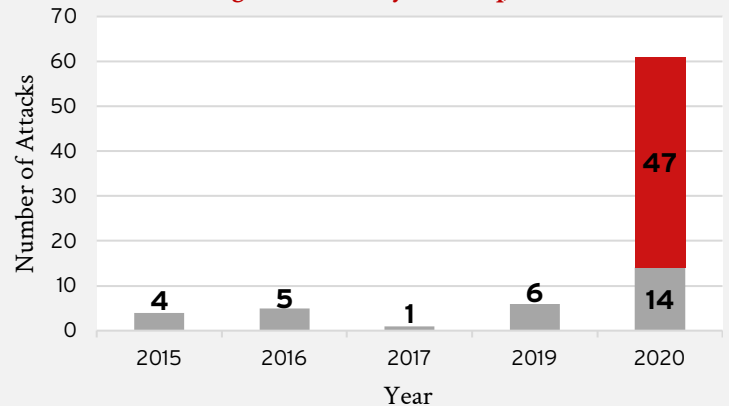


OVERVIEW

In 2020, terrorist attacks targeting US-coalition logistics convoys as well as bases housing US military personnel in Iraq increased dramatically as organizational interests evolved. This research brief uses the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) to analyze the nature of these attacks and contextualize the tactics and strategies they represent. Pro-Iran militia groups were primarily responsible for the attacks for which perpetrator group information was available. The attacks almost exclusively used explosives and typically caused property damage, but relatively few casualties. Those that targeted logistics supply convoys were concentrated along the international highway in southern Iraq, while attacks on bases were concentrated in the north. Moreover, new data indicate that this strategic targeting trend continued to escalate in early 2021.

Terrorist Attacks on US-Coalition Bases and Logistics Convoys in Iraq, 2015-2020



Source: Global Terrorism Database

■ Base ■ Logistics Convoy

BACKGROUND

The rise of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2014 provided a common enemy for US military personnel and pro-Iran militias operating under the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Following the territorial defeat of ISIL and collapse of the so-called “caliphate” in December 2017, tensions between US military personnel and pro-Iran militia groups intensified.¹ The situation reached a flashpoint on December 27, 2019, when a rocket attack at K-1 Airbase killed a US civilian contractor and injured four US servicemembers and two Iraqi soldiers. US authorities attributed the attack to Kata’ib Hezbollah, which denied responsibility, while Iraqi officials attributed the attack to ISIL. In response to the rocket attack, US forces targeted five Kata’ib Hezbollah positions in Iraq and Syria, killing 25 militia members and injuring 51 others.²

On December 31, 2019, a protest outside the US embassy in Baghdad led by Kata’ib Hezbollah and other militia groups turned violent. Three days later, on January 3, 2020, a US drone strike killed Iranian general Qasem Soleimani and PMF commander Abu

Mahdi al-Muhandis. On January 5, the Iraqi Parliament passed a non-binding resolution to expel the roughly 5,000 US troops remaining in Iraq. The resolution did not provide a timetable for withdrawal, but militia leader Qais Khazali stated “If [US troops] don’t leave, then they will be considered occupation forces.”³

Since 2017, US troop levels in Iraq had remained relatively stable at around 5,000.⁴ In September 2020, US officials announced that a drawdown to 3,000 troops would take place that fall.⁵ Then in November, officials announced a further withdrawal of 500 troops, leaving 2,500 in the country.⁶ Though US officials announced the end of the combat mission in Iraq in December 2021, those 2,500 troops remain in an advisory capacity.⁷

