

# From Iraq to Yemen, drones raise US alarm over Iranian plans

Author:

Thu, 2019-07-18 22:58

GENEVA, WASHINGTON: The increased use of drones by Iran and its allies for surveillance and attacks across the Middle East is raising alarms in Washington.

The US believes that Iran-linked militia in Iraq have recently increased their surveillance of American troops and bases in the country by using off-the-shelf, commercially available drones, US officials say. The disclosure comes at a time of heightened tensions with Iran and underscores the many ways in which Tehran and the forces it backs are increasingly relying on unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in places like Yemen, Syria, the Strait of Hormuz and Iraq.

Beyond surveillance, Iranian drones can drop munitions and even carry out “a kamikaze flight where they load it up with explosives and fly it into something,” according to a US official who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Yemen’s Iranian-backed Houthis have significantly increased their UAV attacks in recent months, bombing airports and oil facilities in Saudi Arabia.

Last month, Iran came close to war with the US after Iran’s unprecedented shoot-down of a US drone with a surface-to-air missile, a move that nearly triggered retaliatory strikes by US President Donald Trump.

Trump withdrew from a major 2015 nuclear deal last year and reimposed sanctions to cut off Iran’s oil exports and pressure Tehran to negotiate over its ballistic missile program and regional policy.

The increased use of drones by Iran or its regional allies is a strategy aimed at pushing back and defending against pressure from the US, current and former security officials and analysts say. Iran now flies two or three drones over Gulf waters every day, the first US official estimated, making it a core part of Tehran’s effort to monitor the Strait of Hormuz, through which one-fifth of the world’s oil consumption flows.

The US and Saudi Arabia have accused Iran of carrying out attacks against six oil tankers near the Strait in the past two months.

The US officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity, declined to quantify the extent to which surveillance near US forces has increased in Iraq or to specify which militia were carrying it out.

“We have seen an uptick in drone activity in Iraq near our bases and facilities,” the first official said. “Certainly the drones that we have seen are more of the commercial off-the-shelf variant. So they’re obviously a deniable type UAV-activity in Iraq.”

A second official said the recent increase in surveillance was worrying but acknowledged Iran-linked militia in Iraq had a history of keeping tabs on Americans.

Reuters has previously reported that the US has indirectly sent warnings to Iran, saying any attack against US forces by proxy organizations in Iraq will be viewed by Washington as an attack by Iran itself.

In recent weeks, mortars and rockets have been fired at bases in Iraq where US forces are located but no American troops have been injured. US officials did not link those attacks to the increased surveillance.

Attempts to reach the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Revolutionary Guards, who are most closely linked to militant groups in Iraq, for comment were unsuccessful.

Iraqi militia groups linked to Iran began using drones in 2014 and 2015 in battles to retake territory from Daesh, according to militia members and Iraqi security officials.

These groups received training on the use of drones from members of Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Lebanon's Iranian-backed Hezbollah, two Iraqi security officials with knowledge of militia activities said.

"Key militia groups have the ability to launch aerial attacks using drones. Will they target American interests? That hasn't happened yet," said one Iraqi security official. "They used Katyusha and mortars in very restricted attacks against American interests in Iraq to send a message rather than trying to inflict damage. Using explosive-laden drones is very possible once we have a worsening situation between Tehran and Washington."

How sophisticated are Iran's drones?

In March, Iran boasted about a complex military exercise involving 50 drones. In a slickly edited video aired on state TV, waves of drones streak across a clear blue sky, bombing buildings on an island in the Gulf.

The show of force was intended to highlight Iran's locally developed UAV program, which it has been building up for several years.

Douglas Barrie, a senior fellow at the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, however, cautioned that some of Iran's claims were "best viewed through the prism of domestic messaging." "That Iran has a growing capability in UAVs isn't debatable. What is an open question is the actual levels of technology it often employs," Barrie said, adding that Israel had the most advanced program in the region.

