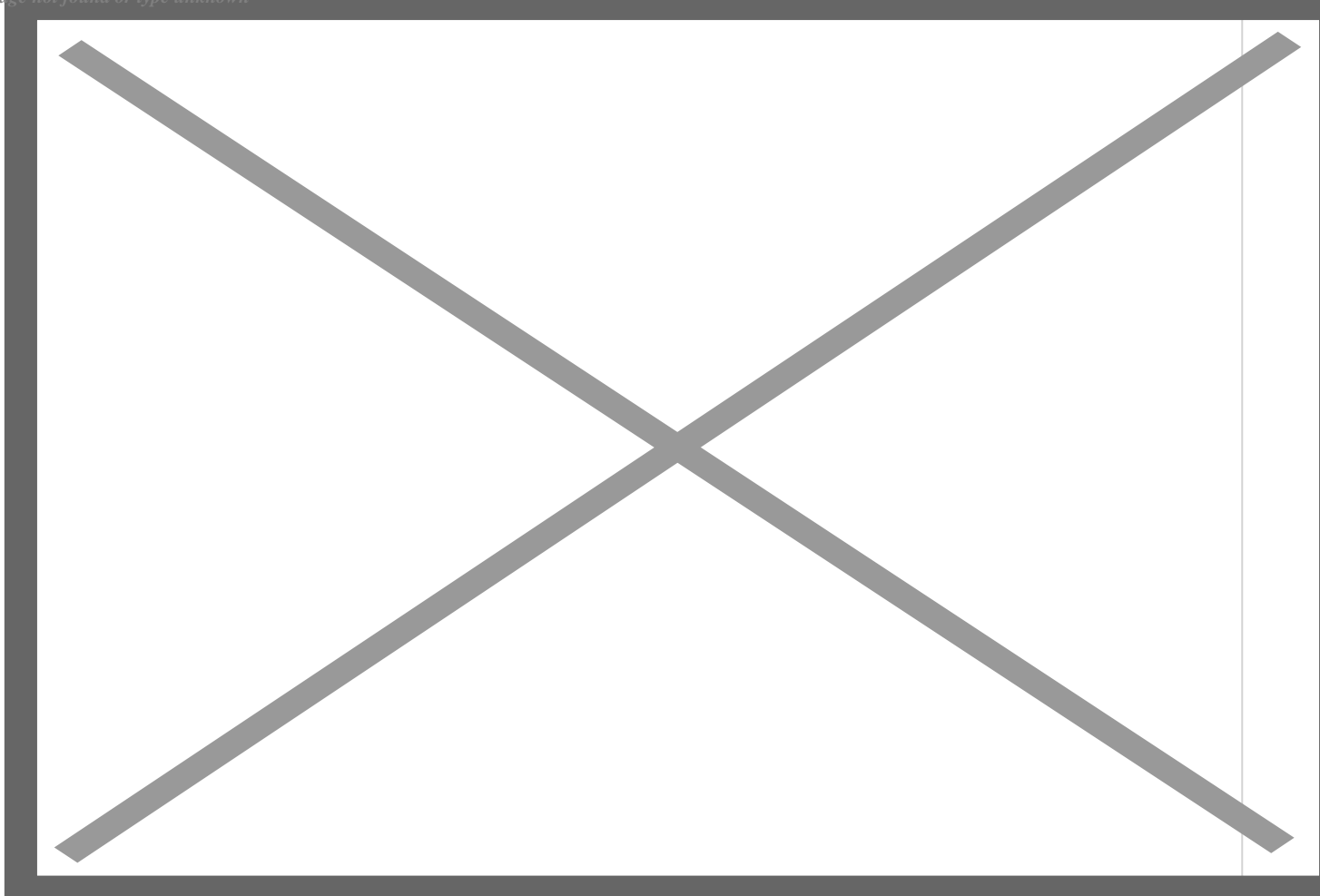


Iraq condemns clear-cut assassination operation after U.S. strike

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A car is set ablaze in what the US military says was a deadly drone strike on a Kataib Hezbollah commander in Baghdad, Iraq, on February 7, 2024 [Screengrab via Reuters]

Baghdad, February 8 (RHC)-- Iraq has denounced a US drone strike in Baghdad that killed a commander of an Iran-aligned group, saying the United States-led military coalition in the country is becoming a "factor for instability."

Army spokesperson Yahya Rasool said on Thursday that repeated attacks by the US in Iraq are pushing the government to end the coalition's mission.

The U.S. has conducted frequent attacks, targeting Iran-backed armed groups that it said were behind missile and drone strikes on its troops in Iraq and Syria.

On Wednesday night, a senior commander from Kataib Hezbollah, an Iran-backed armed group in Iraq that the Pentagon linked to an attack that killed three US soldiers in Jordan, died in a drone strike on a vehicle in eastern Baghdad, security sources said. The vehicle targeted was used by Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces, which includes dozens of armed groups, many of them close to Iran.

Rasool said the U.S.-led coalition "has become a factor for instability and threatens to entangle Iraq in the cycle of conflict." U.S. forces are "repeatedly and irresponsibly" carrying out a "clear-cut assassination operation", he said, adding that such strikes fail to "care about the lives of civilians and international law,"

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Washington was "bombing targets around the region not to fuel escalation but to prevent escalation", according to Al Jazeera's Shihab Rattansi, reporting from Washington, DC.

"It's caused clearly a lot of questions because the escalation we've seen around the region is directly correlated and quite openly blamed on the Israeli bombardment of Gaza," Rattansi said. "But the one thing the US won't do is try and stop Israel from bombing Gaza."

Rasool said the US strikes are even more concerning because "the coalition consistently deviates from the reasons and objectives for its presence on our territory."

The U.S. maintains several military bases in Iraq used by it and its allies to fight ISIL (ISIS). Last month, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed al-Sudani said talks would be held to schedule an end to the coalition's tasks in the country.

"Administration officials [are] also saying this isn't over, that there will be more attacks to come at a time and place of the US's choosing," Rattansi said.

Iraq's Harakat al-Nujaba movement promised a "targeted retaliation," saying "these crimes will not go unpunished." It said U.S. "violations" will not cease without "a firm official position from the Iraqi government."

Palestinian group Hamas said the strikes were a "violation of Iraq's sovereignty and security", according to a statement.

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