

Rocket attack on US base in Iraq underlines continued Middle East militarism under Biden

Bill Van Auken
16 February 2021

A rocket attack Monday on the heavily fortified American military base in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, has underlined the continued US intervention in the Middle East under the Democratic administration of President Joe Biden.

The attack, which killed one military contractor, initially identified as a Syrian Kurd, and wounded nine others, including an American soldier, came as the Pentagon is formally evaluating US troop deployments in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken declared Washington “outraged” by the attack. Tehran, meanwhile, angrily refuted allegations that Iran was in any way involved in the rocket strike. A little-known group calling itself Saraya Awliya al-Dam, or Guardians of the Blood Brigade, claimed responsibility for Monday’s attack.

A similar attack on a US base in Iraq last December led to a spiral of US retaliation that included the bombing of Iraqi Shia militia positions and the criminal US drone strike assassination of senior Iranian leader Qassem Suleimani and a top Iraqi militia leader at Baghdad international airport last January.

While in the course of his election campaign, Biden criticized this assassination and promised to “end the forever wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East,” there is no indication of any move toward a de-escalation of American militarism in the region.

In a press conference last Friday, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said that the ongoing review of US deployments was aimed at assuring “that we have a robust enough deterrent capability in the Middle East,” including “both the fixed and the rotational capabilities in the region to deal with the threats that are posed by Iran.”

Officially, Washington has 2,500 troops deployed in Iraq and approximately 900 in Syria, along with 2,500 more in Afghanistan. The real US military footprint is undoubtedly far larger, however. The Pentagon stopped releasing figures on the number of uniformed forces and military contractors

deployed in the three countries in 2017 on the order of the Trump White House. Moreover, other military units are rotated in and out of the war zones on a regular basis.

Meanwhile, as many as 40,000 more troops are deployed across the region at US military bases in Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and other countries. US aircraft carrier strike groups have carried out continuous threatening maneuvers in and near the Persian Gulf, while the Biden administration has continued menacing Iran with the overflight of the region by B-52 Stratofortress heavy bombers.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, who previously commanded the US Central Command, which oversees military operations in the region, is “comfortable” with the current US military presence there, the Pentagon spokesman said last Friday.

While US troops remain in Iraq and Syria under the pretext of preventing any resurgence of ISIS, their real mission is to counter Iranian influence in both countries. In Syria, the Biden administration is continuing the “keep the oil” policy pursued under Trump, with US forces guarding oil fields in Syria’s northeastern governorates of Deir Ezzor and Hasakah.

Damascus has reported that this operation is only expanding, with convoys of vehicles carrying heavy equipment and weapons arriving at a US base near the Omar oil field in Deir Ezzor, and US forces sending 60 armored vehicles along with bulldozers to the far northeast of Hasakah, near the triple

border between Syria, Iraq and Turkey, to build a new base near oil fields. The aim is to deny the energy

resources to the Iranian-backed government of President Bashar al-Assad.

A previously unknown US oil company, Delta Crescent Energy, has signed a contract with the Pentagon’s Syrian Kurdish proxy ground forces to exploit the oil fields. The firm’s principals include an ex-Delta Force operative and

Fox News contributor, and an ex-ambassador and Republican Party operative who called for the execution of Army whistleblower Chelsea Manning. While Pentagon spokesman Kirby insisted that US troops were not “authorized to provide assistance to any...private company,” they were empowered to “protect civilians,” which would presumably include Delta Crescent Energy employees.

During his presidential campaign, Biden pledged to resume Washington’s participation in the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in which Iran accepted a sharp curtailment of its civilian nuclear program in return for the lifting of economic sanctions. The deal was unilaterally abrogated by the Trump administration in 2018, and relations between Washington and Tehran continue to deteriorate as the “maximum pressure” sanctions regime, an economic blockade tantamount to a state of war, remains in place under Biden.

The Biden administration has demanded that Tehran roll back measures that it took in response to the US repudiation of the deal and the failure of the European powers to counter Washington’s sanctions—increasing its uranium enrichment levels to 20 percent as well as its uranium stockpiles—before the US will lift sanctions and return to the agreement. In addition, administration officials have indicated that Washington intends to demand additional sweeping concessions from Iran, including that it scrap its ballistic missile program and cede its influence in the Middle East in the interests of US hegemony.

Last week, Iran’s foreign minister, Javad Zarif, warned that by the end of February Tehran would halt snap inspections of nuclear sites by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to exert further pressure for the lifting of sanctions that are causing poverty, hunger and preventable deaths among the Iranian population. Zarif also denounced US demands for Iran to return to “full compliance,” writing in a tweet: “US ceased participation in May 2018, violated JCPOA & punished those complying with UN resolution. As of today, US remains in EXACTLY same position. Before spouting off, COMPLY.”

In a speech delivered Monday to the Middle East Institute, the chief of the Pentagon’s Central Command, Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, cast the US intervention in the Middle East and its confrontation with Iran as an essential battle in the strategic confrontation between US imperialism and its “great power” rivals, Russia and, particularly, China.

“The United States faces increasing competition in the region from Russia and China both vying for power and influence through a combination of diplomatic, military and economic means,” he said in a virtual appearance. He went on to charge that Moscow and Beijing had “exploited an ongoing regional crisis; financial infrastructure needs;

perception of declining US engagement; and opportunities created by COVID-19 to advance their objectives across the Middle East and central and southern Asian nations to gain or strengthen footholds in the region.”

He acknowledged that China represented the principal strategic threat. In the past several years, it has emerged as the number-one trading partner for the bulk of the countries in the Persian Gulf region, including both Iran and Iraq, as well as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration is also signaling that US forces will almost certainly remain in Afghanistan after nearly 20 years of war and in violation of a peace agreement signed between Washington and the Taliban last year.

While the Taliban has complied with its pledge to stop all attacks with US and NATO forces in Afghanistan—not a single American soldier has been killed in the country over the past year—its fighters are continuing to overwhelm the forces of the US puppet government in Kabul, overrunning military bases, seizing arms and munitions, and encircling major provincial capitals.

Under the US-Taliban agreement, all US and other foreign forces are required to leave Afghanistan by May 1. There are increasing warnings from within the US military and intelligence apparatus that a full US withdrawal will spell an ignominious collapse of the US puppet regime. According to the *New York Times*, Biden fears the political repercussions of scenes like those in Vietnam, when the last US personnel were forced to evacuate by helicopter from the roof of the Saigon embassy.

Defense Secretary Austin is to meet with NATO ministers on Wednesday and Thursday for talks in which the decision on Afghanistan will be at the top of the agenda. There are currently some 7,000 NATO troops deployed in the country.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, undoubtedly foreshadowing Washington’s decision, declared Monday that NATO will not leave Afghanistan “before the time is right.”

The Taliban has warned that if the US does not comply with the terms of the peace deal and withdraw American forces, it will renew its attacks. In response, American commanders have requested that the Pentagon provide more troops and additional airpower for the continuation of the longest war in US history.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact