

Trump's Katyusha Conundrum: Unguided Artillery Deployed by Iraqi Insurgents against US Occupation Forces

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Katyushas are short-range, unguided artillery rockets typically fired in salvos from truck-mounted launch-tubes. Iraq's insurgents deploy three types.

The smallest is 107 millimetres in diameter and 1 metre long. Its 19 kilogram weight includes an 8 kg high-explosive, shrapnel-bearing warhead. The 107mm is often fired from a 12-tube launcher, however, infantry-portable single-tube tripods are common. An experienced crew with a standardised weapon can hit a 400 X 400 metre target from 8 kilometres away. During the Vietnam War the US Army considered the 107mm to be their adversaries' most formidable weapon.

The 122mm 'Grad' Katyusha is 3 metres long and weighs 75 kg. Its warhead spans a third of its length and weighs 18 kg. It has a 20-kilometre range and a 30-metre lethal radius.

220mm Katyushas hurl 100 kg warheads 30 kilometres.

Katyushas have advantages over mortars. They deliver the same payload twice the distance and they fire multiple ordnance more rapidly. The globally ubiquitous BM-21 Grad fires forty 122mm rockets in three minutes. Reloading takes 10 minutes. Thus, Katyushas excel at "shoot-and-scoot" operations. As well, Katyushas' flat trajectories permit line-of-sight attacks and their 700 metre-per-second velocities provide unique anti-building potential.

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After [allegedly] helping suppress the ISIS-led insurgency (2014-17) US forces defaulted to their previous occupation plan. Central to this program are segregated compounds situated inside Iraqi Armed Forces bases. These installations, always near airstrips, contain mere hundreds (not thousands) of US and Coalition troops who ride herd over the Iraqi Army whilst grooming and directing Iraq's 15,000-strong Special Forces.

Embassies and consulates are integral to the occupation. The sprawling US Embassy compound dominates Baghdad's fortified "Green Zone" which also houses Coalition partners' embassies, and the headquarters of the many NGOs insinuated throughout Iraqi society.

The occupation facilitates local activities of American and European businesses. These require office blocks, oil-field infrastructure; and, gated communities for imported talent.

Pre-2011 Americans relied on bases containing thousands of troops. These were remotely located and allocated substantial resources to thwart indirect (mortar and rocket) attacks through: counter-artillery, drone surveillance, and fighting patrols. Despite this, indirect fire inflicted 3,000 casualties (including 211 fatalities) on American forces; many occurring inside 'secure' bases.

The US-led Coalition's current archipelago of military, diplomatic, intelligence, business and NGO installations are ill-equipped to defend themselves against indirect fire. Proximity to cities makes them sitting ducks.

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In September 2018 persons unknown began targeting US installations with Katyushas. This list chronicles these attacks.* (A dozen mortar attacks are not listed; Katyushas being the weapon of choice.)

1. September 8, 2018 - four rockets (three 107mms and one 122mm) fall near the Green Zone.
2. September 8, 2018 - two salvos of 107mms land near the US Consulate beside Basra Airport.
3. September 28, 2018 - three 107mms are fired at the Basra Consulate; two land on site.
4. December 27, 2018 - two 107mms are fired at Al-Asad Airbase (160 kilometres west of Baghdad) during Trump's visit.
5. February 2, 2019 - an attack on Al-Asad Airbase is aborted. Three ready-to-launch 122mms are captured.
6. February 12, 2019 - three 107mms hit Q-West Airfield (an off-the-books base south of Mosul).
7. May 1, 2019 - two 107mms hit Camp Al-Taji: a 'training' institute, 40 kilometres north of Baghdad.
8. May 19, 2019 - two rockets land near the US Embassy.
9. June 10, 2019 - rocket attack on Camp Al-Taji.
10. June 12, 2019 - rocket attack on a "northern air base" starts a fire.
11. June 13, 2019 - rocket attack on Nineveh Command Headquarters (Mosul Presidential Palace).
12. June 14, 2019 - a rocket lands near the US Embassy.
13. June 17, 2019 - three rockets hit Camp Al-Taji.
14. June 18, 2019 - Nineveh HQ is attacked by two 122mms; one hits, one misses.
15. June 19, 2019 - rockets strike a gated community outside Basra (home to Exxon staff).
16. September 23, 2019 - two rockets hit the Green Zone; one lands near the US Embassy.
17. October 30, 2019 - two rockets hit the Green Zone, killing an Iraqi soldier.
18. November 8, 2019 - seventeen rockets target Q-West Airfield.
19. November 17, 2019 - rockets hit the Green Zone.
20. November 29, 2019 - a rocket hits the Green Zone.
21. December 3, 2019 - Al-Asad Airbase is "rocked" by five 122mms.
22. December 5, 2019 - five 107mms hit Balad Airbase (80 kilometres north of Baghdad).
23. December 6, 2019 - a 240mm rocket lands near Baghdad Airport (then housing a US base).