American technology may have been used to enhance the Iranian drone program: An advanced US RQ-170 Sentinel reconnaissance drone went down in eastern Iran in 2011, and Revolutionary Guards commanders say they were able to reverse engineer it, a claim which some security officials and analysts dispute.

"They've really come up with some aircraft which are looking increasingly

sophisticated in terms of their ability to carry guided weapons and carry out long range surveillance missions,” said Jeremy Binnie, Middle East and Africa editor for Jane’s Defense Weekly.

US forces have shot down Iranian-made drones in 2017 in Syria, after deeming them a threat to both US-backed forces and their advisers.

### **Exporting drone technology**

Iran has passed on its drones and technical expertise to regional allies, current and former security officials and analysts say.

The Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah advise the Houthis on the use of drones and operate video uplinks from Tehran and Beirut to beam in technical expertise when needed, an official from the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen said.

Iran has denied any role in the conflict in Yemen.

UN experts say the Houthis now have drones that can drop bigger bombs further away and more accurately than before. In May, drones hit two oil pumping stations hundreds of kilometers inside Saudi territory.

“Either the drones that attacked the pipelines were launched from inside Saudi territory or the Houthis just significantly upped their capability with satellite technology and were provided with the capability to extend the distance,” said Brett Velicovich, a drone expert and US Army veteran, about the May attack.

A commander of Kataib Hezbollah, an Iraqi militia closely linked to Iran, using the nickname Abu Abdullah, told Reuters in 2014 that Iran had provided training for operating drones, which were mostly used to target Daesh positions.

He said at the time that they had also used the drones to carry out surveillance on American military positions in Iraq and in the conflict in Syria, where Kataib Hezbollah fought in support of Bashar Assad.

Iraqi militia groups have now acquired enough expertise to modify drones for attacks, two Iraqi security officials with knowledge of the militia activities said.



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## [Death toll rises in attack on Turkish diplomat in Iraq](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-07-18 22:41

IRBIL, IRAQ: The death toll from Wednesday's attack on Turkish consular employees in Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region has risen to three after one victim died of his wounds, his family told AFP.

The Turkish vice consul and one Iraqi citizen were shot dead by at least one attacker on Wednesday in a restaurant in the northern regional capital of Irbil, a police source told AFP.

The shooting also wounded another Iraqi, 26-year-old Bashdar Ramadan, who

died overnight, his cousin told AFP on Thursday.

According to Turkish state media, the lone attacker was dressed in plainclothes and carried two guns when he stormed the restaurant in Irbil's Ainkawa district.

Checkpoints were quickly erected in and around the neighborhood, but the perpetrators are still on the run.

"The relevant authorities have launched a thorough investigation to find and prosecute the perpetrators of this criminal act," said the Kurdistan Regional Government in an online statement.

It warned against anyone trying to "harm the security and stability" of the autonomous region.

There was no claim of responsibility for the attack, which came as Turkey wages a ground and bombing offensive against bases of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in northern Iraq.

The PKK is classified as a "terrorist" group by Turkey, the US and the EU because of the three-decade insurgency it has waged against the Turkish state.

Earlier this month, the PKK announced senior leader Diyar Gharib Mohammed and two other fighters had been killed in a Turkish raid.

A spokesman for the PKK's armed branch denied the group was involved in Wednesday's shooting.

Ibrahim Kalin, spokesman for the Turkish president, vowed "the necessary response will be given to those who committed this treacherous attack."

In Baghdad, the UN mission to Iraq called for "maximum restraint" from all sides.

The US Embassy offered its condolences to the Turkish mission after the "heinous" attack, calling for "the defense and safety of foreign diplomats and diplomatic missions in Iraq."

### **US sanctions on 4 Iraqis**

Meanwhile, the US imposed sanctions on two Iraqi militia leaders and two former Iraqi provincial governors it accused of human rights abuses and corruption, the US Treasury Department said on Thursday.

The sanctions target militia leaders Rayan Al-Kildani and Waad Qado, and former governors Nawfal Hammadi Al-Sultan and Ahmed Al-Jubouri, the Treasury said in a statement.

