

Arab Christian figures rebut argument for removing US sanctions on Syria

Wed, 2021-02-17 23:32

NEW YORK CITY: When the time came for Bashar Jaafari, Syria's former UN permanent representative, to leave New York, only one person saw him off at JFK airport: his loyal office assistant.

The symbolism of the moment perhaps eluded the lady as she waved goodbye to the diplomat disappearing through the throng of travelers: Nothing more than Jaafari's lonely departure could embody the image of Bashar Assad's regime as it stands isolated on the world stage today.

Jaafari went back to Damascus where he would take up his functions as deputy minister for foreign affairs, back into the arms of a regime that was his sole supporter at the UN headquarters.

He had for years used the time allotted to him at the Security Council to blame the West for the misery Syrian people live under. He once called Western nations "Ali Baba's thieves without borders," there only to pillage Syria's wealth, both material and cultural.



The UN Security Council members seem to harbor no doubt that only the regime is behind the atrocities inflicted on Syrians, and that only the regime's corruption is able to account for the ever-worsening economic disaster.

(AFP/File Photo)

Jaafari's insults did nothing, however, to alter the member states' stance on what are now firmly established facts, regularly emphasized by the secretary-general's reports on Syria. In every council meeting, representatives called on Assad to come clean about his chemical weapons which, they repeated, he has used against his own people.

They rejected Assad's plans for "sham elections." And when the regime, backed by Russia, organized a conference designed to encourage Syrian refugees to return to "now safe" Syria, the Americans dismissed it as "a dog and pony show."

Apart from Russia, which reliably comes to the regime's defense, Security Council members seem to harbor no doubt that only the regime is behind the atrocities inflicted on Syrians, and that only the regime's corruption is able to account for the ever-worsening economic disaster.

Isolated and paralyzed by the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act's sanctions, the regime has been using every ruse in the book to find a way around them. The changing of the guard in Washington, coupled with the appointment of senior White House advisers keen on a thaw with Iran, may be just the break Assad and Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah had been waiting for.



Isolated and paralyzed by the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act's sanctions, the regime has been using every ruse in the book to find a way around them. (AFP/File Photo)

"We as Syrians are afraid of those advisers who have good ties with the

Iranians,” said Ayman Abdel Nour, a Syrian reformist. “Are they going to sell us out – like they did under (President Barack) Obama – as the icing on the cake of another nuclear accord?”

A widely publicized letter sent to President Joe Biden on Jan. 21 by Michel Abs, secretary-general of the Middle East Council of Churches, and co-signed by Syriac Catholic Patriarch Ignace Joseph III Younan, Melkite Catholic Patriarch Joseph Absi and Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II, argued that “unilateral coercive measures imposed by the United States make the economic plight of the Syrian people worse.”

The signatories include also other clerics besides officials and civil personalities with close ties to the Assad regime.

As scholars of modern Middle East history can attest, the Assad regime has a long history of using minorities as a means to burnish its image abroad while keeping its crimes under wraps.

When Hafez Assad came to power in 1970, he presented himself from day one as the “minority protector” and the antidote to rising Islamic fundamentalism. In the name of fighting radicalism, Assad the father erased entire towns, carried out brutal massacres, and tightened his minority Alawite regime’s iron fist on the nation as its absolute ruler.



A handout picture taken on April 20, 2014 shows Assad (C) visiting the ancient Christian town of Maalula which his troops had recently recaptured from rebels. (AFP/SANA/File Photo)

His son Bashar continues to use the Christian minority in his various attempts to get around the sanctions, and as he desperately tries to regain some sort of international recognition.

Thus, he sent four patriarchs to Washington in 2013 to meet with President Barack Obama. When the latter watched them repeat the same talking points from small paper notes hidden in their pockets, he was infuriated.

“It was a disaster, that meeting,” remembers Abdel Nour, who met with the four patriarchs at their hotel lobby before their meeting with Obama.