24. December 9, 2019 - four 240mms strike Baghdad Airport killing 2, and wounding 5, Iraqi soldiers.
25. December 11, 2019 - two 240mms land outside Baghdad Airport.
26. December 27, 2019 - thirty-six 107mms hammer K1 Base (15 kilometres northwest of Kirkuk); killing an American translator and wounding several US troops.
27. December 29, 2019 - four rockets hit Camp Al-Taji.
28. December 29, 2019 - five rockets hit Al-Asad Airbase.
29. January 4, 2020 - two rockets hit Balad Airbase.
30. January 4, 2020 - several rockets hit the Green Zone. One lands near the US Embassy; another closes a major street.
31. January 5, 2020 - six rockets are fired at the Green Zone; three hit the target.
32. January 8, 2020 - two rockets hit the Green Zone.
33. January 12, 2020 - eight rockets hit Balad Airbase, wounding several Iraqi soldiers.
34. January 14, 2020 - a five-rocket attack on Camp Al-Taji.
35. January 20, 2020 - three rockets hit Green Zone. They were fired from Al Zafraniya (15 kilometres away).

Attacks are becoming more frequent and are trending toward bigger rockets and higher volume salvos.

The insurgents' strategy is working. Katyusha attacks shuttered the US Basra Consulate in September 2018. Attacks in May and June 2019 forced Exxon to evacuate much of its foreign staff. Throughout 2019 the US State Department extracted personnel and the Defense Department consolidated bases into more secure facilities. By late 2019 US authorities were begging Iraqis for help whilst threatening retaliation.

The last straw came December 27 when the barrage onto K1 Base killed an American translator. The US responded with airstrikes on five Kata'ib Hezbollah bases (90 casualties) and with the January 3 assassination of Iranian General Soleimani. (The decision to assassinate Soleimani - in the event of an American fatality - was made June 24, 2019 following a week of near daily Katyusha attacks.)

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While Iran and Iran's Iraqi allies are blamed for these attacks; this is dubious. Reportage following attacks invariably drops the phrase "*no one claimed responsibility*" - which is notable because perpetrators often boast of such achievements. Ten years ago, when Kata'ib Hezbollah targeted US facilities with "lob bombs" (improvised rockets), they posted videos of their handiwork. They deny involvement in these recent attacks as do other Iranian-linked militias.

The reportage often describes the attacks as "*mysterious*" or as a "*whodunit*." Authors relay US intelligence theories of Iranian involvement ...without evidence.

On several occasions insurgents abandoned launchers and/or launch vehicles after the attack, often with fail-to-launch rockets inside. Investigators also possess fragments of successfully fired rockets. Tellingly, US officials, renowned for straining at gnats for evidence of Iranian complicity, do not utilise this material to incriminate Tehran.

The launchers themselves are obviously manufactured by local artisans. Moreover, an article from *Kurdistan-24* describes the *rockets* as “*locally made.*” Even globalist-militarist instrumentalities like the Washington Institute, Long War Journal, and Center for Strategic and International Studies concede some Katyushas are manufactured in Iraq.

Iraq has a burgeoning steel industry and, due to the calamities of the past 20 years, an enormous scrap metal industry. Katyushas’ cardinal virtue is their simplicity.

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Circa 2014 twelve countries hosted non-state armed groups that deployed Katyushas. (Post-2014 Yemen’s Houthis joined this list, then outdid the pack in innovation and output.)

