
Erbil missile attack: A repeated policy and continued attack

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It is believed that the missiles were launched from the provinces of Kermanshah and Western Azerbaijan. The attacks, except for targeting several summer houses and causing civilian damage, did not hit any other targets. The Iranian media described the missiles as 122 mm grad, and some sources from the Kurdistan Region [of Iraq] believe it is Fatih 110 – the latter were previously used. What are the reasons behind the attack? and what should the Kurdistan Region do?

Why did this attack happen?

the Islamic Revolutionary Guard said in a statement “the recent attacks by the artificial Zionist regime” and “the previous statement about the response”, “a center for strategic plotting” had been attacked. This might be a reference to two Iranian commanders who were targeted in Syria in recent days. There is indeed no evidence that can prove there is an Israeli research center in Erbil [in the first place], for it to be attacked. The claim has been refuted by the Kurdistan Region and the Government of Iraq has not accepted this claim. The places that were damaged are summer houses of people and civilian areas.

The fact is Israel has targeted Iranian [interests] deep inside Iran and Syria to a greater extent, than it has from places such as the Kurdistan Region. Tel Aviv has proved that it has the capacity to steal -from within Iran- thousands of documents of the country's atomic program, it can kill atomic scientists and can carry out cyber-attacks against Iranian sites. In Syria, too, it can -with the Russian approval – it can attack the bases and compounds of Iran and its allies. The Iranian attacks against the United States and the International Coalition are more targeted against logistic companies – instead of direct attack against the US. If the target of the attacks is designed to attack countries [like the US] – seen by Iran as their enemies and rivals – there is no doubt Erbil is the wrong address. But as usual, Iran fights its enemies far from where they are!

In fact, the objectives of the attacks are not the stated ones. We can identify some of the original reasons:

One: the possibility for the change of the balance of power in the Middle East

The world now in practice is on the verge of the revival of another cold war. The policy to form alliances and the militarization of countries is fast developing. This fact has been translated into a rapid change in the alliances and militarization of the actors in the Middle East.

A closer relationship between Israel and Turkey – after 14 years, and Turkey's closer relationship with the UAE and other Gulf countries; in line with such developments, the Arab-Israeli peace, the opening of Gulf countries towards Iraq and Syria, are examples of big policy changes of forming alliances that following the Russian attack on Ukraine might have accelerated even more. These are steps that might practically form obstacles for Iran's upper hand in Iraq and the Middle East. For example, Turkey -after the elections [in Iraq], it has had four meetings with Sunni and Kurdish leaders, and in the Kurdistan Region, it is trying to open channels with Suleimani. The Turkish Consul has visited Suleimani several times and it is expected they open [Turkish-backed] Maarif school there. This is in addition to Turkey's interest in the market of the Kurdistan Region and Iraq -including the natural gas. It is with attacks like Iran wants to send the message that any closer relation between the Kurdistan Region and Turkey is a red line [for Iran].

It is worth mentioning that the attack comes days after Israel's president's visit to Turkey and the visit by Kurdistan Region's president to that country. It is also after the indirect suspension of Iran-Saudi Arabia talks that were expected to resume sometime soon for the fifth round.

Second: securing more achievements in the Vienna talks

Joseph Borrell, the head of EU's Foreign Relations, has stated that the talks [in Vienna] had been suspended "due to foreign factors." It is believed he meant Russia's demand that might have asked for protection from any blockage on any future relations it could form with Iran.

Iranians know that the Biden administration, while it has strained relations with both Russia and China, is interested in reviving the agreement with Iran; that is why Iran wants to put as much as pressure on the US to secure more achievements.

Earlier this month, the US intelligence community published its assessment for the year 2022 in which it stated that Iran remains a direct or indirect threat against the interests of the United States. However, Antony Blinken has requested that such threats should not derail the talks in Vienna. This might be because of the will of the Biden administration to decrease tensions with Iran.

Washington is now faced with the threat of China expansion in the Indo Pacific. In Europe, it is living with the phobia of President Vladimir Putin and has Iran as a problem in the Middle East. It is why Washington is at least trying to have peace of mind in the Middle East – through rebalancing of power and an accord with Iran. This would help the US to focus on Russia and China. Additionally, any accord with Iran would help lessen the pressure on the energy market –already dealing with high prices. Iranians know this, and that is why they are claiming more direct attacks.

Third: the alliance between Sadr and the KDP

Even though the Kurdistan Democratic Party for a considerable time insisted the Shiites have to internally come to some agreement, and only then to hold negotiations with the Kurds – it even formed an initiative aimed to have Sadr Movement and the Coordination Framework form closer relations, but Iranians know that the trilateral alliance of Sadr, Barzani and Halbusi has a solid ground. This solid ground might in the future further strengthen the [Kurdish] party in the Kurdistan Region – especially since the KDP is still insistent to claim the seat of the Iraqi presidency. If such a scenario materializes, the KDP with the support of its allies of Sadr and Halbusi can resolve some of its [outstanding] issues with Baghdad; the most important issues are the budget, the federal court, and the oil and gas law. This in return would translate into a stronger stance for the KDP. That is why the Erbil attack might be related to the formation of the [Iraqi] government and the Kurdish stakes.

Fourth: Kurdistan Region's natural gas

The landing of missiles near the house of a businessman of the energy sector of the Kurdistan Region have led to the suspicion that the attack might also be related to the energy market. Now – more than ever – there is discussion about the increase of the Kurdistan Region's natural gas. This aspect is even mentioned by the president of Turkey. Dana Gas, one of the important companies that operate in this sector, has announced that it will increase its production to 700 million cubic meters in 2023. If such plans go ahead, it means that the decree of the Federal Court will not be followed on the ground – the natural gas of the Kurdistan Region can create obstacles for the Iranian natural gas. This is especially important since Iraq is buying Iranian natural gas to generate electricity at its power plants, and Iran is trying to secure a long-term energy contract with Iraq. If the Kurdistan Region becomes unstable, no doubt there will be less opportunity for developing this sector.

Conclusion

The Iranian attack this time is related to war and three negotiations. The negotiations of the allies in the Middle East, the Vienna negotiations and the negotiations on the formation of the government in Baghdad. The war in Ukraine has provided Iran with the upper hand; while the world is closely watching the situation in Ukraine, it can operate here [in the Middle East] at wish. A war against Israel cannot be done on the soil of the Kurdistan Region – if the objective is to fight the Israeli state. The Kurdistan Region must request the Iraqi government to officially respond to the attack and must officially try to record this [violation] at the United Nation. This might not have a direct impact on the ground – [powerful] forces on the ground might be able to do just that – but it could be seen yet as a step -a worthy step- to invalidate the justification for such attacks to continue.