

Erbil Strikes: Is Israel Illegally Operating in Iraqi Kurdistan?

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The Tehran-Tel Aviv war is out in the open. Israel’s Mossad is actively pursuing an infiltration of Iran’s strategic depth and edging up to its borders. But now Iran will retaliate to oust the Israelis from places they don’t belong.

Multiple rockets fell in Erbil, the capital of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR), early on Sunday with Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) claiming responsibility for the attack.

A dozen Fateh missiles hit an unknown target at 1:30 am local time, a small distance from the site of the new US consulate on the outskirts of Erbil. Although no deaths were reported by Kurdish authorities, Iranian sources have claimed multiple deaths and injuries of Mossad operatives, and several buildings were collaterally impacted in the strike including the headquarters of the [Kurdistan24](#) news agency.

The IRGC however, claimed that the targeted site was an Israeli intelligence outpost:

“Following the recent crimes of the fake Zionist regime and our previous statements that the crimes and evils of this infamous regime will not go unanswered, last night, the strategic center of Zionist conspiracy and evil was targeted by powerful missiles of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps,” an IRGC statement read hours following the incident.

In further contrast to media reports, Iranian state media [Mehr](#) published a list of the reportedly slain Israeli Mossad operatives in the attack.

A senior Iranian [security source](#) told *The Cradle* on Monday that the IRGC operation was conducted in direct retaliation for a 14 February Israeli attack on an IRGC-operated drone base in the Mahidasht district of Kermanshah, inside Iran.

Israel and the Kurds

The Kurds have decades of established [ties with Israel](#) which date back to the 1950s, and has included covert [military training](#). However, the existence of Mossad spy bases operating in the IKR has been disputed by Kurdish authorities and the spokesperson for the autonomous region's government last year, not for the first time, [denied](#) the "baseless accusations".

Erbil's Governor Omed Khoshnaw told reporters in the aftermath of Sunday's strikes that "the topic of Israel has been talked about for a long time, that is baseless, there is no Israeli base in that area."

Iraqi law prohibits relations with Israel – restrictions that were fortified last year after a highly-publicized pro-Israel event in Erbil fell flat.

Nevertheless, a senior US official briefed on the Erbil attack told the *New York Times* on Monday that the building struck by IRGC ballistic missiles served as an Israeli training facility. The US consulate was not targeted but the IRGC didn't mind that it was nearby, the official added. This claim was [dismissed](#) a day later by a "senior Biden administration official" who described the targeted site as a civilian residence only.

Erbil, a Mossad spy hub

According to Kurdish political commentator [Niyaz Hamid](#), "It was agreed between these parties that the city of Erbil should become the center of the Israeli Mossad, where several Iranian Kurdish opposition groups are also based. This agreement has had the consequence of making the city of Erbil the center of the war between Israel and Iran."

"This affects the people of the area," he argues. We saw this when Iran bombed the Mossad's secret bases in Erbil."

Hamid's comments were made in relation to the visit on 12 March – the day before the Erbil missile attack – between the IKR's President Nechirvan Barzani and his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Antalya, Turkey.

While relations between Turkey and Iran had become strained following last year's Iraqi elections, the Ankara has moved swiftly in recent months to improve its ties with Israel and the UAE. The three countries, he believes, want to form a government in Iraq that serves serve their interests. "On the other hand, Iran is an obstacle to the formation of this [kind of] government."

Iranian-Kurdish journalist Pooya Mirzaei, using [security camera footage](#) provided by Kurdistan 24, does not believe the target was a civilian site. "Contrary to claims by the Iraqi government and the KRG (Kurdistan Regional Government), a secondary explosion after the rockets hit may indicate the presence of ammunition and explosives" at the alleged Mossad base in Erbil.

Iran's motives

In an interview with *The Cradle*, the official spokesman of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party's Erbil office, Azad Jolla, concludes "the Iranian attack on Erbil did not happen without a reason. Attacks on Iraqi Kurdistan have happened before – 27 times to be precise – where either Iran or groups that are close to Iran have somehow attacked the Kurdistan

region, Erbil in most of these occurrences. Yet this one differs a lot from previous attacks.”

According to Jolla, in order to understand the motive behind the attack, it is important to appreciate Iran’s reasoning.

“One issue that can be seen here is the agreements made between Nechirvan Barzani and Erdogan to send gas through Turkey to Europe, as a substitute for Russian gas. But also the sending of oil through Turkey to Israel and other parts of the world.”

“Russia does not want to allow Turkey to do this, and there is a possibility it attempts to block this through Iran. That is a possibility, although a small one,” he emphasized.

“But on the other side, there is another possible explanation. And that is that there are a mix of different intelligence agencies present in Iraq, and most prominently in the Kurdistan region. There is the presence of Turkish MIT, Iranian Ettalaat, and yes, also Israeli Mossad, the American CIA, agencies from European countries, and even Russian KGB.”

“So yes, there is – among others – an Israeli Mossad presence. And this presence provokes Iran to attack their sites in the Kurdistan region. Iran has done this before, and will probably do it again.”

One of the buildings impacted by Sunday’s attack was a villa owned by the CEO of the Iraqi Kurdish oil company KAR group, [Sheikh Baz Karim Barzinji](#). “Iran is our neighbor and has assisted Kurdistan’s people during difficult times,” he was quoted as saying and also invited Iran’s ambassador to Iraq to visit his home to see the damage for himself.

