Rocket attack on base in Iraq raises threat of US escalation

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A rocket attack on the sprawling Ain al-Asad air base in Iraq's western province of Anbar early Wednesday has heightened the threat of a further escalation of US military aggression in the country and the wider region.

The 10 rockets that fell on the base, which houses US and other NATO troops, claimed no casualties, but one US civilian contractor died of a heart attack while sheltering during the assault. Iraqi security officials said little damage was inflicted on the base, while witnesses told local media they had seen flames and a long plume of black smoke.

Raising the prospect of another round of US military action, President Joe Biden told reporters, "We are following that through right now... we're identifying who's responsible and we'll make judgments."

The rocket attack follows last week's US air strikes against facilities near the Iraqi border used by Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia militias in Syria. Those strikes, the first military action ordered by the new Democratic president, were initially reported to have killed 17 people, while later reports said that just one person died.

While there was widespread speculation that the rockets fired on Ain al-Asad were in retaliation for the US strike in Syria, as of Wednesday evening no group had claimed responsibility. The area surrounding the base is overwhelmingly Sunni and not under the control of the predominantly Shia Hashed al-Shaabi, or Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an official arm of Iraq's military, which the US military attacked last week in Syria.

The US claimed that last week's air strikes were in retaliation for a February 15 rocket attack on a US base in Iraqi Kurdistan's capital Erbil, which killed a single military contractor from the Philippines. That attack, however, was claimed by a little known group, while it was disavowed and condemned by the PMF.

There are no doubt many forces with motives for attacking the US military in Iraq, where the American intervention that began in 2003 led to an estimated one million deaths.

Anger against the continuing US occupation—officially numbered at 2,500 troops—soared in January of last year after President Donald Trump ordered the drone missile assassination of Gen. Qassem Suleimani, considered the second most powerful figure in Iran, after he arrived on an official state visit at Baghdad's international airport. Also killed in the drone strike was Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the de facto leader of the PMF militias, along with several aides to both men. Following this drone massacre there were massive protests, and the Iraqi parliament voted for a resolution demanding the immediate withdrawal of all US and other foreign forces from Iraq.

The possibility cannot be discounted that remnants of the Islamic State (ISIS) are staging missile attacks against US bases, including with the potential motive of provoking US retaliatory attacks.

In any case, the Biden administration is pursuing its own ends in resuming US military violence in the region. Last week's US air raid represented the first American attack inside Syria since December 2019, on the eve of the January 3 Suleimani assassination.

Following that assassination, Iran staged a limited retaliation, firing missiles into the same Ain al-Asad air base that was hit by rockets on Wednesday. While no US troops were killed in the 2020 missile strike, it was later reported that more than 100 soldiers suffered concussive brain injuries. The Trump administration decided not to take any military action in response to the Iranian attack.

The unilateral US air strikes last week in Syria,

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carried out in violation of international law and with no congressional authorization, represented a dangerous escalation of US militarism, with the potential of triggering a catastrophic new war in the Middle East and beyond.

The US action was aimed in large measure against Iran. The Biden administration claims it is seeking to rejoin the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the 2015 nuclear deal struck between Iran and the major powers, which was unilaterally abrogated by Trump. Yet it has taken a hard line against Tehran, insisting that it will not rejoin the agreement until Iran reverses the increases in uranium enrichment it carried out in protest over both Washington's ripping up of the accord and the European powers' refusal to challenge the draconian sanctions imposed under the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign.

This sanctions regime, which has killed many thousands of Iranians, including from the coronavirus pandemic, remains in place under the Biden administration. Meanwhile, Washington has indicated it will demand a re-negotiation of the JCPOA to include tight restrictions on Iran's conventional ballistic missile program as well as a rollback of Iranian influence throughout the Middle East, thereby firmly subordinating the country to the drive for US hegemony in the region.

More broadly, the attack on Syria signaled the Biden administration's pursuit of more aggressive US imperialist policy globally, escalating the interventions and provocations carried out under Trump from the Persian Gulf to Eastern Europe, the South China Sea and beyond.

On Monday, the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) delivered a report to Congress calling for additional spending of roughly $27 billion between 2022 and 2027 in preparation for a "great power" confrontation with China. The report calls for "new missiles and air defenses, radar systems, staging areas, intelligence-sharing centers, supply depots and testing ranges throughout the region," *DefenseNews* reported.

An unclassified executive summary obtained by the military website quoted Adm. Philip Davidson, the commander of INDOPACOM, telling Congress that the proposal provides "several flexible deterrent options including full [operational plan] execution if deterrence should fail." By "full execution," the admiral is undoubtedly referring to nuclear war.

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