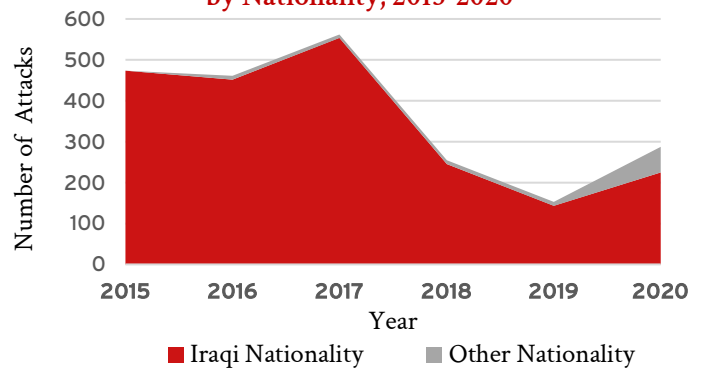
TERRORIST ATTACKS AGAINST MILITARY TARGETS IN IRAQ, 2015-2020

The GTD recorded 2,191 terrorist attacks against military targets in Iraq from 2015 to 2020. These attacks primarily targeted soldiers, bases or checkpoints, and convoys. From a peak of more than 500 attacks in 2017, terrorism targeting military in Iraq declined in 2018 and 2019 before registering a relatively sharp uptick in 2020. Part of that trend includes attacks on military bases housing US and coalition personnel, and logistics convoys supplying those bases.

The nationality of the military forces attacked during this six-year period was primarily Iraqi. Attacks occasionally targeted military forces from other countries, including Turkish, Syrian, and international coalition forces. However, no terrorist attacks predominately targeting non-Iraqi military forces took place in 2015. From 2016 to 2019, attacks against non-Iraqi military forces remained steady, ranging from 8 to 10 per year. These attacks increased to 62 in 2020, 54 of which specifically targeted international forces operating under the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR).

From 2015 to 2019, there were 16 terrorist attacks targeting either US bases in Iraq or Iraqi bases housing US personnel, and no attacks observed strictly on US-coalition logistics convoys. In 2020, there were 14 attacks targeting bases and 47 attacks

