

The US Airstrike on Syria: Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss, and the Boss before that

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In his first publicly acknowledged military act as commander-in-chief, President Joe Biden orders an assault on Syria, and proves that when it comes to solving the many problems of the region, he’s no better than Trump, or Obama.

President Biden [ordered US military aircraft to strike targets](#) on Syrian soil that the US claims were affiliated with two pro-Iranian militias, Kataib Hezbollah and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada. The US, working closely with Iraqi security services, has implicated Iranian-backed Shia militias in a recent rocket attack on a US airbase in Erbil, Iraq, that killed a foreign contractor employed by the US and wounded four American contractors and a US service member.

A Pentagon spokesperson, John Kirby, [called the attack](#), which was carried out by US F-15E aircraft and killed up to 17 people, a “*proportionate military response*” designed to send “*an unambiguous message: President Biden will act to protect American and coalition personnel.*”

White House Press Secretary [Jen Psaki noted](#) that the strike was part of a calculated response “*using a mix of tools seen and unseen.*” Psaki sought to differentiate the actions of the Biden administration from previous airstrikes undertaken during the Trump administration against the exact same target, for precisely the same reasons, a little more than a year ago. “*What we will not do,*” Psaki noted, “*and what we’ve seen in the past, is lash out and risk an escalation that plays into the hands of Iran by further destabilizing Iraq.*”

So that’s all clear and ok, then...or is it?

Airstrikes in the time of Trump

Back in December 2019, then-President Trump [ordered US forces to strike targets](#) located in and around the town of Abu Kamal, on the Syrian side of the Syria-Iraq border, opposite the Iraqi town of Al Qaim. The Syrian garrison at Abu Kamal had been reinforced by pro-Iranian Iraqi militias, in particular Kataib Hezbollah, in an effort to cut off forces affiliated with the

Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIS) trapped in Syria from their base of support in Iraq. Abu Kamal was also an important logistics support hub for supplies trucked in from Iran to pro-Iranian forces operating inside Syria.

The US airstrike on Christmas Day 2019 was ordered by President Trump in retaliation for a rocket attack on a US airbase at K-1, in Kurdish-controlled Iraq, that killed a US civilian contractor.

While the US blamed Iran and Kataib Hezbollah for the attack, Iraqi security forces believed that the real perpetrators were Iraqi insurgents sympathetic to IS. The airstrikes on Abu Kamal reportedly killed at least 25 militiamen and wounded 55 more, setting off a wave of protests inside Iraq which culminated in a mob overrunning parts of the US Embassy compound in Baghdad.

The US responded to the assault on the embassy by dispatching thousands of troops into the region, [and ordering the assassination](#) of Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's Quds Force which oversees cooperation between Iran and pro-Iranian militias, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the head of the Popular Mobilization Committee, an umbrella organization under which Kataib Hezbollah fell.

These two murders prompted a retaliatory strike by Iran against a US airbase inside Iraq that injured more than 100 American servicemembers, and brought Iran and the US to the brink of war. It was this cycle of escalation that Jen Psaki was referring to in her statement following the Biden-ordered airstrike of February 25.

It's Joe time

While Kirby and Psaki have both espoused an official Biden administration position that tries to differentiate itself from the actions and policies of its predecessor, the reality is that the actions of the Biden administration, in bombing Syria, are just as ill-informed and wrong-headed as those which brought the US and Iran to the brink of war in early 2020.

Like the Trump administration before him, Biden and his advisers have shown that they are just as capable of misreading the facts on the ground in the Middle East, drawing the wrong conclusions, and developing solutions that only exacerbate an already dangerous situation. *"We know what we hit,"* Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin [commented after the attack](#). *"We're confident that the target was being used by the same Shia militia that conducted the strikes."*

Austin's confidence, however, does not jive with the facts. The Iraqi militias stationed at Abu Kamal denied any involvement in the Erbil rocket attacks (indeed, both are affiliated with the Iraqi government, having been officially absorbed into the Iraqi security services).

