

The Geopolitical Playground in Iraq:

Stuck between US and Iranian tensions, how the Biden administration can proceed in Iraq

RETHINKING SECURITY IN THE 2020s SERIES – ANALYSIS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tensions between the United States and Iran continue to rise, as the two geopolitical forces vie for power in Iraq, and elsewhere in the Middle East. Following the killing of Qassem Soleimani on 3 January 2020, US-Iran tensions have been highly contentious, and have impacted international forces in Iraq, as well as put into question the presence of the United States in the country. Following this attack, Iranian-backed paramilitary groups in Iraq have continued to target US and foreign troops, sending rockets into the international “Green Zone” of Baghdad, as well as numerous military bases hosting foreign security personnel throughout the country.

These ongoing attacks continue to threaten the lives of international forces operating in the country, as well as Iraqi security forces and civilians. The Iraqi government is in a precarious position, as they have to balance the safety of their civilians and security personnel while trying to remain in the good graces of both the United States and Iran, as their strongest allies.

2. BEYOND BASES: THREATS TO SECURITY PERSONNEL IN IRAQ

In 2020, following the missile attack that killed Qassem Soleimani and Abu Muhandi al-Muhandis, Iran and Iranian-based paramilitary groups operating in Iraq went back and forth sending rockets into military bases and locations where international (US) security forces were operating. The United States retaliated at multiple points, but there the number of civilian contractors and soldiers killed in hostile rocket attacks by Iran in 2020 totalled five men; four Americans and one British officer.¹ All of these attacks were attacks on military bases, that sent rockets into Camp Taji (outside Baghdad)² and in North Central Iraq (near Erbil) within the month of March 2020.³ March was the only month in 2020 where the US and International coalition reported casualties related to Iran-backed groups attacking international bases.⁴



Despite no more deaths occurring from hostile attacks on military bases hosting international troops, there were multiple more attacks that did occur, without taking lives. These attacks were fairly consistent throughout 2020, occurring in multiple locations where international forces were present, both within and

¹ <http://icasualties.org/App/Fatalities?page=2&rows=10>

² <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/03/14/iraq-officials-rocket-attack-hits-base-housing-us-troops/>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/11/world/middleeast/us-troops-killed-iraq-rocket-attack.html>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/iraq-rocket-attack-americans-uk-soldier-dead>

beyond military bases. One such attack was on the US Oil company Halliburton operating in southern Iraq, which was targeted with multiple rockets in April 2020.⁵

While 2020 was a transformative year for the US position in Iraq, where they faced many challenges to operating throughout the country, 2021 is off to an equally tumultuous start, and the Biden administration will need to formulate a clearer policy for US intentions in the country moving forward.

Leading up to the anniversary of Soleimani's death, tensions were high, as international forces expected retaliation.⁶ No attack ever came to fruition, but a few weeks later, following another attack on an international military base in Erbil, northern Iraq, a US contractor was killed and two servicemen were injured.⁷ This attack was one of the first attacks on a base in Iraqi Kurdistan by pro-Iranian forces since September 2020.⁸ The malicious actions that were carried out by pro-Iranian groups were both defensive and offensive in nature. The Biden administration has carried out attacks across the border in Syria in an attempt to counter Iran. In late February, 2021, Biden retaliated by attacking three convoys, killing 22 Iraqi/Syrian forces, many of whom were known affiliates of Iranian backed militias, such as Kataib Hezbollah.⁹

The retaliatory action only further escalated tensions, and on 11 March rockets landed within the Al-Asad airbase, the same base that was targeted after the death of Soleimani in March 2020.¹⁰ The tit-for-tat between the United States and Iran that is playing out in Iraq continues to threaten international forces and at this rate is becoming more deadly each successive year. The five international military forces¹¹ that were killed in 2020 has already been met this year in 2021. While this does not speak to the volume of attacks that took place in 2020, which were frequent and diverse in their location and origin, the attacks are becoming

⁵ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/04/rockets-iraq-us-oil-company-halliburton.html>

⁶ <https://thehill.com/policy/international/532301-iran-commander-promises-resistance-ahead-of-one-year-anniversary-of>

⁷ [https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-02-15/mortars-land-near-erbil-airport-iraqi-kurdish-security-sources-say#:~:text=15%2C%202021-,By%20Reuters%2C%20Wire%20Service%20Content%20Feb.,2021%2C%20at%20%3A21%20p.m.&text=ERBIL%2C%20Iraq%20\(Reuters\)%20%2D,attack%20in%20almost%20a%20year.](https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-02-15/mortars-land-near-erbil-airport-iraqi-kurdish-security-sources-say#:~:text=15%2C%202021-,By%20Reuters%2C%20Wire%20Service%20Content%20Feb.,2021%2C%20at%20%3A21%20p.m.&text=ERBIL%2C%20Iraq%20(Reuters)%20%2D,attack%20in%20almost%20a%20year.)