“It was very clear that the patriarchs were the regime’s intelligence messenger. So, when they returned the following year, Obama refused to meet with them.”



A Syrian military defector using the pseudonym Caesar, while also wearing a hood to protect his identity, testifies about the war in Syria during a Senate Foreign Relations committee hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington DC, March 11, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

Assad had more tricks up his sleeve, so to speak, as the sanctions’ noose continued to tighten. In 2017, After he declared victory in Aleppo, he went on to seek the Vatican’s public support.

In order to get it, he gave the Holy See two offers the latter could not refuse: The first was a license to build a Roman Melkite faculty of theology open to seminarians from all over the Middle East.

The second was a visit he personally paid to a Syriac Catholic youth camp. All smiles, he posed for the cameras that showed him buddying up with the Christian youths.

ASSAD REGIME IN NUMBERS

- * **128,000 People believed murdered in Syrian jails by Assad regime.**
- * **\$ 7.6bn Estimated Iranian line of credit to Assad regime since 2011.**
- * **70% Decline in Syria's per capita budget spending since 2010.**
- * **\$902m Syria's projected budget deficit for 2021.**
- * **\$117bn Estimated cost of rebuilding Syria's physical assets.**

Patriarch Younan, who was appointed by the Vatican, was very pleased. He and his Roman Melkite counterpart sent Pope Francis telegrams lauding the generosity of the president and imploring him to send a delegation to meet with Assad.

"The pope could not say no. These are his two patriarchs for the whole Middle East, not just Syria," said Abdel Nour. "They have constituencies in Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. So, he sent that delegation. And Assad used the photo-op to show the world that he has the Vatican's support."

Again, however, the Vatican quickly moved to distance itself from Assad's "actions."

Thus, when Abdel Nour, who is also the editor-in-chief of All4Syria, Syria's leading independent news outlet, got wind of the Jan. 21 letter, he was alarmed.

He says he picked up the phone and called the signatories. He learned that some had been coerced to sign; others had sought changes to the letter before agreeing to sign, but their names were added anyway without any changes made.



Syrian Christian Orthodox worshippers take part in parade marking Palm Sunday at the Church of Saint Elias in the Syrian capital Damascus on April 9, 2017. (AFP/File Photo)

One signatory was on a hospital bed when Abdel Nour called him. The patient had not even heard of the letter, he said.

An examination of the background of one of the letter's signatories, SOS Chrétiens d'Orient (SOS-CO), reveals that the French NGO knowingly transferred money and equipment to the pro-regime National Defense Forces (NDF).

The Nov. 2020 report compiled by the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) also claimed there are close ties between SOS-CO's founders and NDF leaders.

The US Treasury Department defines the NDF as "a pro-Assad, Iranian-affiliated militia." It sanctioned one of its top leaders late last year for his alleged role in the massacre of more than 70 civilians.

What alarmed Abdel Nour most was the sophisticated, efficient language of the letter. It was written by highly respected Christian dignitaries who wrote a single, simple demand: that sanctions be lifted.



Assad (C) walking with Christian and Muslim clerics during an annual conference organised by the Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf) in Damascus.
(AFP/File Photo)

This is the kind of letter that gets attention in Washington, D.C. “They worked very hard on it. They started writing in December, two months before Biden took the oath of office,” said Abdel Nour.

“And they submitted it to him on January 21, his second day in office, hoping to capitalize on the new momentum. The letter makes it look as though all the suffering of the Syrian people is due to the Caesar Act sanctions against the figures of the regime.”

Something needed to be done, said Abdel Nour, who is president of the non-profit Syrian Christians for Peace. Work on a new letter then began. A response was written and signed by prominent Christian and Muslim figures from six Arab countries.

They included members of the Christian Arab Congress; the Jordanian diplomat Marwan Muasher; and Lebanese former MPs Fares Souaid and Ahmed Fatfat; in addition to Iraqi intellectuals and politicians, university rectors and famous writers.

