



Iranian Proxies Likely Fire Rockets at Green Zone in Baghdad, Saturday, February 11, 2017

By Patrick Martin

Unidentified gunmen fired rockets at the Green Zone during a large Sadrist demonstration in Tahrir Square in eastern Baghdad.

- The [rockets](#) came from the areas of Baladiyat and Filistin Street in predominantly Shi'a eastern Baghdad, according to the Joint Operations Command.
- No group has claimed responsibility for the rocket attack.
- The rockets struck the Green Zone either as or slightly after protesters attempted to cross bridges towards the Green Zone. Security forces [fired](#) live ammunition and tear gas at demonstrators, killing at least four and wounding at least 320. Sadrist Trend leader Muqtada al-Sadr ordered his followers to peacefully withdraw and [denounced](#) any effort by demonstrators or anyone else to use violence to destabilize Baghdad.

Rocket attacks against the Green Zone are a historical attack pattern by Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a militias against the U.S.

- Iranian-backed militias frequently fired rockets at the Green Zone targeting the U.S. Embassy compound before U.S. forces withdrew in December 2011. The U.S. and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) launched a major operation in April 2008 into Sadr City in northeastern Baghdad in part to stop rocket and mortar attacks against the Green Zone.

The rocket attack breaks from the behavioral pattern of Iranian proxy militias, which have not launched indirect fire at U.S. forces or the Green Zone since at least June 2014.

- There has been only one indirect fire (IDF) incident in the Green Zone since ISIS captured Mosul in June 2014. Three [mortar shells](#) landed less than one mile from the Green Zone in May 2016 after the Iraqi government announced operations to clear Fallujah. No group claimed the attack.
- The organization and disposition of the Sadrist demonstration, as well as Sadr's reaction, strongly suggest that Sadrists did not fire the rockets. ISW hypothesizes but cannot assess that an Iranian-backed proxy group, such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) or Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) could be responsible.
- The attack follows changes in U.S. policy toward Iran, including a [warning](#) by U.S. National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, a stricter interpretation of pre-existing [sanctions](#), and leaks that the State Department might designate Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as a [Foreign Terrorist Organization](#).

- The attack also follows threats by Iranian proxy militias to [target the U.S. in Iraq](#) and a warning by Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah [Khamenei](#) that the U.S. would see a response, albeit on February 10, the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, celebrations of which were typical rather than violent.

This incident marks an escalation in Iraq between the U.S. and Iran, if an Iranian proxy group did conduct the attack as hypothesized. ISW had [forecasted](#) on January 26, 2017 that Iran was changing its posture in Iraq. Iran is likely warning the U.S. that it has the capacity and will to escalate violence in Iraq, where it is best positioned to target U.S. interests and personnel should the U.S. continue to pressure it. Iran may deploy lethal force through its proxies against the U.S. Embassy in the Green Zone, U.S. advisers at multiple bases, and U.S. contractors.

More information and analysis to follow.