

Erbil Missile Attack: A Repeated Policy and Continued Attack

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Annotation

On the 13th of March, there have been missile attacks, for which the Islamic Revolutionary Guard have claimed the responsibility, in the Kurdish-populated Erbil in Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The missile attacks have damaged civilian areas including several buildings near the US consulate in the capital of the Kurdistan Region. As explained in this paper, the reasons for the attack can be ranged from the domestic politics of Iraq and power balance in the Middle East to the natural gas issue of the region.

Why Did the Attack Take Place?

The Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard declared in a statement that it is a response to “the recent attacks by the artificial Zionist regime” and it targeted “a center for strategic plotting” referring to an alleged Israeli intelligence base in Erbil. This might be a response to the Israeli targeting of two Iranian commanders in Syria in the recent days. There is indeed no evidence that can prove that there is such Israeli facility in Erbil in the first place to be attacked. The claim has been refuted by the Kurdistan Region and in similar vein, the Government of Iraq has not accepted this claim. The places that were damaged by Iranian missiles are summer houses and high-end civilian residential areas.

The fact is that Israel has targeted Iranian interests deep inside Iran and Syria. Tel Aviv has proved that it has the capacity to acquire -from within Iran- thousands of documents of the country’s nuclear program, it can kill its nuclear scientists and can carry out cyber-attacks against the Iranian sites. In Syria, it too can - with the tacit Russian approval - attack the bases and compounds of Iran and its allies. The

Iranian attacks against the United States and the International Coalition in Iraq have been recently conducted chiefly against local logistic companies providing services to them instead of directly targeting US forces. If the intended Iranian goal was to directly harm a specific country seen by Tehran as enemies and rivals such as Israel or the US, there is no doubt that Erbil is a wrong address. But as it often happens, Iran targets their enemies far from where they actually are.

In fact, the true objectives and motivations behind the attack are more complex and go beyond the Iranian official narrative. We can identify four crucial factors.

The First: The Prospect of Changing Power Balance in the Middle East

The world is now arguably on the verge of another Cold War. The policy to form individual alliances and blocs and the militarization of countries and their foreign policies became a strong pattern of interaction. This trend has also been translated into a rapid change in alliances and militarization of the actors and their policies in the Middle East.

There is a number of examples of significant policy changes and (re-)forming alliances, which might have been accelerated even more following the Russian attack on Ukraine. These dynamics include a closer relationship between Israel and Turkey after 14 years, Turkey’s closer relationship with the UAE and other Gulf countries, the opening of Gulf countries towards Iraq and Syria or normalisation of ties between Israel and Arab states.

These steps pose a challenge and even form obstacles for Iran’s upper hand in Iraq and the Middle East. For example, following the Iraqi elections held in October 2021 Turkey scrambled to conduct four meetings with Sunni and Kurdish leaders, and in the Kurdistan Region, it is trying to open channels with Suleimaniya, where the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan enjoys closer

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ties to Tehran than the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Erbil. The Turkish Consul has visited Suleimaniya several times and it is expected that they will open a Turkish-backed Maarif school there. Moreover, Turkey has strong economic interests in both Kurdistan Region and Iraq as a whole, including a desire to acquire natural gas from Iraq.

It appears the Iranian missile attack on Erbil was a direct message to Kurdistan Region that any deepening of relation between Erbil and Ankara is a red line for Tehran.

It is worth mentioning that the attack came days after Israeli president's Isaac Herzog and Kurdistan Region president's Nechirvan Barzani visits to Turkey. It also occurred after the indirect suspension of Iran-Saudi talks that were expected to resume sometime soon for the fifth round.

Second: Securing More Achievements in the Vienna Talks

Joseph Borrell, the head of EU's Foreign Relations, has stated that the talks in Vienna on Iranian nuclear deal had been suspended "due to foreign factors." It is believed that he referred to Russia's demands that might include protection from any blockage on any future relations that could be formed with Iran. Iranians are aware that the Biden administration is interested in reviving the agreement with Iran, while the same administration has strained relations with both Russia and China. This situation may be the reason why Iran wants to put as much pressure as it can on the US to secure more achievements.

