

Anger erupts in Iraq over US drone strike in Baghdad

Peter Symonds
11 February 2024

The US carried out a blatantly illegal drone strike in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad late last Wednesday, killing two members of the Kata'ib Hezbollah militia and provoking angry protests in the city's streets. Identification cards found nearby reportedly identified them as Arkan al-Elayawi and Abu Baqir al-Saedi.

The Special Operations drone strike was part of the ongoing US retaliation for the deaths of three American soldiers in an attack on a US military base in Jordan. The Pentagon claimed that al-Saedi was responsible for directing Kata'ib Hezbollah operations, including the strike in Jordan.

Like the first round of strikes in Iraq and Syria the previous Friday, the US military has offered no evidence for any of its claims. Rather, Washington has arrogated to itself the right to carry out murderous attacks across the Middle East, deliberately inflaming tensions and widening the war already underway as a consequence of Israel's genocide in Gaza.

Sky News reported that people rapidly surrounded the burning vehicle, chanting anti-American slogans. Witnesses told reporters there was a lot of anger over the blatant disregard by the Americans for civilian lives. The US admitted to carrying out a "unilateral attack" that destroyed a car in a busy civilian street in the east of the capital.

"America needs to be investigated for breaching international law," one man told Sky News.

"How are they able to attack another country and kill people with immunity?"

Within hours of the strike, crowds gathered at the entrance to the heavily-fortified Green Zone in Baghdad to protest against the killings. Demonstrators chanted "Death to America" and "America, get out of our land," as large numbers of heavily-protected riot police blocked the entrance.

The Green Zone, built in the aftermath of the criminal

US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, contains the huge American embassy and associated infrastructure which directed the US military occupation of the country that resulted in an estimated million civilian deaths.

The day after the attack, Iraqi military spokesman Yehia Rasool denounced the strike as "a blatant assassination" that showed "no regard for civilian lives or international laws."

Rasool warned: "The trajectory compels the Iraqi government more than ever to terminate the mission of this [US-led] coalition, which has become a factor for instability and threatens to entangle Iraq in the cycle of conflict."

The US has around 2,500 troops in Iraq on the pretext of combatting remnants of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fighters. Another 900 American troops occupy parts of Syria without even the pretence of authorisation by the Syrian government.

The office of Iraqi Prime Minister Mohamed Shia al-Sudani also suggested that US troops and others from the US-led coalition against ISIS should leave Iraq. A social media post "highlighted Iraq's enhanced capabilities in combating terrorism, leading to the decision to end the coalition's mission as ISIS terrorist remnants no longer pose a threat to Iraq."

Major General Tahsin al-Khafaji, a spokesman for Iraq's security services, branded the strike as "an aggression" that "violated Iraqi sovereignty and risked dangerous repercussions in the region."

The Iraqi government's response highlights the deeply destabilising impact of the Israeli regime's barbaric war against the Palestinians, backed by the US and all the imperialist powers, and the wider regional war that the US and Israel are opening up. While US and Israeli strikes have to date been restricted to Iranian-backed militia groups in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, Iran itself is the chief target.

The government in Baghdad formed in October 2022 is a highly unstable amalgam of Shiite parties aligned to a greater or lesser extent with Tehran, along with Sunni and Kurdish parties. Prime Minister al-Sudani was nominated by the Iran-backed Shia Coordination Framework, the largest bloc of legislators in the country's parliament.

The government, however, faces opposition from a bloc led by populist Shiite leader and cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr, which won the largest number of parliamentary seats in the 2021 national elections. The Sadrist, who demand the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Iraq, including US troops and Iran-back militia, refused to join the current government.

The US strikes will further inflame popular opposition to the American military presence in the country, adding to the political volatility.

Reporters for US-based PBS travelled to western Iraq last week where the US military had hit several towns as part of its retaliatory strikes on February 2, provoking angry reactions from local people. On that day, nuclear-capable B-1B bombers delivered over 125 munitions on 85 targets in seven locations throughout Iraq and Syria.

The town of Akashat, located near the Syrian border, was heavily hit by American airstrikes. Largely abandoned after the fighting with ISIS, it is under the control of the 13th Brigade of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an umbrella group of paramilitary forces formed to fight ISIS and is now officially part of Iraq's security forces.

Eyewitnesses told PBS that the first missile hit the military hospital, killing the five people inside and wrecking the ambulance. In all, 17 PMF members were killed.

PMF commander Qasem Musleh flatly denied involvement with any of the militia groups operating as Islamic Resistance in Iraq that have attacked US forces. "I hope that the United States will reveal one piece of evidence that there is support to the resistance factions. There was no leadership here, as they claimed, or people with ties to foreign countries, or who took part in strikes on coalition forces."

In the town of al-Qaim, where a Kata'ib Hezbollah base is located, PBS spoke to Anmar Al-Rawi, whose brother was killed by a US missile strike on the family home. "Of course, their [the US] strike was a reaction to the attack on them, but their response fell on the civilians, not on the militaries. Not one from Kata'ib Hezbollah was killed. They knew there was ammunition in the base and that civilians would be affected."

A local tribal leader, Sheik Ragheb Al-Karbouli, warned that hostilities could lead to "an unpredictable regional war." Asked what would prevent such a conflict, he bluntly declared: "The solution to the solution is the Palestinian issue. An independent Palestinian state with full sovereignty will give an opportunity for security and peace in the entire region."

Neither Israel nor the US and its allies has the slightest intention of creating an independent Palestinian state or resolving the oppression of the Palestinian people. Rather, the Israeli military is poised to escalate its barbaric war with an onslaught on Rafah where a million refugees from other parts of Gaza are gathered in atrocious conditions.

US claims that it is seeking to avoid a wider regional war, endlessly repeated, are a lie. The Israeli war on the Palestinians is adding fuel to wider conflicts underway throughout the Middle East as the US and Israel intensify their strikes in the region.

- On Saturday, an Israeli drone strike hit a car near Lebanon's southern port city of Sidon, killing at least two people and wounding two others. The attack was one of the deepest inside Lebanon, where Israel has carried out numerous strikes in an undeclared war with Iranian-backed Hezbollah militia. The target appears to have been Hamas official Basel Saleh, reportedly responsible for recruiting Hamas fighters in Gaza and the West Bank.

- The Israeli military carried out airstrikes on several sites on the outskirts of the Syrian capital Damascus on Saturday. The British-based war monitor, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said one of the strikes hit a residential building west of the capital, killing three people. The observatory said it was the 10th Israeli strike on Syrian territory since the beginning of the year.

- The US has been engaged in new military exchanges with Houthi militia in Yemen. The US Central Command announced on Saturday that US warships had destroyed two mobile unmanned surface vessels, four anti-ship cruise missiles and one cruise missile that were threatening ships in the Red Sea. In addition, the US and Britain conducted several airstrikes on Houthi-held areas across Yemen, including the capital of Sanaa.



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