

Iranian Proxies Escalate Against U.S. in Iraq

Overwatch Crisis Brief Podcast Transcript



Featuring Nicholas Harris, Katherine Lawlor, and Brandon Wallace

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Crisis Brief is a special edition of the Overwatch podcast series intended to provide timely updates on unfolding national security crises. Iran's proxies are again escalating against U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq. Kata'ib Hezbollah fired rockets at a U.S. base in Taji, north of Baghdad, on March 11, triggering an immediate U.S. reprisal. Today, another rocket attack targeted the Taji base. In this Overwatch Crisis Brief recorded on March 13, ISW's Iraq experts Nicholas Heras, Katherine Lawlor, and Brandon Wallace discuss the implications for the U.S.-led coalition's relationship with Iraqi security forces and the increasing cooperation between Iran's proxy groups.

Nicholas Harris:

Hello, everyone. Thank you for joining us today for this special Iraq crisis discussion. My name is Nicholas Harris and I am the Middle East portfolio manager at the Institute for the Study of War. I'm joined today by our Iraq team analysts, Katherine Lawlor and Brandon Wallace.

Since the January 3rd U.S. strike near Baghdad that killed Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, and the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Unit's Deputy Commander, and well-known Iranian proxy leader, Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis, Iran, through its Iraqi proxy groups, has not stopped escalating this response against the U.S.

Iran and the Iraqi groups that it supports have taken the intervening two months since Qassem Soleimani's death to take stock, to organize, and to test the U.S. and Iraq. Over the last 72 hours, there's been a spike in Iran's escalation against the U.S. Most notably, on March 11th, a rocket attack was carried out by Iranian proxy group Kata'ib Hezbollah against Camp Taji, an Iraqi military installation near Baghdad that houses U.S. and coalition forces. The attack killed three U.S. led coalition personnel, including two U.S. service members, and one from the U.K., and wounded 14 other coalition personnel.

Katherine, what has happened over the last 72 hours exactly? And what is the threat that these Iranian backed groups represent to the U.S. led coalition and its mission in Iraq?

Katherine Lawlor:

Thanks, Nick. So as you mentioned, March 11th, which actually would have been the birthday of Qassem Soleimani, saw an Iranian escalation against U.S. forces at Camp Taji, which is about 30 kilometers north of Baghdad.

This latest attack killed an American soldier, an American contractor, and a British soldier. The last time an Iranian proxy group killed an American, the U.S. killed Iran's top general. This time, President Trump delegated the response for this attack to Defense Secretary Mark Esper, who worked with U.S. Central Command Commander General McKenzie to conduct a proportional retaliation.

The retaliatory U.S. strike destroyed five Kata'ib Hezbollah weapon's facilities. The strike killed 11 members of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces. Likely all members of Kata'ib Hezbollah, which we'll call KH. The strike also killed one civilian cook near a KH construction site at the Karbala Airport.

The strike also killed non-militia members of the Iraqi security forces. Three soldiers in the 19th Iraqi Army Division, and two soldiers in the 3rd Babil Emergency Police Regiment. In its press release, the Iraqi Joint Operations Command said that such strikes are not part of a partnership, and do not respect the sovereignty of Iraq.

And after the U.S. strike that killed Soleimani and Muhandis, who was an official in Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces, the Iraqi Parliament passed a nonbinding resolution expelling U.S. forces from Iraq, and all foreign forces from Iraq. Even though that resolution was not legally binding, and the U.S. presence in Iraq is based on an executive level agreement with Iraq's Prime Minister, it was a blow to the coalition's ability to continue training its Iraqi partners.

The deaths of non-militia members of the Iraqi security forces will likely negatively impact the U.S. led coalition's relationship with the Iraqi security forces and with the Iraqi government. They may further degrade popular and political support for U.S. presence in the country. And because of the proportional nature of the response, these strikes may not deter further Iranian and proxy escalation against U.S. forces.

Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, another Iranian proxy designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S., has already vowed to retaliate against the U.S. retaliation with quote, "an eye for an eye." And the January U.S. decapitation strike that killed two leaders of the proxy network, Soleimani and Muhandis, is having continuing implications for the proxy network. It's extraordinarily difficult for them to operate in an exposed manner. They can't draw too much attention to themselves in their operations or they risk further decapitation strikes. So they have to take the time to recover and reconstitute their leadership.

KH appears to have been successful here, in that it got away with the March 11th strike without suffering another devastating leadership loss, or a fatal blow to its organization. So, in summary, Iran's proxy groups will still pursue Iran's objective, which is the removal of U.S. forces from Iraq. They simply have to take a more cautious approach to operations. They'll continue using rocket attacks and targeting of U.S. facilities, while simultaneously pursuing their nonkinetic political campaign. Meaning that they'll continue shaping the next Iraqi government so that it's more amenable to Iranian objectives, including that removal of U.S. forces from Iraq.

In this situation, the benefits of this strike for KH outweigh its costs. Because the U.S. waited 24 hours, KH had the opportunity to conceal its highest value assets, including leaders and weapons. The men it lost were likely not key to the organization's continued success. And because the U.S. retaliatory strike killed members of the Iraqi army and federal police, and not just Iranian proxy militia members, this cycle of escalation likely drove another wedge between the United States and the Iraqi government.

However, this response may have the effect of forcing non-militia members of the Iraqi security forces to think twice before co-locating or cooperating with members of KH or other Iranian proxy groups. If KH is going to keep killing Americans and, you, as a member of the Iraqi security forces are going to keep being near them, you will risk being caught in the crossfire.

Nicholas Harris:

Thank you very much Katherine. Brandon, I'd like to broaden the aperture a bit, and ask you how have Iran-backed groups in Iraq kept up their pressure campaign against the U.S. since the January 3rd strike that killed Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mehdi al- Muhandis? And how does this fit into Iran's strategy to escalate against the U.S. in Iraq?

Brandon Wallace:

Thank you Nick. So first, following the U.S. strike against Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis, Iran itself did respond. The Iranian IRGC launched a ballistic missile attack on some U.S. facilities. However, they caused no casualties.

The way that Iran escalates against the U.S. and Iraq is through its proxy network. The proxy militias through which Iran acts are almost exclusively U.S. designated terrorist groups. For example, Kata'ib Hezbollah. And these groups target personnel, facilities, allies, and interests, and they've done so for many months.

Iran, itself, has been escalating, as you have written, and others have written, since at least May of last year. And Iranian proxy networks haven't stopped escalating against the U.S. In fact they've organized things, like an anti-U.S. march in Baghdad earlier this year. And this most recent strike was actually the tenth that we've recorded since the death of Qassem Soleimani inside of Iraq.

Most of those have been fairly low level. Only one of which caused an injury, that being a rocket attack against the U.S. Embassy cafeteria in January. But as Kat mentioned, it's important to remember here that Soleimani and Muhandis both helped to oversee the Iraqi proxy project, and it was a large hit for them, for both of them to be taken out.

That has implications, meaning that they have to recover and reconstitute. After the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis, Iran's proxy groups inside of Iraq, which often fight between one another over resources came together and began working cooperatively. They've used different names to describe the cooperation, one of which is the Iraqi Resistance Front.

Since the last month or so, they've stopped referring to themselves as the Iraqi Resistance Front. But that doesn't mean that they've stopped cooperating or coordinating. These groups will continue to pursue Iran's and their shared objective, which is the removal of U.S. forces from Iraq.

One of these groups which we've mentioned several times, Kata'ib Hezbollah, has set a deadline of March 15th for all Iraqi security forces, companies, and individuals to stop working with the United States. And we expect more attacks of similar size and variety in the coming months, particularly around that deadline.

In sum, the objectives haven't changed, and they'll keep doing what they are doing, because what they seek is the end of the U.S. presence and influence in Iraq.

Nicholas Harris:

Thank you very much Brandon. As we can see, the U.S. and Iran will continue to be involved in a cycle of escalation in Iraq, as Iraq is a primary theater for Iran to challenge the United States in the broader Middle East. Thank you, Katherine, and thank you, Brandon, for an excellent discussion and analysis. And thank you to our audience, for listening to us today.