

Iran's attack on Irbil confirms widening of US/Russia conflict to the Middle East

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As the war between Russia and Ukraine spirals out of control, with a Russian missile strike on a military training base just 15 miles from the Polish border with Poland, a NATO ally, geo-political fault lines in the Middle East threaten to open another front and destabilise the entire region.

On Sunday morning, Iran launched a dozen ballistic missiles that landed near the new US consulate compound eight miles north of the northern Iraqi city of Irbil, capital of the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The attack resulted in minor damage to the nearby satellite broadcasting channel Kurdistan24 but no casualties, although an Iranian official claimed that two Israeli officials had been killed. Israel has refused to comment on the attack.

Iran's attack on Irbil marks a significant escalation in the ongoing tensions between Tehran and Israel, and by extension the US. It follows years of covert warfare between the two countries both in Iran, where Israel has carried out assassinations, blown up installations, launched cyber-attacks on vital Iranian computer systems, including nuclear facilities, and attacked sea-going vessels, and in Syria, where Israel has attacked Lebanese Shia Hezbollah fighters, their weapons dumps and Iranian-linked facilities.

It was initially thought that the target in Irbil was the American compound, where US forces provide air and other military and intelligence support for its puppet regime in Baghdad. Once complete, the compound will be one of the largest US diplomatic compounds in the world.

The relocation to the KRG follows Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi's demand that they leave the al-Asad airbase and other bases where US troops were stationed. He demanded this in the aftermath of the US assassination of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander General Qassem Suleimani in January 2020 that led to several attacks on US forces and facilities in

Iraq.

However, Washington has insisted the missiles were not aimed at its compound. Tehran said the attack was in retaliation for an Israeli strike on an Iranian base near the Syrian capital of Damascus. That attack on March 7 killed four people, including two members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), who play a key role in supporting the Lebanese Shia Hezbollah fighters with military expertise and supplies.

The Revolutionary Guards pledged to "make the Zionist regime pay for this crime." The IRGC said the attack was a warning to the US and Israel and was aimed at "the strategic center of the Zionist conspiracies in Erbil." A foreign ministry spokesperson said Iran had warned the Iraqi authorities on numerous occasions that its territory should not be used by third parties to conduct attacks against Iran.

Lebanese television station *Al Mayadeen*, which is close to Hezbollah and Iran, said that an Israeli drone attack in mid-February had been launched from Iraqi Kurdistan, causing substantial damage. The *Middle East Eye* reported that Iranian and Iraqi officials had said the Iranian strike was a response to a previous Israeli attack that targeted an Iranian drone factory in the city of Tabriz, one of Iran's most important airbases hosting an army aviation headquarters, F-5 squadrons and a radar station. Tabriz had witnessed two explosions since the beginning of February. *Sabereen News*, an Iraqi news outlet affiliated with an Iranian-backed network of Shiite militias, claimed the target was two secret Israeli intelligence bases in Irbil, with Iranian state television saying the targets were "under the supervision of the Zionist regime in Irbil."

That the KRG hosts a secret Israeli base in Irbil is an open secret. Israel's relations with Iraq's Kurds go back decades when it supported their rebellion against Baghdad in the 1960s. Under its Periphery Doctrine, it has long

viewed the Kurds, who live in Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria, as a source of vital intelligence and a counterweight to its regional adversaries.

Seymour Hersh, writing in the *New Yorker* in 2004, cited CIA and military sources claiming that Israeli military and intelligence operatives, including members of Mossad, were providing training for Kurdish commando units and running covert operations, working as businessmen, inside Kurdish areas of Iran and Syria.

It was Israel's support for the KRG, whom President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accuses of supporting Turkey's Kurdish separatists, that led to Tel Aviv's increasingly hostile relations with Ankara, as it gave "humanitarian aid" to Syria's Kurds, claiming they faced possible "ethnic cleansing" by Turkey and its armed proxies in Syria.

In 2015, it was reported that Israel was importing as much as three-quarters of its oil from the KRG in Iraq, helping to finance Peshmerga soldiers fighting the Islamic State group. In September 2017, Israel was the only country to publicly endorse the KRG's independence referendum staged by KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani. Last year, Iranian media reported that Iran had launched drones and missiles near the Irbil airport, wounding Mossad agents.

That Sunday's strikes near Irbil caused little material damage suggests that they were meant as a signal to Washington and Tel Aviv that Tehran would not tolerate attacks on its forces in Syria. Neither would it tolerate Moscow's collusion with Israel over its airstrikes.

Iran's attack on Irbil takes place amid the stalling last week of the months-long talks in Vienna, aimed at restarting the 2015 nuclear accords the Trump administration unilaterally abandoned in 2018. Washington has rejected demands on March 5 from Russia, one of the signatories to the deal, for written guarantees that if Tehran signed the nuclear deal, Russian trade, investment and military-technical cooperation with Iran would be able to continue despite sanctions over its invasion of Ukraine. Russian "interference" in the final stages of talks has drawn criticism from Tehran as "not constructive."

Iran had abstained in the UN General Assembly vote condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which was supported by 141 countries, amid calls for Tehran to refrain from supporting Russia and show that it was not dependent upon Moscow. This has become a key political issue in Iran under conditions where Russia has repeatedly allowed Israel to attack Iranian and Hezbollah

targets in Syria.

With oil and gas prices soaring following the war in Ukraine and US/NATO powers sanctions on Russian energy sectors, the prospect of relief from sanctions and re-entry into the world's energy markets is an opportunity not to be missed by Iran's bourgeois clerical regime.

Iran reportedly has 80 million barrels of oil stored in tankers and other Asian countries available for sale. This, plus its ability to produce a further 1.2 million barrels a day, would increase world supplies, lower oil prices and bring much needed revenue to Tehran. It could also provide new sources of investment from international corporations that have had to pull out of Russia.

Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian is set to visit Russia today, after France, Britain, and Germany warned that the talks might collapse because of Russia's demands.

Further ramping up tensions, Iran has suspended talks with Saudi Arabia, Washington's other main ally in the region, due to restart this week. It follows Tehran's condemnation of Riyadh's executions of 81 activists, the biggest mass execution in decades. Those killed included 41 Shia Muslims from the impoverished oil producing eastern Qatif region, who the Saudi monarchy accuses of loyalty to Iran.

The two countries are involved in open conflicts, having backed opposing sides in regional wars and political conflicts in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq for years, while Saudi Arabia has headed an Arab coalition waging war against the Houthi movement it claims toppled Riyadh's hated puppet in Yemen, President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, with Iranian support, since 2015.



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