Kurdish politician Hiwa Seid Salim told *The Cradle* he suspects the reason for the Iranian attack on the Barzinji’s villa was due to his business activities, which Iranian security sources claim includes selling Iraqi oil and gas to Israel.

But Salim believes “the real theatre of conflict between Israel and Iran is in Syria, not in the Kurdistan region, and that the targeting of the house of Sheikh Baz Karim Barzinji has more to do with his influence in the KRG on the export of gas, which has become a hot topic since the start of the war between Ukraine and Russia. There are talks concerning Kurdish gas becoming an alternative for Russian gas in export to Europe, which is an initiative Iran would like to block.”

Jolla, the PUK spokesman, has a more nuanced view. Asked how the alleged Mossad presence could be tied to Kurdish businessman Barzinji, Jolla responded with a detailed description of the site of the attack.

“This villa compound is closed off to the public, it has walls and barbed wire, security guards, checkpoints around, and nobody is allowed to approach the compound. Nobody could approach the compound as it was heavily secured. If this villa compound is targeted with missile attacks by the Iranians, this is not done without a reason. All people here in Erbil are ready to accept this reality.”

The Cradle’s Iranian security source said much the same, while offering further [exclusive details](#) on the IRGC’s target: “The structure of these two villas had two roofs that completely protected it from 240mm missiles. An explosion-proof engineering roof under a shock-absorbing roof that had two layers under the gable roof.” He says that post-operation

images confirm this assessment. The building, despite being hit by 12 missiles, maintained its structural integrity.

Dismissing the dominant Kurdish Democratic Party's (KDP) spin on Sunday's strikes, Azad Jolla claims that the party's "media, personalities and leaders try hard to convince the public that the targeted villa is the house of a businessman, and where he lives with his wife and children, and there was nobody or nothing else present. This is also crystal clear not true, because what would Iran have to do bombarding the house of a businessman and his family, why would it target it? How come the house received 12 missiles and is in ruins, but there is no family member or personnel of sheikh Baz Karim wounded or dead in the attack?"

"It looks like the statements presented [by the KDP] are a constructed narrative, and it looks like something was definitely going on at this site. There should and will be more investigations about what was going on at this site."

Israel's support of Iranian Kurdish militants

Ties between the KDP and Israel have existed for decades as part of Tel Aviv's 'Alliance of the Periphery' strategy – initiated by Israel's very first president David Ben Gurion – that focuses on attracting allies against its once united Arab opposition. The Kurds, but also Turkey and pre-Islamic revolution Iran, were approached as possible allies toward this end.

Nowadays, Israel uses its connection with Kurdish leaders in its proxy conflict against the Islamic Republic, including militant Iranian Kurdish opposition groups. This is also the main reason Israel has shown major interest in monitoring Kurdish politics and the movement of Kurdish insurgent organizations, and has financially supported several of these groups. It is also a plausible reason behind Iran's cooperation with Turkey in carrying out [joint military operations](#) against Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq.

The disclosure of classified US diplomatic cables leaked by Wikileaks contains statements made by Meir Dagan, Israel's former Mossad chief, to US officials in August 2007 calling for the support of Kurdish opposition groups, among them the anti-Iran, militant Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), in an attempt to destabilize Tehran.

Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist [Seymour Hersh](#) reported a year after the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq: "Israel has hundreds of agents, including members of Mossad operating in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq. In addition Mossad is now conducting covert operations in Kurdish areas of Iran and Syria." One former Israeli intelligence officer told Hersh in a sweeping [New Yorker](#) piece that same year: "It's Realpolitik... By aligning with the Kurds, Israel gains eyes and ears in Iran, Iraq and Syria."

Not for the last time

In the murky world of espionage, it can naturally be difficult to decipher fact from fiction. However, Iran looks set to take a more assertive retaliatory role in its confrontation with Israel, which was recently hit by the [largest cyber attack](#) in its history the day after the Erbil strikes. Interestingly, this also affected the Mossad website, according to prominent Israeli daily *Haaretz*.

Iran's ambassador to Iraq, Iraj Masjedi, has now warned of further attacks against "Israeli strategic centers" in Erbil. The Iranians presented tangible intel and evidence to both Iraqi and Kurdish officials in advance of last weekend's missile strikes.

A “well-informed Iraqi source” was quoted by [The New Arab](#) as saying “Masjedi submitted documents to the Iraqi foreign ministry officials proving that Israeli drones have flown from a mansion in Erbil and carried out attacks against a fleet of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) drones in Mahidasht region of Kermanshah province, west of Iran in 14, February” – information also confirmed by *The Cradle* earlier this week.

The Iranians are dead-set on establishing deterrence, and have, for a few years now, warned they would deliver an [equal ratio](#) of counterattacks to Israeli salvos – whether at sea or on land.

On Sunday, they [warned](#) the next attack on Israeli operations will be a “harsh, decisive and destructive response.” As Tel Aviv actively works to counter Iran’s strategic depth by [locating](#) directly or via proxies near Iranian borders, it is unclear whether Tehran’s next operation will be in Iraq or another neighboring state.

What is known is that the attacks on Sunday against alleged Israeli intelligence targets in Erbil were neither isolated nor unprecedented, and are therefore unlikely to be the last.

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Featured image: A story of oil, gas, espionage, subterfuge and sabotage sprung to the fore after Iran’s missile strikes on a Mossad base in Erbil revealed some unsavory connections in Iraqi Kurdistan. Photo Credit: The Cradle

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