Earlier this month, the US intelligence community published its assessment report for the year 2022, in which it has been stated that Iran remains a direct or indirect threat against the interests of the United States. However, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has stressed that such threats should not derail the talks in Vienna. This can be related to the will of the Biden administration to decrease tensions with Iran.

Washington is facing the threat of China's expansion in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, Europe now fears President Vladimir Putin's further steps following the attack on Ukraine. At the same time, Iran is seen as a destabilizing actor in the Middle East. That is why Washington is at least trying to have peace of mind in the Middle East through rebalancing of power and reaching an accord with Iran. This would help the US to focus more on Russia and China. Additionally, any accord with Iran would help lessen the pressure on the energy market, which is already dealing with its high prices. Iranians are aware of this situation, which is the reason why they are carrying out more direct attacks to bolster their position knowing they have more room to manoeuvre.

Third: The Iraqi Internal Factor aka the Alliance Between Sadr and the KDP

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), for a considerable time, insisted that the Shiite political blocs in Baghdad must internally come to some agreement, and only then to hold negotiations with the Kurds to form the next Iraqi government. To that avail, it even formed an initiative aiming at getting two main Shia rivals to work more closely together – the Sadrist Movement and the Coordination Framework. However, Iranians know that the unusual cross-sectarian trilateral alliance of Shiite Sadrists, Kurdish KDP, and Sunni Arab Muhammad al-Halbusi's Progress Party has solid ground. Consequently, it threatens the position of the main Iranian allies among Iraq Shiite blocs rallied under the Coordination Framework banner.

This solid ground might in the future further strengthen the KDP's position in the Kurdistan Region, especially given the fact that the KDP is still insistent to claim the seat of the Iraqi presidency. If such a scenario comes true, the KDP with the support of its allies of Muqtada al-Sadr and al-Halbusi can resolve some of its outstanding issues, including the budgetary, federal court, and the oil and gas law, with Baghdad. This in return would translate into a



stronger stance for the KDP. Considering Tehran has little interest in such developments on the expense of their main Shia allies the Erbil attack might be related to the formation of the Iraqi government and the Kurdish role in the process.

Fourth: Kurdistan Region's Natural Gas

The fact that one of missiles landed near the house of one of the top Kurdish businessmen in energy sector – KAR Group founder and owner Baz Karim - has led to the suspicion that the attack might also be related to energy. KAR Group was recently awarded a contract to build gas pipeline in Kurdistan Region, potentially threatening Iranian interest as it is among the main suppliers of natural gas to Turkey and Iraq.

Now, more than ever, there is a discussion on the increase in the production of the Kurdistan Region's natural gas. This prospect of tapping into emerging gas supply from Kurdistan Region has even been mentioned by the Turkish president Erdogan. For example, Dana Gas, one of the largest companies that operate in this sector, has announced that it will increase its production of gas to 700 million cubic meters in 2023.

Iraqi Federal Court surprisingly made a long-stalled decision on February 15 deeming independent oil and gas sales from Kurdistan Region unconstitutional. It may also put under scrutiny existing contract between Kurdistan Regional Government and international oil companies.

However, so far little has been done to implement the court ruling on the ground. If this continues to be the case, Kurdistan Region's natural gas will threaten Iranian interests in this sector. This is especially important since Iraq is importing Iranian natural gas to generate electricity at its power plants, and Iran is trying to secure a long-term energy contract with Iraq. If the Kurdistan Region becomes unstable and threatened by further attacks, no doubt there will be fewer development opportunities in this sector as investors may be discouraged.

Conclusion

The last Iranian attack is related to the current war in Ukraine and three respective negotiations: namely the negotiations of the allies in the Middle East, the Vienna negotiations, and the negotiations on the formation of the government in Baghdad. The war in Ukraine has provided Iran with the upper hand. While the world is closely watching the situation in Ukraine, Iran can operate in the Middle East enjoying more freedom.

Moreover, a war against Israel cannot take place on the soil of the Kurdistan Region if the objective is to fight the Israeli state. The Kurdistan Region must request the Iraqi government to officially respond to the attack and must officially try to record this violation at the United Nations. This might not have a direct impact on the ground in terms of preventing further such incidents. However, it could be seen as a solid diplomatic step to outright invalidate the justification for such attacks to be continued in the future.