Terrorist Attacks Targeting Military in Iraq, by Nationality, 2015-2020

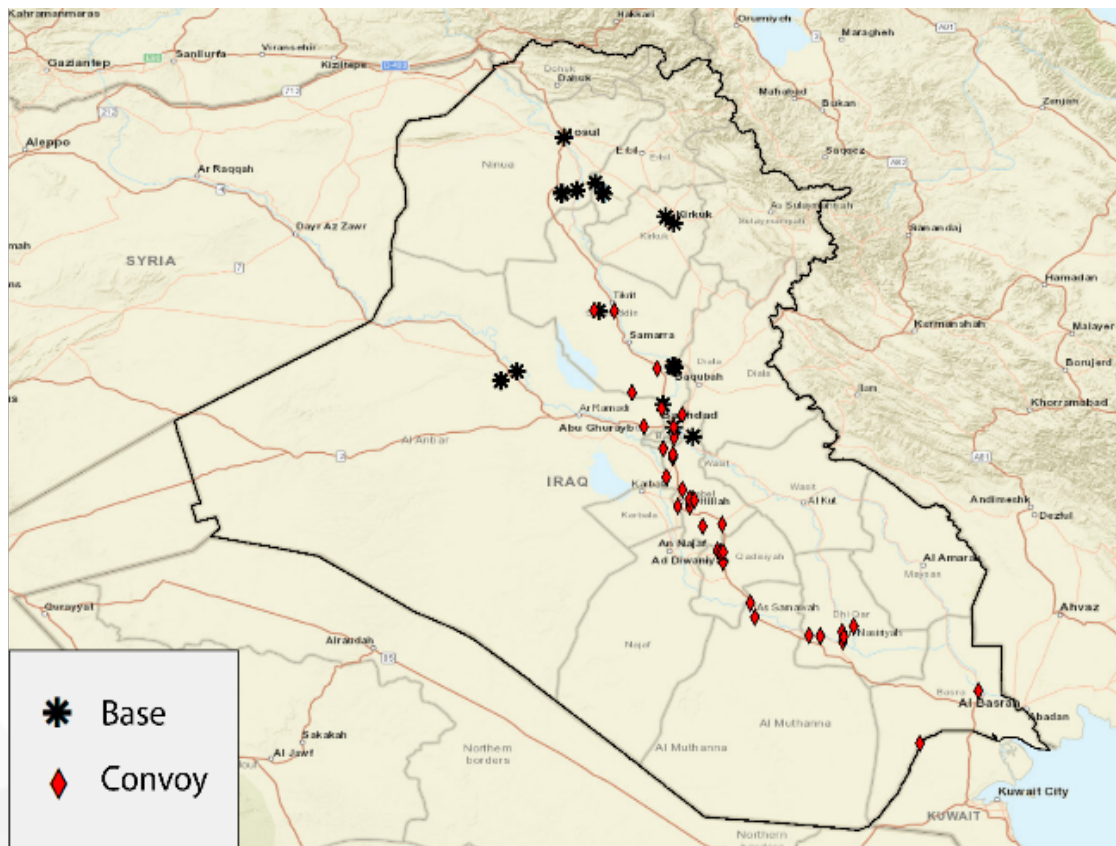


Source: Global Terrorism Database

targeting logistics convoys. Thus, of the 77 attacks on US bases and logistics convoys from 2015 to 2020, 79% occurred in 2020.

Geographically, throughout the six-year period of observation, attacks on bases were concentrated primarily in Baghdad and points north, whereas attacks on logistics convoys largely occurred south of Baghdad in Babil (18 attacks) or further south in Diwaniyah (6 attacks). It is likely that these convoys carrying supplies from US assets in Kuwait were attacked along this southern corridor before they reached their destinations in the north.

Locations of Terrorist Attacks on US-Coalition Bases and Logistics Convoys in Iraq, 2015-2020



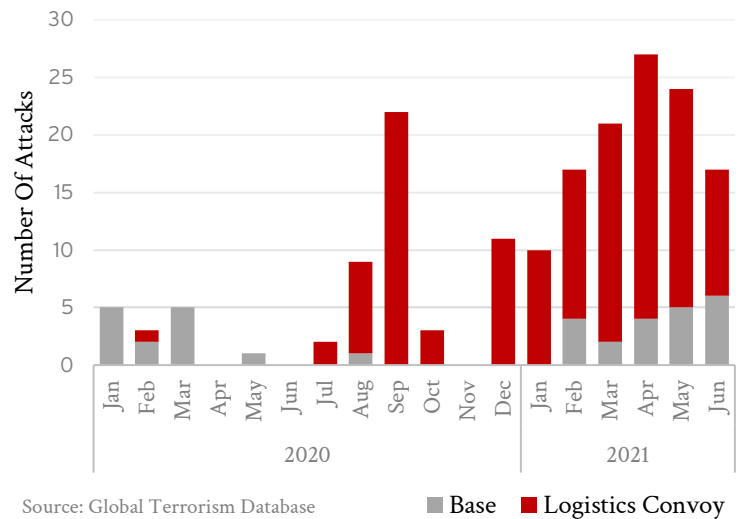
Source: Global Terrorism Database

ATTACK TRENDS

Monthly trends beginning in 2020 show that terrorist attacks on bases occurred primarily in the first quarter of the year. This marks the continuation of tensions following the attacks on US bases in December 2019 and the killing of Soleimani and Al-Muhandis in early January. The strategy shifted in the second half of the year. Almost all the attacks targeting logistics convoys occurred after June, including a significant uptick in September. This increase coincided with a September 9th announcement by the US military of a drawdown of troops from approximately 5,200 to 3,000.⁸ The withdrawal announcement itself does not appear to have had an immediate impact on the rate of attacks. Seven occurred before the September 9th announcement; 15 occurred throughout the rest of the month.

In October, however, a Kata'ib Hezbollah spokesperson speaking on behalf of the newly formed Iraqi Resistance Coordination Commission announced a "conditional ceasefire" wherein the group would halt attacks on US military forces on the condition that the US military present a timetable for complete withdrawal from Iraq.⁹ This may account for the decline in attacks in October and November. Following the two-month lull, attacks targeting logistics convoys increased in December, and this trend

Terrorist Attacks on US-Coalition Bases and Logistics Convoys in Iraq, by Month, January 2020 - June 2021



Source: Global Terrorism Database

continued steadily into the first half of 2021. From January to June 2021, there were 21 attacks targeting bases and 95 attacks targeting logistics convoys serving the US coalition--an increase from 14 attacks on bases and 47 attacks on logistics convoys throughout all of 2020.