The militia that did claim responsibility, Awliya al-Dam, was formed in the aftermath of the assassination of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, from militia members belonging to Kataib Hezbollah splitting from that organization in order to exact revenge against the US once it became clear that Kataib Hezbollah would follow the instructions of the Iraqi government to not escalate the situation further.

While US intelligence believes that Awliya al-Dam was created to give Kataib Hezbollah and other pro-Iranian militias plausible deniability regarding continued rocket attacks against US targets inside Iraq, regional experts believe that the split is genuine, and that the actions of

Awliya al-Dam cannot be conflated with Kaitab Hezbollah or any other pro-Iranian militia operating as part of the Iraqi security services.

Compounding concerns that the US, by bombing Iraqi militias based in Syria whose mission is to prevent the resurgence of the Islamic State, is once again seeking a solution to a problem it has incompetently defined, is the fact that the Biden administration has sought to color the February 25 airstrike as a “message” to Iran regarding other regional events which have nothing whatsoever to do with either the attack on Erbil, or the forces based in Abu Kamal that were bombed by the US in retaliation.

The Syrian government condemned the US airstrike, noting that the attack came at the same time that the Syrian Army and the Iraqi militias based in Abu Kamal were engaged in ongoing operations against Islamic State.

An optics nightmare

The complete lack of recognition by the Biden administration regarding the optics of being seen to be giving air support to IS escapes those who have articulated in favor of the assault.

The same applies to the seeming disconnect between those who view the Biden-ordered air attack as a measure designed to rein in Iranian regional malfeasance while keeping open the door for diplomatic engagement regarding Iran’s nuclear program.

Iran has been critical in the past of the US’ willingness to violate both international and US domestic law when it comes to pursuing policies aimed at keeping Iran in its place. If nuclear talks with Iran are to have any chance of succeeding, the Biden administration will need to convince the Iranian authorities that, unlike the Trump administration, the current iteration of the US government can be expected to obey the law and keep its word.

The US airstrike on Abu Kamal, however, makes a mockery of any such notion. Not only has the Biden administration mirrored the incompetence of the Trump administration when it comes to articulating a compelling reason for striking the targets it did, but its actions fly in the face of the stated moral and legal standards that senior members of the Biden administration had previously espoused when criticizing the actions of the Trump administration.

In 2017, Jen Psaki questioned the “*legal authority*” for airstrikes on Syria ordered by Trump in retaliation for thinly sourced allegations of chemical weapons use by the Syrian government. “*Assad is a brutal dictator,*” [Psaki tweeted](#), “*But Syria is a sovereign country.*” And in 2018, then-Senator Kamala Harris, commenting on a second round of airstrikes against Syria ordered by the Trump administration, [tweeted](#) that she was “*deeply concerned about the legal rationale*” behind the US use of military force.

Each tweet could be resent today.

And let’s not even go back to the president twice-removed, Biden’s old boss Barack Obama, the man who came to office pledging to end George W. Bush’s wars, but whose last year in office saw America [drop 26,171 bombs](#), many of them on Syria.

Deafening silence

The silence that exists inside Washington, DC regarding the legality of the new US airstrikes against targets inside Syria (a “sovereign nation”, as Jen Psaki once astutely observed) is deafening.

It is too early to tell what impact, if any, the illegal US attack on Syria will have on US-Iranian nuclear negotiations, or whether this attack will trigger yet another cycle of escalating retaliatory violence that could push those two nations to war.

One thing is certain, however – the Biden administration is no different than its predecessor when it comes to incompetently executing policies that fly in the face of both international and US law. To quote The Who’s Roger Daltry, “Meet the new boss – same as the old boss.”

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Featured image: Vice President Joe Biden, Austin, and Command Sergeant Major Earl Rice, at an event marking the award of the Iraq Commitment Medal in December 2011



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Michel Chossudovsky

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