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THE CURRENT: What's the significance of Biden's first military strikes in Syria?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

On Thursday night, the U.S. carried out air strikes in Syria near the Iraq border in response to rocket attacks on U.S. and coalition forces by Iranian-backed militias, the first such military action from the Biden administration.

With us to tell us more about what's happening there is Michael O'Hanlon, senior fellow and co-director of the Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology here at Brookings. Mike, thanks for talking to us today.

O'HANLON: Hey, Adrianna, nice to be with you.

PITA: Mike, what can you tell us about who and what was targeted in this strike and why?

O'HANLON: Well, as you say, we were trying to retaliate against the broader regional holdings and assets of an Iranian-backed militia that we suspect was behind the earlier attack of just a few days ago in Iraqi Kurdistan. So, the first interesting thing to note is why this attack happened in Syria. Of course, that Iraq-Syria border is fluid, at a time when Syria's government has been engaged in civil war for a decade and hasn't really been able to control much of its territory, and also has been more than happy to collaborate with Iran, and therefore as part of the broader ecosystem, it gives rise to these kinds of militias. Iran is the common thread, and therefore from our point of view, it's not worth worrying too much about where an attack happens when in fact, the Syrian government is not completely sovereign over its own territory and its in cahoots with Iran. That would be the explanation for why we wouldn't distinguish too much about one country over the next. I would agree with that approach.

In terms of the kinds of targets struck, this is the sort of thing where you believe you've seen some activity previously, probably trying to minimize the loss of life, so it sounds more like we were after supplies, weapons, etc., rather than people. But that's just my initial sense based on what's been reported so far. So in a sense, it's the Biden administration's effort to be resolute but also be proportionate and maybe even de-escalatory. I think it was therefore just about the right balance. It doesn't change the power balance on the ground, of course, but it sets out an early indicator of how Biden will think about this problem, which at least in terms of protecting American personnel and assets is not radically different from his predecessors.

PITA: On that note, there was a similar type strike against similar types of Iranian-backed militias in this border area back in 2019, although at that time it did happen on Iraqi soil. That did raise some objections in Iraq about a U.S. strike there being a violation of its sovereignty. Do you know on this occasion, did we cooperate more closely with the Iraqi allies in the Kurdistan region, and how that worked this time, whether there were objections from our allies on the ground?

O'HANLON: That's an excellent point. Yes, the Iraqis were upset with us when we attacked in the 2019 period that you mentioned in retaliation to similar types of strikes against our bases that were perhaps slightly more threatening, slightly larger in scale, and then we retaliated with a little bit bigger of a blow. But most of all, we did it without asking permission on Iraqi soil, which led the Iraqi parliament to think about asking us to get up and leave entirely with our military footprint. We didn't do that because the parliament didn't have that kind of authority, and the prime ministership in Iraq was in some flux, so we waited it out and ultimately were able to stay, but this time it appears we tried to avoid that kind of issue altogether. So, if there was consultation with Iraq, it was perhaps less in the spirit of asking permission, since we didn't really need Baghdad's permission to attack a target on Syrian soil, but as you say, there still might have been intelligence collaboration. It may have been the kind of thing where we didn't give Iraq the chance to object and didn't really want it to feel any sense of owning the decision either, so it could claim that it was not engaged in any way in this particular retaliation, and yet if it wanted to be helpful, it could have done so behind the scenes.

So, this particular target that we chose, again, it's not like we tracked down a top leader; it's not as if we eliminated the majority of the capacity for further violence; so the target selection doesn't strike me as all that particularly interesting, and I'm not sure how much help we needed to find, essentially, that kind of a warehouse. Except for the fact that, again, it was on Syrian soil where we didn't have to go down this path. So, maybe the Biden administration was just trying to buy some time as it establishes a working relationship with Iraq, not trying to pre-judge what kind of collaboration will happen in situations like this by doing something that didn't require Baghdad to be involved whatsoever.

PITA: There have been some concerns raised, particularly from congressional Democrats, but also others, about this use of force and whether it should have required congressional approval. Was Congress briefed before this strike happened, and what's your understanding of where a strike like this falls under executive authority versus congressional approval needed?

O'HANLON: In general, I think Congress should be involved in these kinds of decisions. For example, I thought that when Barack Obama used force against Gadhafi in 2011, it would have been preferable for Congress to have some say in that. And in the end, of course, it would up being a multi-month operation, not just a set of pinpricks, and frankly I think rose to the level of a small war, where in retrospect, it would have been appropriate for Congress to be involved. This case is far smaller. It's more in the spirit of almost tactical, immediate reprisal. It's not quite hot pursuit or immediate pre-emptive self-defense, but it's small enough in a part of the world where we've had long-standing operations against ISIS and al-Qaida groups and even Iranian-affiliated groups, that for me, it's not a threshold that requires separate congressional action, or frankly, even notification. I'm pretty inclined to think that Congress should err on the side of being more involved in these sorts of decisions, but we've been involved in Iraq for two decades with various kinds of authorities, often dealing with militias backed by Iran, and Congress has had plenty of opportunity previously to weigh in on the broader mission. So, in that regard, I'm not inclined to get myself worked up about this one.

