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PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Iran Is Using Violence to Put Pressure on Biden

by Dr. Ardavan Khoshnood

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Multiple missiles were fired at Erbil on February 15, killing at least one civil contractor and injuring at least one American national. It is likely that the attack was conducted by an Iranian proxy in order to put pressure on President Biden to lift the sanctions against the country and return to the 2015 nuclear deal.

On Monday, February 15, several rockets were fired at Erbil International Airport in northern Iraq. Information is still scarce, but it is known that at least one [US base](#) was hit. The [Independent](#) reported that one person was killed and six injured. According to [Deutsche Welle](#), the fatality was a foreigner and probably not an American. The official spokesman for [Operation Inherent Resolve](#) (the US military's name for the international force in Iraq combating ISIS) stated that one civilian contractor had been killed and five others wounded, as well as one US service member.

Authorities in the Kurdish region have [blamed](#) the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (al-Hashd al-Shaabi, or PMF) for the attack. The PMF is an umbrella organization for dozens of different groups amounting to more than [150,000](#) fighters. Some of the most significant groups within the PMF are the Badr Brigade, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and the Kataib Hezbollah. They are all loyal to Iran and work closely with the Quds Forces (QF) of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The PMF is effectively not only a branch of the [IRGC-QF](#) as its proxy, but also a branch of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Since its establishment, the PMF has loyally promoted Iranian foreign policy to significant effect.

The groups constituting the PMF are foremost Shiite militias that follow Tehran's orders. One of its major groups is Kataib Hezbollah, which was the main force behind the [attack](#) on the US embassy in Baghdad on December 31, 2019. The previous Deputy Chairman and Secretary-General of the Kataib

Hezbollah was Jamal Ibrahim, better known as Abu Mahdi Muhandis. In 2009, Muhandis and the Kataib Hezbollah were designated as terrorists by the [US Department of the Treasury](#). In January 2020, soon after Muhandis greeted then QF chief Qassem Soleimani at Baghdad International Airport, both were killed in a US drone strike.

It is too soon to declare the PMF responsible for the Erbil attack. However, both the modus operandi and the timing of the attack clearly point to the PMF as the culprit. For at least two months there have been no major attacks against US forces in Iraq, and this most recent attack is the first deadly strike in Iraq for a year. This begs the question: Why now?

Once it became established that Donald Trump had lost his bid for reelection and Joe Biden was going to be the 46th president of the US, it was understood by all observers that Washington's policy toward Iran was going to change drastically. An obvious signal was President Biden's selection of Robert Malley as US special envoy for Iranian affairs. As [Dr. Mordechai Kedar](#) noted, "Malley is likely to urge the US to return to the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA), lift the sanctions as soon as possible, and free the Tehran regime from any other obligation, including with regard to long-range ballistic missiles and its destructive involvement in other countries' affairs. Malley will seek to restore to Tehran the military and political power it wielded in the days of President Obama, despite the calamities that that power has wreaked on the citizens of Iran and on the region."

The Trump administration's maximum pressure policy had crippled the Islamic regime and the Iranian economy, so Iran cheered Biden on in the hope of getting rid of the sanctions. But now that he has taken office, he is not moving fast enough to satisfy the regime. Its plan is therefore to put as much pressure as possible on his administration to force him to lift the sanctions.

Regrettably for Iran, President Biden recently said he will not lift any sanctions unless Iran reverses its "[nuclear steps](#)." The Erbil attack is almost certainly Iran's reply to that demand. More attacks will occur during the coming weeks and months. Tehran hopes to put its own version of "maximum pressure" on Biden and his administration, thus forcing him to lift the sanctions as soon as possible and return to the nuclear deal.

The use of violence to achieve foreign policy goals has been the modus operandi of the Islamic Republic of Iran since its birth in 1979. Will it succeed this time? Probably yes.

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