The signatories wrote that, in Assad, the world is dealing with a leader who has been summoned by European courts for his war crimes and crimes against humanity.

They argued that Syrians are suffering indeed, but for reasons that have

nothing to do with sanctions: The regime has found ways to steal humanitarian aid, sell the goods on the market and use the profits to finance its military operations against civilians.



Syrian civil defence volunteers search for victims following Syrian government air strikes on the Eastern Ghouta rebel-held enclave of Douma, on the outskirts of the capital Damascus on March 20, 2018. (AFP/File Photo)

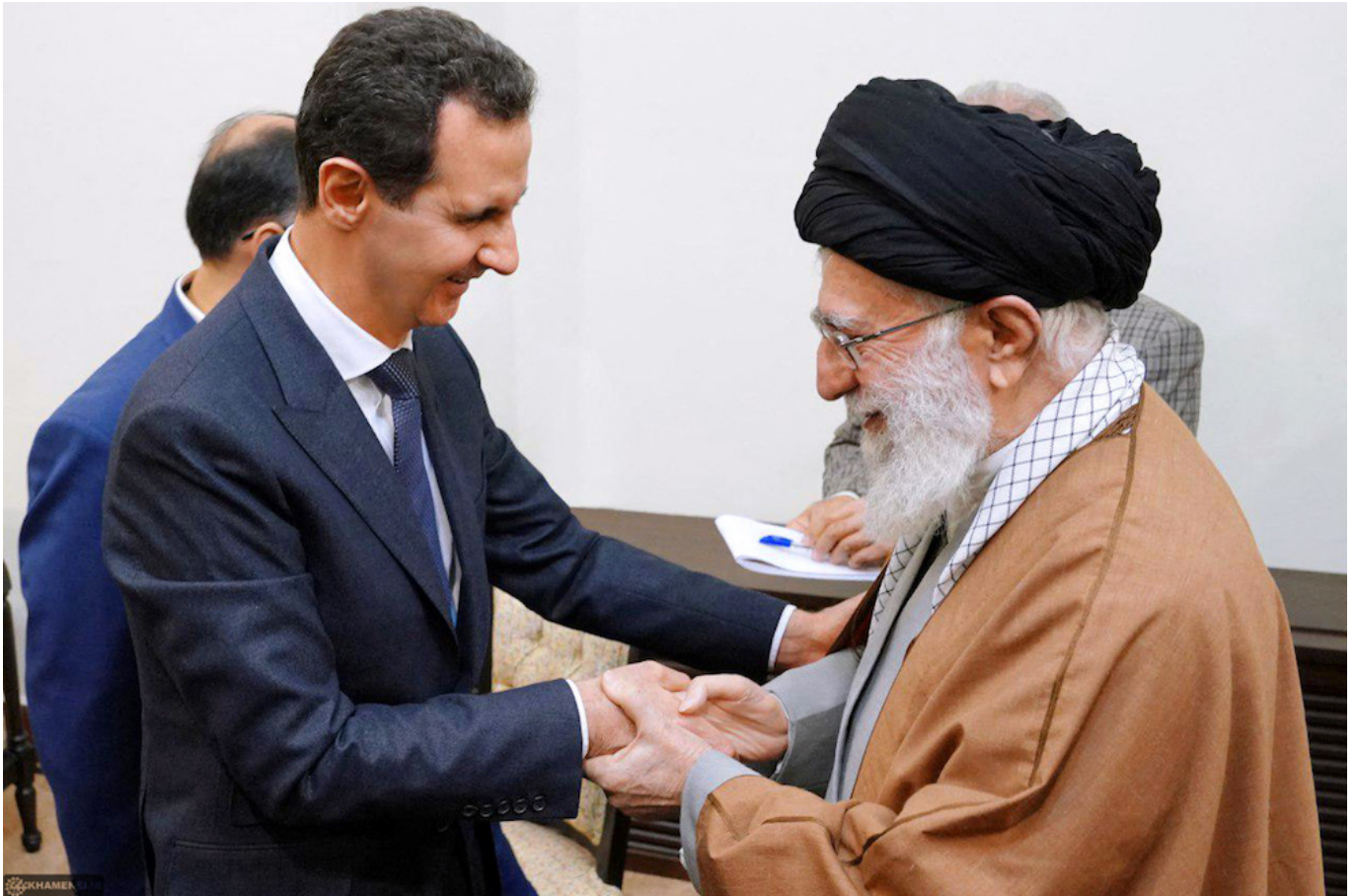
They called for aid to be delivered directly to impoverished Syrian citizens living in refugee camps under the supervision of international organizations.