PERPETRATORS, WEAPONS, AND CASUALTIES

Examining the details of attacks targeting US-Coalition logistics convoys and bases reveals trends regarding the perpetrators of these attacks, the weapons they used, and the casualties they caused. Perpetrator attributions highlight the shift from violence carried out by ISIL against US interests to violence carried out by pro-Iran militias. Of the attacks carried out by identified perpetrator groups, Kata'ib Hezbollah was the most prevalent, with 17 attacks. Sixteen of the attacks were attributed to unspecified Iran-backed militias while 12 were carried out by Ashab al-Kahf. ISIL, by contrast, was responsible for only 11 attacks. The majority (118) of the terrorist attacks on US-coalition bases and logistics convoys from January 2015 to June 2021 were carried out by unidentified perpetrators. However, source documents for the attacks indicate that US government officials often blamed¹ attacks of this nature on Iran-backed militias.¹⁰ The attacks carried out by ISIL operatives all targeted bases rather than convoys and took place between 2015 and 2019. This suggests that the uptick in the use of

Perpetrators of Terrorist Attacks on US-Coalition Bases and Logistics Convoys in Iraq, January 2015 - June 2021

Perpetrator Group Name	Number of Attacks		
	Base	Convoy	Total
Kata'ib Hezbollah*	4	13	17
Unspecified Iran-backed militia*	8	8	16
Ashab al-Kahf*	1	11	12
Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)	11	0	11
International Resistance*	0	4	4
Saraya Awliya al-Dam*	3	1	4
Khyber Brigade*	1	2	3
Revolutionary League*	3	0	3
Saraya Thorat Aleshreen*	0	2	2
Martyr Karim Daraam Brigade*	0	1	1
Popular Mobilization Forces (Iraq)*	1	0	1
Sabiqun Battalion*	0	1	1
Unknown	19	99	118
Total	51	142	193

*Pro-Iran militia group

Source: Global Terrorism Database

¹ The Global Terrorism Database records information on the perpetrators of the attacks, but when attributions of responsibility are purely speculative or unsubstantiated, they are not formally documented in the database.

this tactic in 2020, and its persistence in 2021, was likely driven by Kata'ib Hezbollah and other pro-Iran militias rather than ISIL.

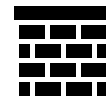
Almost all (98%) of the attacks targeting US-coalition bases and logistics convoys involved explosives. Attacks on bases were most frequently carried out with projectiles (73%) such as rockets or mortars, suicide bombing (12%), or remote-triggered devices (10%). Assaultants used explosives in 141 of the 142 (99%) attacks on logistics convoys. Source documents typically provide little detail about the types of explosive devices used to target convoys, but at least 90 (63%) were specified as roadside bombings and none involved suicide tactics. The supply convoys were often operated by local Iraqi contractors who may not have had the equipment or technical expertise necessary to carry out mine-clearance operations along their routes.

Of the 51 attacks on bases, 15 (29%) resulted in non-assailant casualties: 61 victims were injured and nine were killed. Of the 142 attacks on logistics convoys, 20 (14%) resulted in non-assailant casualties: 30 victims were injured and three were killed. Additionally, at least 46% of attacks on logistics convoys resulted in property damage to vehicles, containers, or tankers.

CONCLUSION

Many groups and organizations across global conflict zones carry out attacks aimed at expelling what they regard as occupying forces. The dynamics of the attacks on US-coalition bases and logistics convoys provide insight into the strategy of the perpetrators. Attacks on logistics convoys resulted in fewer deaths and injuries but still yielded property damage which suggests that they may be intended to cause economic and supply-chain disruptions for US security personnel without provoking a significant military response. However, different pro-Iran militia groups do not necessarily agree on tactics and targeting practices. Hardline groups have criticized the targeting of logistics convoys as too limited in scope.¹¹ The resumption of attacks targeting US-coalition bases seen in the first half of 2021 may indicate a concerted shift in strategy to intensify the conflict, or perhaps a splintering of strategies among various groups. Additional research on attacks with unidentified perpetrators, and the relatively new pro-Iran militia groups that emerged and claimed responsibility for some of these attacks, could provide useful insights into consistencies and inconsistencies in the groups' collective strategy.