⁸ <https://www.dw.com/en/iraq-rockets-target-us-led-coalition-base-in-erbil-airport/a-55113186>

⁹ <https://allegheny campus.com/19690/international-2/rockets-fired-on-u-s-military-base-in-iraq/>

¹⁰ <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/rocket-attack-targets-iraqi-military-base>

¹¹ Some of which were independent contractors, others were military personnel.

more intense and well targeted. Further, the fact that these attacks are not taking place solely on military bases, but in areas where American companies and forces are operating or transiting through demonstrates the coordinated nature of these attacks which are using intel and surveillance to monitor US actions within Iraq. On 3 March, 2021 US coalition logistics convoys were targeted in both Samawah (southern Iraq) and Hillah (southern Baghdad).¹²

3. BIDEN AND THE PATH FORWARD IN IRAQ

The Biden administration must now choose their focus in how to tackle and deter Iran. Noting that President Trump stated at multiple points throughout his presidency that he intended to withdraw all troops from Iraq¹³, the Biden administration has not stated that they will continue with that plan. In late February, in a statement to the United Nations Security Council, Deputy US Ambassador to the UN, Richard Mills, said that the US will continue to help Iraq assert its sovereignty “in the face of enemies, at home and abroad”.¹⁴ US involvement in Iraq threatens regional partners, resulting in hostilities and retaliation towards international forces, aimed particularly at the United States. Further, the international reaction to the US presence in Iraq remains uncertain. Countries share concern that such a strong US presence in Iraq threatens international personnel, yet international forces remain in the country through obligations to the international coalition against the Islamic State, through the NATO training mission, or through independent country missions.¹⁵

The presence of international troops through their additional obligations from bilateral or multilateral relations in Iraq is concerning, as the continued presence of US troops in Iraq increases their risk. US troops have continually been asked to withdraw both by Iranian paramilitary groups, the Iranian government and Iraqi officials who question the role of US forces in completing their mission and improving the security within the country.¹⁶ The current US strategy of

¹² <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/170641/3rd-US-military-convoy-targeted-in-Iraq-on-Wed>

¹³ <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-donald-trump-afghanistan-troop-withdrawals-iraq-f386726f79ac6c65be97211d3a89b12d>

¹⁴ <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/02/biden-administration-taking-steps-stay-iraq-forever/172209/>

¹⁵ <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2507564/nato-defense-leaders-agree-to-increase-iraqi-mission-defer-decision-on-afghanis/>

¹⁶ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/11/20/iran-and-iraq-remove-u-s-troops-iraq-column/3776254001/>

“proportionate” retaliation against Iran/Iranian-backed paramilitary groups cannot continue in Iraq.¹⁷ These attacks are anything but proportionate in terms of the scale, casualties and damage that they cause, yet the United States will continue to pursue action against Iranian affiliated enemies in a manner that is disproportionate to the actions taken by Iranian allies. There is the question of quantity over quality, as the number of attacks that Iranian affiliated groups have carried out since Soleimani’s death remains high, the number of attacks that are carried out by the United States is not highly publicized, and therefore seems less than those of the Iranian counterparts, which is unlikely.

The attacks are becoming increasingly more deadly, but the United States response thus far under the Biden administration has been to strike with great force, killing numerous security forces in Iraq and then prepare for a hostile response from paramilitary groups operating in Iraq. This absolutely cannot go on. In no way does this work to improve the security situation in Iraq, for Iraqi troops, international forces, or Iranian-backed forces that the US should be working with to create better relations with in the coming months.

While the US justifies their presence as supporting a stable and democratic society for the sovereign nation of Iraq, in practice this is not playing out as strongly. The United States is a key player in Iraq. It is not feasible to think that the US will withdraw from the country, now or likely at any point in the near future.¹⁸ At this point in the Joe Biden presidency, he does not have an explicit Iraq strategy beyond what has been said through diplomatic officials, noting the importance of sovereignty and stability within the country.

Further, the US has stated that in Iraq, the US will “address Iran-backed militias and Iran’s destabilizing efforts in Iraq...” without specifying what the potential response could be to “address” Iran/Iranian backed groups.¹⁹ In order to create lasting peace in Iraq, and to hope for the de-escalation of Iran/US tensions, both sides must be willing to diplomatically solve the problem, rather than attacking and responding to rocket attacks in a back-and-forth manner.

¹⁷ <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/12/815210420/u-s-launches-retaliatory-airstrikes-in-iraq-after-missile-attack>

¹⁸ <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/biden-administration-seeks-stable-iraq-free-islamic-state>

¹⁹ <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-the-situation-in-iraq-via-vtc-4/>

4. CONCLUSION

Over the past year, Iranian actions and attacks have threatened the lives of international forces operating within Iraq. Unfortunately, 2021 has demonstrated that these tensions remain high, with neither side willing to reach a compromise on the matter. The continuation of rocket attacks on international military bases and US convoys carrying materials throughout the country must end. The goal in having international troops present in Iraq, at the government's request, is to improve the security situation through advisory missions and military training missions. However, international troops are continually threatened, compromising the safety of the international forces operating in the country. Iraq is stuck between a rock and a hard place, where Iran and the United States' pressures play out, with Iraqis paying the ultimate price. Without either Iran or the United States taking measures to ensure the end to hostilities in Iraq, the situation on the ground will continue, with more rocket attacks, more soldiers, both Iraqi and international, being killed.

About the BIC

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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