The letter also pushed to put a stop to any increase in humanitarian supplies, contending that it is not the quantity of aid that is the problem, but the way it is distributed. Instead, according to the signatories, it would be more than enough for the US to push for a full implementation of Resolution 2254, which called for a ceasefire and political settlement.

The letter apparently did not go unnoticed at the State Department. Anthony Blinken, who during his five-hour Senate confirmation hearing last month did not once mention Syria, called UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and discussed some of the letter's recommendations: Both reaffirmed their commitment to the political process under the Security Council Resolution 2254 and the extension of a cross-border authorization to deliver aid and help relieve the suffering of the Syrian people."

The issue again came up during a call between Blinken and his Turkish counterpart. "Blinken showed he is an official who has dignity," commented Abdel Nour. "He read a credible letter from a reputable group of signatories

and he adopted it as policy.”



Assad met Iran’s supreme leader Ali Khamenei in 2019 during his first to the Islamic Republic since the start of the Syrian conflict. During the meeting, Assad expressed his gratitude to Iran for all that it had done for Syria during the conflict. (AFP/File Photo)

Abdel Nour, whose podcast *Risala Ila Sourriyyin* (Letter to Syrians) has 1.5 million weekly listeners, said the US still has no strategy for dealing with the Syrian crisis, although the State Department is fashioning one. He believes it will not be separate from the strategy for the Middle East, which includes Iran.

In a list of recommendations that he was asked to share, Abdel Nour urged the State Department team to heed the lessons taught by the Obama-era 2015 nuclear accord: “The deal did not prevent the Iranian regime from expanding and taking control of Arab capitals. It put US allies (the GCC countries) in constant danger. The nuclear agreement should not be reinstated without first addressing the concerns of Arabs who live in the region. Then there is the case of Iran’s ballistic missiles which, if developed, will reach European capitals.”

That the nuclear agreement needs to be updated is, to be sure, Blinken’s own stance. But in a Security Council that has been for years paralyzed by US-Russia sparring, is an updated deal a realistic option?

“I think so,” replied Abdel Nour, “because in the past two years Iran has shown its hostile face. It has shown how much damage it can inflict on Saudi

oil facilities using Yemen and Iraq. And that's very dangerous. What they also did against the American embassy in Iraq is unacceptable.

"This will not pass. There will be retaliation."

With inputs from Oubai Shahbandar in Washington, D.C.



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Caesar Act

sends Syria's Bashar Assad a stark reality check

[Biden makes first call to Israel's Netanyahu after delay](#)

Wed, 2021-02-17 23:30

TEL AVIV/WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden made a long-awaited first phone call to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday after a delay that had seen Washington deny it was snubbing Israel's leader.

There had been speculation that the Democratic president was signaling displeasure over Netanyahu's close ties with former President Donald Trump, who called the right-wing leader two days after his inauguration in 2017. Biden has spoken with about a dozen other world leaders since taking office on Jan. 20. The White House had said that Netanyahu, who differs with Biden on some Middle East issues such as Iran, would be the first regional leader he would call.

The delay in the traditional courtesy call was also widely regarded by analysts as a sign that Biden did not want to be seen boosting Netanyahu ahead of Israel's March 23 elections.

