

Rocket and Drone Attacks against U.S. Air Base. Iraqi Prime Minister Calls Upon American Troops: “Go Home”.

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This has been a busy weekend in the Levant and in the Red Sea, as well. For one thing, [according US Central Command](#) (CENTCOM), on January 20, at about 6:30 p.m. (Baghdad time), several rockets and ballistic missiles were launched by “Iranian-backed militants in Western Iraq” targeting the al-Assad Airbase, which hosts American troops. Most of the missiles were intercepted but some evaded the defense system and the base suffered some damage.

Some American personnel were injured also. The next day, however, Brigadier General Yahya Rasool, spokesman for Iraq’s Joint Operations Command, referring to the presence of the US military, stated that his country’s government is

“resolute to put an end to the deployment of foreign forces in the country.

It has devised a vision plan for the next stage, which includes joint technical activities intended for the US-led coalition’s departure and subsequent security and military cooperation.”

On January 18, during the World Economic Forum in Davos, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia’ al-Sudani had already reiterated the call for the troops to leave:

“the end of the US-led coalition mission is a necessity for the security and stability of Iraq. It is also a necessity for preserving constructive bilateral relations between Iraq and the coalition countries.”

Since then US President Donald Trump ordered the assassination (by drone strike near Baghdad International Airport) of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in 2020, many voices in Iraq have been calling for the withdrawal of foreign troops. The assassination was praised by both [Israel and the ISIS](#) terrorist group. Soleimani and Iraqi militia commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was also killed during the strike, were both leading figures in the struggle against ISIS in the Levant. Iraq's Prime Minister Sudani has repeatedly demanded the Americans leave Iraq, with his country adopting a law to expel foreign troops.

After the al-Assad Airbase attack last weekend, however, the US is trying to exploit the episode to justify their presence in the country. The country's Prime Minister not being very inclined to agree with such line of reasoning, so the US Ambassador to Iraq Alina Romanowski met with Former Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki on January 21, the next day after the attack. Although al-Maliki stressed "the importance of strengthening the ties of friendship and cooperation" between Washington and Baghdad during the meeting, he remains a top leader of what can be described as a pro-Iranian bloc in his country. Iran's influence in Iraq has grown tremendously in the last years, and Tehran could in fact be described as [the main winner](#) of the Iraq's war, after the failure of Washington's neo-colonial [project](#).

The episode on al-Assad Airbase is just the latest in a series of attacks on American positions in the Levant (in both Syria and Iraq) since October 2023, when the Israeli-Palestine conflict escalated. These attacks are being launched by Iran-backed groups in the region. It is not the only thing pertaining to Iran that troubles the US and the West though, one needs only take a look at the Red Sea, for instance

On January 21, the US Centcom stated that two Navy Seals (American elite special operations personnel) have been declared dead after a 10-day Search. They disappeared during an operation off the coast of Somalia to seize Iranian weaponry destined for Houthi forces in Yemen.

For years, Israel has carried out strikes targeting Iranian personnel and their allies in Syria, where Iran has a military presence. This has intensified since Israel's [widely condemned](#) military campaign in Gaza started. As I [wrote](#), that turn of events in Palestine has also triggered an escalation of the long-going Iranian-Israeli covert war - this "[secret war](#)" is increasingly turning into an overt one, as we can see [in the Red Sea](#) and beyond.

On January 20, [an attack in Syria](#) in the Mazzeh neighborhood (south-west Damascus) killed the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) intelligence chief and his deputy, plus other IRGC members, and a number of Syrian forces. Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi said Israel was responsible for the strike, which he described as "terrorist and criminal", adding that it "will not remain unanswered." Raisi urged international actors to condemn the attack, which took place in an area that is home to embassies and to the UN headquarters - these locations were not hit, but a residential building was and at least 10 people were killed, while other civilians were injured. Last month, another suspected Israeli strike near Damascus killed a senior IRGC commander.

The Syrian Arab Republic and the Islamic Republic of Iran remain close strategic allies, and the latter has provided the former with key military, financial and logistical support throughout the Syrian civil war. Moreover, Iran-backed Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon have taken direct combat roles. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Hezbollah have in fact

been [the main deterrent to the expansion of the terrorist group Daesh](#) (the so-called Islamic State or ISIS) in the whole Levant region.

Some observers [describe Iran today as “the main power”](#) in the Middle East, and such assessment might bear some truth. This rising influence however won't go unchallenged, but it has many supporters.

Israel's military campaign in Gaza has been described by many international observers and organizations as an attempt at ethnic cleansing or [genocide](#), as Tel Aviv announced a total blockade of Gaza, which stopped supplies of food, water, medical items, and energy. This has further polarized public opinion in the Middle East, the African continent and also Europe. The escalation of tensions also ensued the intensification of the long-going Iranian-Israeli war, which now extends from the Levant to the Red Sea, with global consequences.

Last week, in the US Congress, 15 Jewish members of the House released a statement saying they “strongly disagree with the prime minister” of Israel, meanwhile leading progressive members of Congress call for Washington to reset its “unconditional support of Israel”. The US radical support of the Jewish state indeed fuels anti-American feelings around the world and aggravates the crisis.

Part of the problem is the fact that Washington sees a number of actors such as the Houthis, Hezbollah and others as mere pawns of Iran. The truth is that the Islamic Republic cannot “control” its “proxies” – much the same way Washington cannot do so with its increasingly bold Israeli ally. In such a complex equation, there is a large degree of unpredictability and much room for backfiring. All the aforementioned groups have their own popular base, agenda and agency as political and social actors. And any good diplomacy must contemplate all that – which is no easy task.

In trying to oppose its Iranian adversary, Washington might end up alienating its potential Middle Eastern partners and allies – [who are already investing in new relationships](#). The Iraqis for instance seem to be fed up with an American presence which, from their perspective, only brings trouble. And they, much like the Syrians, the Lebanese and others, might have good reasons to support and even welcome Iranian presence, influence and assistance.

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