacity.

The European Union has failed to acknowledge the risks of these ongoing attacks, and the lack of comprehensive political support which could put EU Member States' military personnel at risk. Noting that all EU bodies, including the Commission, the Council and the European External Action Service play a vital role in maintaining good relations with Iraq, they have a responsibility to acknowledge the risks that military personnel are facing amidst these missile and rocket attacks.

¹⁴ EU Council, "EU Council on Twitter: '#Iraq: "Ministers Have given Me a Strong Mandate to Carry out Diplomatic Efforts with All Parties to Contribute to de-Escalation in the Region, Support Political Dialogue & Promote a Political Regional Solution."' @JosepBorrellF @eu_eas #FAC 🍌 More:

<https://t.co/PxQWhustFi> <https://t.co/6mrPLrPFwz> / Twitter," Twitter, January 10, 2020, <https://twitter.com/EUCouncil/status/1215740288657973250>.

BIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- All EU bodies must recognize the ongoing attacks that have inundated Iraqi military bases over the past months, noting the increasing level of threat that military personnel face during these attacks.
- The EU should work closely with the NMI and the international coalition to properly assess the risks of future attacks against military personnel, if an international presence in Iraq is to continue.
- Exemplify a stronger attentiveness to the events that are taking place on ground in Iraq. While the EU has maintained well versed in the political protests that have affected thousands of Iraqis, the state of affairs in Iraq that directly impacts the lives of military personnel from EU Member States remains a lower priority for the EU to acknowledge.

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.



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