"We will continue to hold accountable persons associated with serious human rights abuse, including persecution of religious minorities, and corrupt officials who exploit their positions of public trust to line their pockets

and hoard power at the expense of their citizens,” Sigal Mandelker, Treasury under secretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, said.

The Treasury said many of the actions that prompted the sanctions occurred in “areas where persecuted religious communities are struggling to recover from the horrors inflicted on them” by Daesh, the militant group that controlled parts of Iraq for several years.

The Treasury said Kildani is the leader of the 50th Brigade militia and is shown cutting off the ear of a handcuffed detainee in a video circulating in Iraq last year.

It said Qado is the leader of the 30th Brigade militia which engaged in extortion, illegal arrests, and kidnappings.

Sultan and Jubouri were designated for being engaged in corruption, including the misappropriation of state assets, and other misdeeds, the Treasury said.

Iraq in March issued a warrant for the arrest of Sultan, the former governor of Nineveh province, on corruption charges after at least 90 people were killed in a ferry accident in the provincial capital Mosul.

As a result of the designation, any property the four persons hold in the US would be blocked and US persons are barred from business dealings with them.



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## Trump says US warship destroys Iranian drone in Strait of Hormuz amid heightened tensions

Thu, 2019-07-18 22:18

WASHINGTON: The US military shot down an Iranian drone on Thursday that came within 1,000 yards of one of its naval vessels in the Strait of Hormuz, President Donald Trump said.

“The (USS) Boxer took defensive action against an Iranian drone which had closed into a very, very near distance, approximately 1,000 yards,” Trump announced at the White House.

“The drone was immediately destroyed.”

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## [US Navy searching for missing sailor in Arabian Sea](#)

Thu, 2019-07-18 20:16

DUBAI: The US navy and other ships are conducting search and rescue operations for a missing US sailor in the Arabian Sea, the Bahrain-based US Fifth Fleet said.

“The Sailor has been listed as Duty Status Whereabouts Unknown (DUSTWUN) after a reported man overboard incident onboard Abraham Lincoln while operating in the Arabian Sea, July 17,” a Fifth Fleet statement said, without giving the sailor’s name.

A Spanish and a Pakistani navy ship are assisting two US navy ships in the search operation.

Tensions in the Gulf region are currently high, with fears that foes the United States and Iran could stumble into war.

The United States has blamed Iran for a series of attacks since mid-May on shipping around the Hormuz Strait, the world’s most important oil artery, which Tehran rejects.

Tehran has also accused Britain of piracy and warned of repercussions after Royal Marines seized an Iranian tanker off Gibraltar on July 4 on suspicion it was shipping oil to Iran’s ally Syria, in breach of EU sanctions.





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## [Pence announces sanctions on Iranian-linked leaders in Iraq](#)

Thu, 2019-07-18 18:19

WASHINGTON: Vice President Mike Pence said Thursday that the United States is imposing sanctions on the leaders of two Iranian-linked militia groups in Iraq.

"Let me be clear, the United States will not stand idly while Iranian-backed militias spread terror," Pence told a high-level meeting on religious freedom, without naming the individuals targeted.

A US Treasury statement said the sanctions were being imposed on the four Iraqi militia leaders due to suspicion of human rights abuses and corruption.

Further sanctions were imposed on five people and seven entities in connection to Iran's nuclear program and non-proliferation matters, the Treasury Department said on its website on Thursday.

They are the first punitive steps by Washington since Tehran announced earlier this month it would increase its levels of enriched uranium that can be used for bomb fuel.

Tehran announced on July 1 that it had amassed more low-enriched uranium than permitted under its 2015 nuclear deal with world powers, marking its first major step beyond the terms of the pact since the United States withdrew more than a year ago.

"Treasury is taking action to shut down an Iranian nuclear procurement network that leverages Chinese- and Belgium-based front companies to acquire critical nuclear materials and benefit the regime's malign ambitions," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in a statement.

"Iran cannot claim benign intent on the world stage while it purchases and stockpiled products for centrifuges," he added.



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