98% OF ATTACKS ON BASES AND LOGISTICS CONVOYS WERE CARRIED OUT WITH EXPLOSIVES



ATTACKS ON BASES

29% resulted in casualties

61 people injured

9 people killed



ATTACKS ON CONVOYS

14% resulted in casualties

30 people injured

3 people killed

Source: Global Terrorism Database

The terrorist attacks outlined in this brief were purportedly part of an overall strategy to increase pressure on US forces to leave Iraq. Indeed, some groups cited this as their motivation for carrying out particular attacks.¹² The United States ended its combat mission in Iraq in December 2021. As of this report, approximately 2,500 US troops remain in Iraq in an “advise and assist” capacity. Several factors play a role in the US government’s determination of appropriate troop levels in Iraq. These include, but are not limited to, the threat posed by ISIL and other terrorist groups, the Iraqi army’s ability to counter that threat on its own, geopolitical tensions with Iran, and domestic support for continued military presence in Iraq. It is unclear the extent to which the increase in attacks targeting US-coalition personnel and resources impacted the pace of US troop withdrawal, but it likely played a role in the calculus.

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- ¹ Giglio, M. (2019, May 8). The flash point between America and Iran could be Iraq's militias. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/05/iraq-militias-flash-point-between-united-states-and-iran/589003/>
- ² BBC. (2019, December 30). US attacks Iran-backed militia bases in Iraq and Syria. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50941693>
- ³ Qiblawi, T., Karadsheh, J., & Damon, A. (2020, January 6). Iraq has voted to expel US troops. whether they'll actually be kicked out is far from clear. *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/06/middleeast/iraq-us-troops-explainer-intl/index.html>
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- ⁵ BBC. (2020, September 9). US to withdraw 2,200 troops from Iraq by end of September. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-54085129>
- ⁶ Jones, D. (2020, November 16). White House orders thousands of U.S. troops withdrawn from Afghanistan and Iraq. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/16/935513762/white-house-orders-thousands-of-u-s-troops-withdrawn-from-afghanistan-and-iraq>
- ⁷ Davison, J. (2021, December 9). U.S.-led troops end Iraq combat mission, as planned – military officials. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraq-security-adviser-says-international-coalition-ends-combat-mission-no-us-2021-12-09/>
- ⁸ BBC. (2020, September 9).
- ⁹ Loveluck, L. (2020, October 11). Iran-backed militias announce 'conditional' cease-fire against U.S. in Iraq. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/iran-backed-militias-announce-conditional-cease-fire-against-us-in-iraq/2020/10/11/7a64f624-0bbd-11eb-b404-8d1e675ec701_story.html
- ¹⁰ See for example: McKenzie Jr. K. (2020, November 19). General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. remarks as delivered to the National Council on US-Arab Relations. U.S. Central Command. <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/2421604/general-kenneth-f-mckenzie-jr-remarks-as-delivered-to-the-national-council-on-u/>; *The Arab Weekly*. (2020, September 18). Pro-Iran militias suspected of attack on US school in Iraq. *The Arab Weekly*. <https://the arabweekly.com/pro-iran-militias-suspected-attack-us-school-iraq/>; Schaer, C. (2021, December 18). End of an era? US ends combat mission in Iraq. *Deutsche Welle*. <https://www.dw.com/en/iraq-after-us-ends-combat-mission/a-60174121>
- ¹¹ Malik H. (2021, March 3). The tuna and noodles saga: Findings from a war of words between militias. *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tuna-and-noodles-saga-findings-war-words-between-militias>
- ¹² South Front. (2020, September 24). Iraqi 'resistance groups claim responsibility for recent attacks on U.S.-led coalition convoys. *South Front*. <https://southfront.org/iraqi-resistance-groups-claim-responsibility-for-recent-attacks-on-u-s-led-coalition-convoys/>

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

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For more information about the GTD, and to browse or download the data, visit start.umd.edu/gtd. Please direct questions about the GTD to gtd@start.umd.edu.

ABOUT START

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