



Recent Iranian Proxy Attack in Iraqi Kurdistan Unlikely a Signal for New Escalation

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Key Takeaway: The recent Iranian proxy drone attack on Erbil International Airport was likely a stand-alone event and likely does not indicate the immediate resumption of large-scale Iranian proxy attacks on US facilities in Iraq. Iranian proxy militants launched two drones targeting what Iran assessed to be an Israeli intelligence asset at Erbil International Airport in Iraqi Kurdistan on September 11, 2021, possibly triggering an Israeli retaliatory strike on a proxy convoy in Abu Kamal, Syria, on September 14. Iran may have approved this attack after US and Israeli political and military leaders met in recent weeks to discuss their strategies for addressing the threat Iran poses to US, Israeli, and regional security. The 20th anniversary of the 9/11 New York terrorist attacks may have influenced the timing of the attack. Iran will likely maintain its ban on large-scale attacks on US facilities in Iraq until after Iraq's October 10 elections and possibly until the end of 2021 unless the Iran-Israel escalation cycle spills further into Iraq.

Context:

Iranian proxy militants launched two kamikaze drones toward US forces locations at Erbil International Airport on September 11, 2021, ending their halt of major attacks against US interests in Iraq since late July.¹ The attack caused no damage or injuries. US force protection countermeasures intercepted both drones.² An Iranian proxy Telegram channel affiliated with the militia Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq wrote that the attacks were intended to remind the United States of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.³

The September 11 attack was the first Iranian proxy attack on or near US forces in Iraq since July 29.⁴ Iran ordered its proxies to cease large-scale attacks on US forces and facilities in Iraq following the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue in late July.⁵ That dialogue ended with a US agreement to withdraw all combat forces from Iraq and transition to a purely advisory mission by the end of the year. The authors forecasted that Iran would order a resumption of attacks either after Iraq's October 10 parliamentary elections or around the December 2021 deadline for the withdrawal of US combat forces.

Assessment:

Iran likely assessed that its proxies were targeting either an Israeli intelligence asset in the vicinity of the airport or a center for US-Israeli cooperation. Iranian state-run media reported that the attack targeted a Mossad “spy center” at the airport.⁶ Iranian proxy Telegram channels associated with Kata’ib Hezbollah also circulated that claim, citing “informed sources.”⁷ Iranian officials assess that much of the Israeli threat to Iran’s domestic assets, including its nuclear facilities, emanates from Israeli spy cells in Iraqi Kurdistan. Israel has no public presence inside Iraq and no formal diplomatic relations with the Iraqi state.

Strikes against an Iranian proxy convoy in Syria on September 14 were likely conducted by Israel and may have been in retaliation for the September 11 attack if Israel believed that strike targeted its interests or assets. The location suggests that Israel prefers to avoid opening an Iraqi front in its current conflict with Iran. Unidentified drones, likely controlled by Israeli Defense Forces, struck a three-car convoy belonging to likely Iranian proxy factions within the Popular Mobilization Forces just after the convoy crossed the Iraqi border into Syria.⁸ The strikes destroyed the vehicles, which may have been carrying drones or other conventional proxy armaments, but caused no casualties. The US-led coalition denied responsibility for the strikes.⁹ Israel rarely confirms or denies its activities in Syria.

Forecast:

Iran will likely revert to its ban on large-scale attacks on US forces until after Iraq’s October 10 elections and possibly until the end of 2021 unless US or Israeli retaliations trigger an escalation cycle that continues to spill into Iraq. Iran and its proxies are managing a regional conflict with Israel that could force Iran to re-evaluate its preferred plan for managing violence in Iraq through the end of the year.¹⁰ Recent meetings between US and Israeli officials in which they emphasized their cooperation and commitment to countering Iran could have triggered the Iranian attack on what they believe to be an Israeli asset.¹¹ Earlier alleged Israeli actions against Iran’s nuclear program could also be a contributing factor. Iran likely ordered a one-time exception to its de-escalation due to US and Israeli rhetoric, the poignance of the September 11 anniversary, and alleged intelligence activities inside Iranian territory. Israel’s decision to retaliate inside Syria indicates that a larger-scale escalation in the Iraqi theater before October 10 remains unlikely.

However, attacks on US and allied assets in eastern Syria remain likely in the coming weeks. A likely Iranian proxy surveillance drone flew over Erbil Airport on August 21, possibly in preparation for the September 11 attack.¹² US aircraft shot down another drone near a US facility in eastern Syria that same day, indicating additional proxy preparation for attacks outside of Iraq.¹³ Iran may allow its proxies to retaliate with attacks on US forces and facilities in eastern Syria, maintaining the Iraqi de-escalation while also increasing pressure on US forces.

Alternatives:

Additional Israeli or US strikes on Iranian proxy assets inside Iraqi territory could re-open the escalation cycle, end the Iranian-ordered ceasefire, and trigger a resumption in Iranian proxy attacks on US assets in Iraq. The recent strikes also increase the risk of attacks on US assets in eastern Syria, which have previously faced rocket and drone attacks.¹⁴ One strong indicator for this trajectory has already been tripped: the leader of one Iranian proxy militia stated that the United States bears responsibility for the strike because it controls Iraqi airspace and because “everyone knows” that Israel cannot conduct strikes in Iraqi territory without US permission.¹⁵ The strikes were likely on the Syrian side of the border despite initial reporting that they took place in Qaim, on the Iraq

side. Additional open-source indicators that Iran will rescind its ceasefire order would include statements by other Iraqi proxies asserting that the United States bears responsibility for the September 14 strikes and circulations of such claims by IRGC-affiliated Iranian media and additional surveillance drone flybys of US facilities. An escalation in the Syrian theater could also spill back into Iraq.

¹ <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-iraq-baghdad-e9e277e53074caeefd0593c4c3e4b2bd>

² <https://twitter.com/OIRSpox/status/1436945050357964801?s=20>

³ <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-proxies-iraq-undertake-only-terrorist-attack-worldwide-commemorate-911>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-rocket/rockets-hit-baghdad-green-zone-no-casualties-security-sources-idUSKBN2EZoS2>

⁵ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iranian-proxy-response-us-iraq-strategic-dialogue>

⁶ mehrnews dot com/news/5303048/%D9%85%D8%B1%DA%A9%D8%B2-

%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AF-

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⁷ t dot me/Tura313/18605

⁸ timesofisrael dot com/us-denies-carrying-out-strike-on-iran-backed-militia-convoy-on-syria-iraq-border/

⁹ <https://twitter.com/OIRSpox/status/1437880428258631682?s=20>

¹⁰ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/the-iranian-proxy-response-to-the-us-iraq-strategic-dialogue>

¹¹ timesofisrael dot com/at-first-meeting-biden-pledges-to-bennett-that-iran-will-never-get-nukes/

¹² rudaw dot net/arabic/kurdistan/210820214

¹³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-led-coalition-aircraft-shoots-down-drone-over-syria-2021-08-22/>

¹⁴ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/iran-file/iranian-proxies-increase-attacks-on-us-forces-to-catalyze-a-us-withdrawal-from-iraq>

¹⁵ t dot me/Tura313/18712