EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A missile strike on September 8 in Iraqi Kurdistan conducted by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) on the headquarters of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran killed 18, including the father of this author, and injured another 40. Though Tehran claims the strike was retaliation for an attack on a military post that had been claimed by an armed Kurdish group, the threat posed by the Iranian Kurds to the Islamist regime is not sufficient to justify such a violent attack. The strike was likely a message intended not only for the Iranian Kurds, but for the Saudis, the Americans, and the Israelis as well.

On September 8, 2018, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps launched a barrage of missiles into Iraqi Kurdistan, targeting the headquarters of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDP-I) and an adjacent refugee camp. The strike killed 18 people and wounded 40 more. Tehran justified the strike as retaliation for an attack on a military post that had taken place on July 21. That attack was claimed by the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), one of several armed Kurdish groups.

The Iranian Kurds, a historically important group, are very politically aware. They have long struggled for their civic and national rights, which successive Iranian regimes have consistently denied them throughout their history. In 1979, the newly installed revolutionary regime brutally refused their demands, with Ayatollah Khomeini declaring a “holy war” on the Kurds.

The Kurdish parties’ associated militant groups and paramilitary Peshmerga forces have conducted armed resistance against the regime’s forces over the years. Intense fighting took place from 1979 to 1982, with clashes continuing throughout the 1980s and beyond. In 1996, however, when the regime launched
a political and military crackdown, the fight shifted to political opposition abroad, with only sporadic armed conflict.

Over the past decade, the KDP-I has pursued a nonviolent strategy, focusing on civil activities inside Iran and encouraging NGOs to campaign for political engagement. This new policy was exemplified by the efforts of Khalid Azizi, the former secretary general of KDP-I. The premise of this point of view is that Kurds who are aware of their legitimate rights can use that knowledge to challenge the Islamic Republic. Rahman Piroti (a leadership committee member of KDP-I), who was killed in the recent missile strike, promoted this point of view for years. He believed the frustrated street is a real headache for the regime. Even after the missile strike, the party avoided a violent reaction and called for a general strike, an approach that garnered approval in Kurdish areas of Iran.

The Kurdish parties in Iran have made important strides, and Tehran is concerned that they might get international or regional support. However, it is difficult to believe that the Kurds’ pressure on the regime has reached a level sufficient to justify a missile strike. The IRGC’s version of the attack is therefore suspect. The missiles did, however, carry a message: they were intended as a warning to multiple parties.

According to the Heritage Foundation, “Iran’s ballistic missiles pose a major threat to US bases and allies from Turkey, Israel, and Egypt in the west, to Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States to the south, to Afghanistan and Pakistan to the east.” Among these, Israel is most at risk from an Iranian attack. Tehran even inscribed the words “Death to Israel” on missiles recently fired on Abu Kamal in southeastern Syria. Israel is protected by multi-tiered missile defense systems, but it can still be hit by the 150,000 rockets and missiles that Iran has supplied to Hezbollah in Lebanon and to Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza.

When Iran targeted ISIS positions in eastern Syria’s Deir az-Zour on June 18, anonymous Israeli security sources observed that all but one of the missiles missed their target. But in Iraqi Kurdistan, the missiles’ precision was notable. By using the Fateh-110 missile series – “one of the missile varieties that Israel’s Magic Wand weapon system is meant to combat” – to strike the KDP-I headquarters, Tehran might have been signaling to those same security sources that “our missiles are precise enough to target your military bases and populated areas.” It might also be seen as a harbinger of more systematic missile attacks.

There is background to the warning. On November 6, 2017, Kayhan, an Iranian newspaper that is close to the Supreme Leader, ran a controversial headline stating that Houthi rebels in Yemen would target Dubai after firing a ballistic missile at Riyadh’s airport. It added that the United Arab Emirates, Riyadh, Jeddah, and Saudi’s oil and gas company Aramco would be targets for missile attacks. Those
words were considered an IRGC maneuver at the time, but populated areas in Saudi Arabia have indeed been targeted by Iran-sponsored Houthis.

The Iranian regime funds terrorists and provides them with equipment, weapons, training, and sanctuary. It has now added missile strikes to this list. Tehran continues to perfect its ballistic technology and extend its missile range. With Hezbollah hiding rockets and missiles in heavily populated areas in Beirut, Houthis launching missiles at Riyadh, IRGC-linked Shiite militias firing missiles at US bases, and Tehran declaring that “Israel must be wiped off the face of the earth,” the whole region remains under an Iranian sword of Damocles that can fall at any moment through accident, miscalculation, or design.

*Mansour Piroti is a freelance writer based in Iraqi Kurdistan.*

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family