Some said it could foreshadow chillier relations if Netanyahu wins re-election, but there were no immediate signs of tensions in relatively bland accounts of the call released by the two governments.

"It was a good conversation," Biden told reporters in the Oval Office where he was meeting US labor leaders.

Biden and Netanyahu spoke for about an hour on issues including the "Iranian threat" and Israel's newly established relations with Arab and Muslim countries, Netanyahu's office said in a statement. "The two leaders noted their longstanding personal connection," it added.

The White House said they discussed, among other issues, the need for "continued close consultation" on Iran.

Biden told Netanyahu he intends to strengthen defense cooperation with Israel and stressed his support for normalization of relations with its neighbors. He also "underscored the importance" of working toward peace between Israelis and Palestinians, the statement said.

The White House had denied that the delay in a Biden call was meant to disrespect Netanyahu, with spokeswoman Jen Psaki saying last week that it was "not an intentional dis."

Netanyahu this week acknowledged differences with Biden over Iranian and Palestinian issues, but said the two enjoy a strong working relationship. The Israeli leader may find the two countries' alliance tested if Washington restores US participation in the Iran nuclear deal, from which Trump withdrew, and opposes Israeli settlement building on occupied land where Palestinians seek statehood.

Netanyahu was almost in lock-step over Middle East policy with Trump, who took a staunchly pro-Israel approach.

An Israeli diplomat told Reuters that Israel had been concerned about the delay in Biden calling Netanyahu, but was mindful that the US president was dealing with other issues first, such as the coronavirus pandemic and challenges from Russia and China. The fact that Netanyahu was the first Middle East leader called was taken as a positive sign, the diplomat said.



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Biden's first call with leader in region will be with Israel's Netanyahu – White House Presidents Biden and Xi hold first phone call amid tense US-China relations

[Kuwait's emir postpones parliament meetings for a month](#)

Wed, 2021-02-17 22:04

RIYADH: Kuwait's emir issued a decree on Wednesday to postpone parliament

meetings for a month starting from Thursday, state-run KUNA reported. Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah issued the decree based on Article 106 of the constitution, KUNA said without providing further details. On Jan. 24 the emir reappointed Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khalid Al-Sabah to nominate a new cabinet and the premier had been holding consultations with MPs ahead of doing so.
(With Reuters)



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[10 years on, Libyan revolutionaries](#)

Live with wounds, unfulfilled dreams

Author:

Wed, 2021-02-17 02:53

MISRATA: As revolution swept their region in 2011, three young Libyans joined mass protests against Muammar Qaddafi's four-decade rule. They now live divided by Libya's frontlines, their futures irrevocably shaped by the uprising.

The first demonstrations against Qaddafi's rule began in the eastern city of Benghazi on Feb. 17, 2011. A decade on, Libya is still split between rival factions, and shell and shrapnel holes scar its cities.

The UN has backed a new effort to unite Libya's warring sides through an interim government and national elections at the end of the year. But many Libyans remain skeptical.

Usama Ali Al-Aguri, a graduate from Benghazi, was unemployed in 2011 and at the time decried what he called the "injustice that we suffered and heard of from our fathers and grandfathers."

As the fighting spread through the summer of 2011, he joined the assault on Tripoli. When he and a comrade went to reconnoiter an attack, Qaddafi's forces spotted them.

"There was massive shooting at us. I got a bullet in my leg," he said. His comrade was killed. He ended up in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the waist down.

He condemns many of those who emerged as leaders in 2011. "The revolution has been stolen from the honorable people now in their graves," he said.

As the country fell further apart, he joined many others from the east in backing Khalifa Haftar, head of the eastern military forces whose push to capture Tripoli failed last year.

Al-Aguri said his injury changed his life. Now 34, he lives for his two children, he said, and for work he goes each morning to the cattle market to buy and sell livestock.

Hisham Al-Windi came from a family that did well under Qaddafi – his father was a diplomat. But after taking part in protests, he learned he was wanted by police and fled to Tunis.

