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Drexel GPS: Geopolitical Update

U.S. Response Continues: Drone Strike Kills Hezbollah Commander in Baghdad **02/08/24**

This week's geopolitical landscape unfolds against a continuing series of what the Pentagon is referring to as a "tiered" offensive military response to the three U.S. Army soldiers killed in a militant UAV drone attack on a U.S. base in Jordan last week.

In an overnight operation Thursday, a senior commander affiliated with an Iran-backed militia was killed in a U.S. drone strike in eastern Baghdad.

Meanwhile, on the eve of elections in Pakistan, a series of explosions near various polling and candidate offices have killed scores of people. This triggered a highly controversial temporary shutdown of the entire country's cellphone network on election day by the government.

Hezbollah Commander Killed in Baghdad Drone Strike

Here's What We Know

- The targeted vehicle was carrying Abu Baqir al-Saadi, a prominent figure within the militant group known as Kataib Hezbollah (KH), who was the primary target of this recent strike.
- As senior commander of Kataib Hezbollah, the Pentagon attributed al-Saadi's role in orchestrating attacks against American forces in the region as justification for the strike. Notably, this militia (KH) had been previously linked to multiple drone attacks including the one in Jordan that claimed the lives of three U.S. troops.

What is Kataib Hezbollah?

- Kataib Hezbollah (which means Party of God Brigades) is not a subsidiary of the Hezbollah militia in Lebanon, although both have close links to Iran and are considered to function as Iranian proxies.
- KH is considered the most powerful of the Iranian-backed militant groups operating out of the Iraq region. It is among the groups who have claimed responsibility for over 160 attacks on U.S. forces in the region since the beginning of the Gaza war.
- Founded in 2003, KH seeks to establish an Iran-aligned government in Iraq, expel U.S. and coalition forces from the country, and advance Iranian interests throughout the Middle East.

Drexel GPS Assessment

- This is not the first time the U.S. has targeted a key leader of KH. The U.S. killed the founder of KH, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, in the same drone strike four years ago in Baghdad that killed Iranian general Qassem Soleimani.

- An example of the complexity of the delicate political and security nuances the U.S. faces when dealing with this militant group is evidenced by the significant amount of representation its members (most of which are Iranian-backed and funded) currently have in the Iraqi government.
- For example, Muhandis was also a senior Iraqi government security official, and his killing dramatically raised tensions in Iraq with U.S. forces.
- The U.S. military response to the Jordan attack will likely include several more key militant group leaders and infrastructure targets in the region.
- The U.S. will maintain a strategy aimed at disrupting these groups' capabilities of carrying out large-scale attacks against key international shipping/commerce and preventing their ability to conduct major destabilizing operations in the region.
- The U.S. strategy for now remains to avoid direct conflict with Iran. Iran at this point is also incentivized to avoid direct conflict with the U.S. However, Iran views regional instability as a benefit to stave off what it perceives is a hostile regional isolation strategy by the U.S. The U.S. was engaged in diplomacy in the Middle East between Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other countries in the region prior to the Oct 7th attacks.
- It remains to be seen how much unrest Iran is willing to foment in the region, as well as how far the acts by its proxies will have to go before triggering direct attribution and military action from the U.S.
- The attack showcases the U.S. still maintains a high-degree of intelligence assets and precision-strike capabilities in Iraq and the region. The strike was carried out against a moving vehicle on a busy street, and there are no indications of collateral damage or civilian casualties

Kataib Hezbollah Commander Killed By U.S. Drone in Baghdad



Pre-Election Day Violence Spurs Pakistan to cut Mobile Phone Service

A pattern of violence related to the upcoming election in Pakistan prompted the government to suspend all mobile phone service on election day this week. The violence included bombings which killed 28 people in the Balochistan region and the killing of at least one police officer in different areas around the country.

Drexel GPS Assessment:

Cutting phone service is actually nothing new In Pakistan; authorities frequently restrict access to mobile phones during significant protests or religious festivals. The measure aims to prevent armed individuals from communicating with each other. Additionally, jammers are employed to prevent the activation of bombs via mobile phones.

- The suspension of mobile services follows a call by recently jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan to his supporters to wait outside polling booths after voting until results are announced.
- Pakistan's highly decentralized government contributes to much of its political turmoil.
- Last year, Khan's supporters ransacked several government buildings and clashed with troops as they tried to prevent his arrest.
- The suspension of internet and mobile networks is seen as an issue for local election observers who have to go to different polling stations and need to communicate with other observers.
- It is important to note that Balochistan is different from the rest of Pakistan and the violence there is not necessarily linked to election issues in other parts of the country.
- Balochistan is a very poor region and is extremely resentful towards the rest of Pakistan for what it perceives as the unfair exploitation of its natural resources.
- There has been an insurgency in the region for more than 70 years and the candidates for office tend to be very tribal and rarely even show up in Islamabad because they simply do not care; they have a hyper-local regional focus.
- Local rivalries between jihadist and local candidates is a highly probable reason for the bombing as there are many in the region who simply do not want elections to take place.
- The reality of the situation in Pakistan is that regardless of who wins the general election, decisions in Pakistan are really determined by its powerful army.
- Politicians who do not fall in line routinely find themselves imprisoned.

Drexel GPS will continue to monitor these situations as they develop.

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