During the 2003-11 era Iraqi insurgents looted Katyushas from local arsenals. Other Katyushas came from Iran (officially or via the black market) and possibly from any of 32 other countries manufacturing them. Experts bemoan the difficulty of determining a rocket’s origin.

Circa 2008 Iraqi artisans manufactured a variety of launchers. A 2009 raid in Maysan Governorate discovered 107mm, 122mm and 220mm rail launchers; and 1,700 carjacks. (Jacks were affixed to the bottoms of stationary tripods to permit changes in launch angle.) Insurgents developed creative mobile launch platforms i.e. inside ice cream trucks or towed behind motorcycles etc. They debuted remote control triggers and GPS reconnaissance.

Circa 2011 poor quality of locally acquired rockets compelled insurgents to continue to rely on imports. The insurgents were, however, manufacturing “lob bomb” rockets and anti-armour mines; although Iran stood accused of being their sole supplier.

Post-2011 insurgents honed their craft. Remember: Hamas, operating inside Gaza with a tiny fraction of the resources of Iraq’s insurgents, manufactures crude Katyushas.

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Prime suspects in the Katyusha campaign are not pro-Iranian militias; but rather the milieu around Mahdi Army successor, the Promise Day Brigades (PDB). This political tendency, nominally led by Moqtada al-Sadr, is concentrated in Iraq’s densely populated central and southern regions, but boasts a militant contingent in Mosul. This milieu overlaps the Saairun Alliance which includes Iraq’s far left; who carry their own legacy of armed struggle.

The insurgency’s Von Braun might be Jawad al-Tulaybani. An Iran-Iraq War veteran, al-Tulaybani possesses 40 years of combat rocketry experience. A war wound left him partially disabled. He appeared on US radar in 2008 after masterminding a barrage that wounded 15 US soldiers.

The org-chart of the Saairun/PDB/al-Sadr movement remains obscured. Notably, on January 8, 2020 al-Sadr counselled refrain from military actions. Four Katyusha attacks happened since.

What is clear is that this general political tendency is not particularly beholden to Iran. They appear non-sectarian, if not secularist, and they advance a left-nationalist agenda. Prior to the 2018 election (wherein Saairun emerged as the most popular bloc) Iran’s Foreign Minister warned Iran would never tolerate an Iraq run by “*liberals and communists*” -

meaning Saairun.

Then again, Trump's thrill kill of Soleimani (and Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units' Deputy Commander) completely reshuffled the deck, creating unprecedented unity amongst hitherto rivals.

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As Katyushas veto pacification efforts, US forces return to square one. They must retreat to sprawling, remotely situated camps equipped to suppress indirect fire. This, however, means surrendering Iraq's political theatre to adversaries who will marshal Iraqi Government resources against them.

Katyushas are driving the Trump Administration's Iraq policy. Prisoners of groupthink they react by doubling-down on the Big Lie that Iraq's national liberation movement consists only of "Iranian terrorists." In reality, their most effective opponents are as indigenous and legitimate as the French Resistance.

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Note on Sources

Data came from scanning 1,000 articles then parsing several dozen of them. Preference went to state media: i.e. Voice of America, Al Jazeera, Xinhua et al; although Military Times and Kurdistan-24 proved germane. *Rogue Rocketeers: Artillery Rockets and Armed Groups* (Small Arms Survey, Geneva Switzerland, 2014) is a must-read. Data on the first 7 Katyusha attacks was lifted without corroboration from Michael Knights' *Responding to Iranian Harassment of U.S. Facilities in Iraq* (Washington Institute, May 21, 2019). As Knights is the only analyst to grasp the seriousness of the Katyusha attacks. His reports are a trove. Being intimately connected to US and Israeli intelligence, he slavishly relays the anti-Iran party line.

Major attacks generate scores of reports. Lesser attacks are mentioned only in passing. Some articles tally the attacks but the numbers do not jibe. Certain attacks go unreported. Probably, 50+ mortar and Katyusha attacks hit US facilities between September 8, 2018 and January 14, 2020.

<http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/F-Working-papers/SAS-WP19-Rogue-Rocketeers.pdf>

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/responding-to-iranian-harassment-of-u.s.-facilities-in-iraq>

Featured image: Katyusha launcher (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

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