I think when you go after a Soleimani like the Trump administration did a year ago, that's a little closer to requiring congressional authorization or at least notification because that's a new kind of step; that's a different thing than we had done previously, especially given the seniority of the Iranian involved. That I thought was just over the line where the Trump administration should have asked for some kind of blessing or at least made Congress aware. This case, I just think for a host of reasons – the location, the target set, the precedent, the long-standing conflict – I don't think it required Congress to have a substantial role. However, looking forward, I think the Biden administration owes Congress an Iraq policy. Maybe we'll come to that with your next question. But I think it's important not to view this pinprick response as a policy unto itself. It's essentially buying time to come up with a policy, where Congress's role will be more important. And I think that's where Biden needs to go.

PITA: On that point, as you mentioned, the Biden administration is still establishing its working relationship with Iraqi leadership. Where does a strike like this fall into the question of the future of the U.S. military presence in Iraq and military action in the region?

O'HANLON: I would say first of all, Iraq still needs some of our help. And it's a very modest military footprint: 2500 troops. This is a part of the world where we once had 175,000, so we're talking about less than 3% of the kind of numbers we used to have, and even less than we had in the latter couple of years of the Obama administration, when we sent in 5-6000 U.S. troops to help with the overall campaign against ISIS. So, this level of footprint is sustainable. I think it's good for Iraq. It gives us some daily workings with Iraqis, gives them access to American intelligence and vice-versa, gives them some ability to call in American airpower if they're ever really under duress, and it gives us a way to balance Iran's role inside of Iraq. Just being present and maintaining these kinds of collaborations and relationships that are so important. So I want to keep all that, and therefore I think Biden did the right thing by not jeopardizing our ability to do that through some kind of a unilateralist U.S. strike that the Iraqi parliament might have objected to strongly had it occurred on Iraqi soil.

Also, Iraq has been suffering like everybody else from COVID, depressed oil prices, ongoing economic stagnation, and it's got still a relatively new prime minister, al-Kadhimi. I believe we should consider some kinds of debt forgiveness and/or outright economic assistance of a moderate amount in order to help this Iraqi government really establish the kind of economic growth that'll be important to strengthen its overall standing going forward, and the country's overall standing going forward, to bring more Iraqis into the workforce, to give more of them a sense of ownership into where their country's headed. I think that reduces the appeal of extremism and the influence of Iran. So that's the kind of overall package: sustain the modest footprint in military and intelligence terms; maintain occasional arms sales and training relationships as well; and consider in addition to a strong diplomatic presence, an economic relationship where we recognize the next few years are important for Iraq and think of ways to help it coming out of COVID, and coming out of these conflicts to really get on its feet.

PITA: Lastly, I want to ask you about the Biden administration's approach to the region more broadly. The administration has expressed a desire to focus less on the Middle East and hopefully deprioritize that in favor of a combination of domestic concerns and China, and East Asia. I recognize that with this being a more limited strike, I may be asking you to read too much into the tea leaves in this case, but what, if anything, does this action indicate about Biden administration's goals and priorities for how they're going to handle Middle East policy more broadly?

O'HANLON: I think one thing it tells you is the Biden administration's not going to pull out of the Middle East. They're not so starry-eyed that they wasted weeks and weeks and weeks trying to figure out just what kind of tiny military response was appropriate. They figured it out quickly, they went for something proportionate and even de-escalatory. They found a way to do it without roiling the relationship with Baghdad, and they proceeded. I think that was good. It suggests a pragmatism and an eyes-open awareness of how that region works.

Yes, I'd like to see the U.S. military footprint reduced in a few places. Bruce Riedel and I have written a few pieces about that at Brookings; Tamara Wittes has written about that, along with Mara Karlin, who's now at the Pentagon. I have no doubt these kinds of options will be considered. Mark Esper, the former secretary of defense for Donald Trump, just had a conversation with us at Brookings this week publicly, where he also wished them well in being able to figure out a path to scale back some of the presence in the broader region: maybe in Bahrain, maybe in Kuwait, maybe in Qatar; not so much in Iraq or Afghanistan, where I think we've already downsized about as far as we can go. But it is true that the U.S. military presence in that region is probably a bit bigger than it needs to be.

The good news is, it's less than half of what it was at the peaks of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and it's still a modest fraction – less than 5% of the total U.S. active duty military strength is in that region at any given time. But we could still benefit by scaling back the size of our presence and reducing a bit the role of our military in our overall Middle East policy. I think, look for Biden to make some smart adjustments as part of the global posture review the Pentagon and the government are now undertaking. And I would look for a few thousand fewer GIs in Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and/or Saudi Arabia as the most likely outcome. And also, perhaps, feeling less enslaved to have an aircraft carrier in or near the Persian Gulf most of the time, which is a policy the Trump administration was also trying to get away from before hostilities or tensions with Iran forced it to reconsider. But I think even when things are tense with Iran, we have enough of a multi-dimensional military capability that we needn't always have an aircraft carrier or Marine amphibious ready group right there.

So, look for some streamlining and I think it would be a wise policy.

PITA: Mike, thanks very much for talking to us about this today.

O'HANLON: My pleasure, my friend.