Traveling to the south of Tunisia, he crossed through a border post held by the rebels and joined their battle in the western mountains. "I was several months in the fight," he said.

Al-Windi was among the first fighters to storm Qaddafi's Tripoli compound. Wandering through the rooms where the leader had lived, he found an item known to all Libyans – his brocaded military hat.

Interviewed that day on television wearing the hat, Al-Windi voiced his hopes for the future, briefly gaining international recognition as a face of Libya's uprising.

"I wanted to say first that Libyans were not as bad as people thought. And I was also saying 'Qaddafi is finished and we need to rebuild'," he said.

He now works in Tunis and is hopeful for change.

"People say to me: 'You took part in this disaster. How do you like it now?' Well of course I don't. But it doesn't mean you have to choose between Qaddafi and chaos. Revolution is a process. We must build a new Libya that we deserve," he said.

In Misrata, Malek Salem Al-Mejae, then aged 20, began to fight in 2011 when his city came under attack by Qaddafi's forces.

That July, he, too, was wounded, losing a leg.

"I was in the back of the truck. A missile fell behind us," he said. "Some of my friends were killed. I received treatment in Tunisia, then returned to Libya."

He had hoped to see far greater progress in Libya than he has in the last decade, and blames Libya's post-revolutionary leaders for the country's failure to unite.

"Unfortunately the situation is as you see it after 10 years of wars. The politicians, who were entrusted with the task, were not up to the standard."



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Haftar offers support to Libya's peace process Arab countries welcome new Libyan executive authority

[Why was Iraqi Kurdistan's Erbil subjected to another rocket attack?](#)

Wed, 2021-02-17 02:48

IRBIL, IRAQI KURDISTAN: With the evidence in hand, independent analysts are hesitant to pin the blame on any specific group for Monday's rocket strike on Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan. But what they all agree on is that both the timing and nature of the attack, which principally targeted a base in the city's airport hosting US military personnel, strongly suggest that it was the handiwork of one or more Iran-backed militias.

According to reports, a volley of approximately 14 rockets hit Erbil international airport and nearby residential areas, killing a civilian contractor and injuring up to nine people. Clips of the incident quickly flooded social media and prompted an extended debate on Twitter among defense analysts over the correct course of US action in the situation.

David Pollock, Bernstein Fellow at the Washington Institute, pointed out that the Saraya Awliya Al-Dam, the self-proclaimed Shiite militia that has claimed responsibility for the attack, has threatened via Instagram more operations targeting what it calls the "American occupation" of Iraq.

"Iran has officially denounced the attack, but that's just the usual propaganda," Pollock told Arab News while emphasizing the fact that the culprits have yet to be identified. He added: "The Iranians may actually support (the attack) to pressure the US to leave Iraq, in line with all their other threats."

The autonomous Kurdistan Region has long been viewed as a distinctly stable and secure area compared with other parts of Iraq. However, incidents such as the Feb. 15 attack could change international perception of the region.



A volley of approximately 14 rockets hit Erbil international airport and nearby residential areas, killing a civilian contractor and injuring up to nine people. (Reuters)

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is all too aware of this possibility. "Our concern is primarily due to the fact that Kurdistan is not used to this kind of attacks and instability," Safeen Dizayee, head of the Foreign Relations Department of the KRG, told Arab News.

"Kurdistan has been renowned for its stability; coexistence; economic and political development; and prosperity. Therefore, when such incidents occur, it is of concern to the community, to the government, and to all those who live here, and also to our friends elsewhere."

Dizayee asserted that the relevant department of the KRG will "continue to provide utmost security and will work hard to find the culprits and perpetrators of this attack, as well as those who we believe are responsible for the last couple of attacks."

At the same time, he stressed the importance of stronger cooperation between KRG and federal security forces for the prevention of such incidents in the future.

Significant security gaps between the federal forces' positions and the Kurdish Peshmerga in disputed territories, such as Kirkuk and Sinjar, have been known to since late 2017. Daesh and other actors, whom Dizayee described as "loose guns who behave outside the control of the state," have exploited these gaps.

Among the actors in question are militias that operate under the broad umbrella of the Iraqi state-sanctioned and predominantly Shiite Hashd al-Shaabi (PMF), but whose loyalty primarily is to Iran and its interests in Iraq. These groups have used attacks against American troops repeatedly in

recent years ostensibly as a pressure tactic to force a US military pullout from Iraq.



Some security analysts have questioned why the US has reacted angrily to the targeting of its forces, yet has neither announced nor taken any retaliatory action. (Reuters)

Pollock believes that tensions in the security gaps between the Kurdish Peshmerga and the PMF in “seam” areas around Kirkuk and Sinjar are “probably part of the story.”

“It’s noteworthy that many high-level statements from various KRG, UN and Iraq government officials now repeat calls for better security coordination in those places,” he said.

Some security analysts have questioned why the US has reacted angrily to the targeting of its forces, yet has neither announced nor taken any retaliatory action. Pollock says that in any event, the Irbil latest attack will serve “to strengthen US resolve to stay in Iraq, including Kurdistan.”

His views are echoed in part by Nicholas Heras, director of government relations at the Institute for the Study of War in Washington D.C., who believes it is “within character” for Iran-backed groups to want to test US resolve through attacks.

In addition, Heras suspects that the latest attack could be a warning from the powerful Iraqi Kata’ib Hezbollah militia, which has targeted American troops in Iraq in the past, to the KRG against cooperating with Turkey.

“How much Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) controls these shadowy militias, or even a group like Kata’ib Hezbollah, is a point of strong disagreement among analysts,” he told Arab News.



Osamah Golpy thinks the fact that the rockets were launched from a location close to Erbil and struck residential areas for the first time suggests that Iran-backed militias believe that US military personnel in Iraq are increasingly relocating to the Kurdistan region. (Reuters)

He said some analysts believe that following the US elimination of the Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, the IRGC has had trouble keeping the shadowy armed groups under its control.

But others think that these groups are merely a front for Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, providing them the "plausible deniability" they need to harm US interests in Iraq with impunity.

Still other analysts believe that "the ecosystem of Kata'ib Hezbollah groups in Iraq is all just different heads of the hydra, with the body being the IRGC," Heras told Arab News.

Osamah Golpy, a senior editor at the Rudaw Media Network in Erbil, says that while Iran may not have directly orchestrated the attack on Erbil, this is something it wanted to happen. He cites a Kurdish proverb that he says sums up Tehran's position: "I wish it happens (I wholeheartedly want it to happen), but not at my hands."

He pointed out that a media network close to the IRGC recently released a video clip with an actor depicting Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani as helplessly weak in the face of Daesh's threat to Erbil in 2014, only to be saved by a heroic Soleimani. The KRG has denounced the video.

Tehran claimed that that the video did not necessarily represent its view, even though Iran's media is strictly censored and heavily controlled by the regime.

"I believe we should look at the attacks within the same framework," Golpy told Arab News. The scenario he describes is one in which Iran's authorities

officially deny having any links to the groups launching the rockets even though they are aware of who they are and their intentions.

Golpy also does not rule out the possibility that Iran is directing some of these groups' actions through the Quds Force, which is one of five IRGC branches specializing in unconventional warfare and military intelligence operations

In his opinion, the fact that the rockets were launched from a location close to Irbil and struck residential areas for the first time suggests that Iran-backed militias believe that US military personnel in Iraq are increasingly relocating to the Kurdistan region.

Put simply, Golpy says, the militias are seeking to "create a similar atmosphere here in Irbil to the one they created in Baghdad."

Twitter: [@pauliddon](https://twitter.com/pauliddon)



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Saudi Arabia condemns 'terrorist' rocket attack in northern Iraq
Iraq rocket attack kills contractor, wounds US service member