

MIDEAST CRISIS PUTS ANTI-ISIS MISSION AT RISK

Bottom Line Up Front:

- Iran-backed groups in Iraq have contributed to Hamas' battle against Israel by attacking U.S. forces that continue to lead a broad coalition effort to defeat the Islamic State organization (ISIS).
- U.S. retaliatory attacks on Iraqi militia facilities and leaders are increasing pressure on the Baghdad government to drive out U.S. troops.
- A withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq would accomplish a key Iranian objective that long predates the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel.
- The political influence of Iran and Iranian allies was strengthened by the strong showing of pro-Iranian politicians in December 18 provincial council elections.

A rift between U.S. and Iraqi officials is opening as U.S. forces escalate their efforts to deter a range of Iran-backed militia groups from attacking U.S. troops deployed there. U.S.-Iraq differences will widen further as a result of a January 4 U.S. airstrike that killed a high-ranking leader of an Iran-backed Iraqi militia that underpins the Shia-dominated political-military governing structure in Iraq. The strike target, Mushtaq Talib al-Saidi, commonly known as Abu Taqwa, was a key figure in [Harakat al-Nujaba](#), which operates primarily in Iraq but also conducts attacks on U.S. forces in Syria. Harakat al-Nujaba, which is designated as a foreign terrorist organization by the U.S. Department of State, operates as part of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). At least one other Nujaba militia member was killed along with him. The action was the first U.S. pre-emptive - rather than purely retaliatory - attack on Iraqi militia forces since they began a campaign of assaults against U.S. troops on October 17 in support of Hamas' battle against Israeli forces in Gaza. Militias in Iraq and Syria have fired on U.S. forces in both countries [more than 100 times](#) since that time, of which, according to an analysis by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, nearly 70% have been conducted by Nujaba members. However, the U.S. action might have further energized, rather than deterred, Iraq's Iran-backed factions. Militia rocket attacks on U.S. forces continued even after the U.S. bombing and, according to Amwaj media, Sheikh Mohammad Hussein Al-Kawtharani, Lebanese Hezbollah's point man in Iraq, was dispatched to Baghdad to coordinate an escalation in operations against the U.S. military presence in the country. The U.S. airstrike that killed Abu Taqwa appeared to reflect the growing pressure on U.S. leaders to respond more forcefully to attacks by Iran's "[axis of resistance](#)" - the network of regional militias and factions that Tehran has long cultivated and unleashed after the Israel-Hamas war began.

The U.S. action in Iraq also was intended to protect the mission to maintain pressure on [the Islamic State organization \(ISIS\)](#). The United States deployed 2,500 military personnel in Iraq, at the invitation of Iraq's government, to spearhead efforts by an 80+ nation Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. Despite the Coalition's elimination of ISIS' territorial control over parts of both countries and the dismantling of its self-declared Caliphate, ISIS has been able to continue to conduct attacks in various countries of the region. The U.S. troops involved in the anti-ISIS mission, however, present a target for Iran and its regional allies. By attacking U.S. forces in the region, [Iran and its proxies](#) hope to compel Washington to put pressure on Israel to curtail its ground assault, potentially enabling Hamas to survive the war as a still-potent Palestinian rejectionist organization. More broadly, the Israel-Hamas war has provided Tehran with the opportunity to demonstrate its capability to project power throughout the region in service of its broader objectives, foremost among which is to drive U.S. forces out of the region.

There are indications that, as a result of U.S. escalation against Iran-backed Iraqi militias, Tehran's longstanding effort to pressure Baghdad to drive out and put an end to the U.S. military mission might be gaining traction. Militia commanders and their political allies argue that the U.S. strikes violate Iraqi sovereignty and are inconsistent with the U.S.-Iraq understandings under which U.S. forces are deployed there. One week before the strike on Abu Taqwa, and following several U.S. retaliatory attacks on facilities operated by Nujaba and another powerful Iran-aligned group, [Kata'ib Hezbollah](#), Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani said that his government "is proceeding to end the presence of the international coalition forces." Sudani came to power with the backing of Shia political factions that form the broad "Coordination Framework," but, in contrast to his harder-line allies, he has also attempted to maintain good relations with the United States. On January 5, his office announced that the Iraqi government "is setting the date for the start of the bilateral committee to put arrangements to end the presence of the international coalition forces in Iraq permanently." U.S. officials have moved to blunt the momentum for jettisoning U.S. forces - an expulsion that U.S. leaders said would severely damage the anti-ISIS mission. On January 5, Defense Department spokesman Patrick Ryder issued a statement explaining the U.S. rationale for the Abu Taqwa strike and the significance of the U.S. military mission in Iraq: "U.S. forces are in Iraq at the invitation of the government of Iraq...They're there for one reason, which is to support the defeat-ISIS mission. We'll continue to work very closely with our Iraqi partners when it comes to the safety and security of our forces. When those forces are threatened, just like we would anywhere else in the world, we will maintain the inherent right of self-defense to protect our forces." Still, it remains unclear whether Sudani has sided with his more pro-Iranian allies in a concerted effort to force a U.S. withdrawal or, alternately, whether he is merely posturing on the issue of the U.S. presence in order to retain hardline Shia support.

Sudani's ultimate decision-making on the U.S. relationship might be influenced by the strong showing of the Coordination Framework's politicians, including those associated with [pro-Iranian militia-linked parties](#), in the December 18 provincial council elections. Voters chose council members in the 15 Arab-dominated provinces of Iraq; Iraq's Kurds will hold elections for councils in three Kurdish-inhabited provinces next year. The last provincial council elections were held in 2013, and the councils were disbanded entirely after a broad anti-corruption uprising in 2019. The bodies do not set national policy, but they are responsible for appointing regional governors and allocating health, transport and education budgets. Overall, the Coordination Framework - which collectively ran candidates on three separate electoral lists - won 101 of 285 council seats, more than any other bloc, according to Iraqi state media reports. Framework members also form the biggest bloc in Iraq's parliament. The strong Framework showing might indicate that the coalition is well positioned for the next national elections in 2025, although a boycott of the provincial council vote by supporters of the powerful and popular Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr might temper the Framework victory. The Framework's top list, which won 43 seats, grouped several of the most influential Iran-allied, militia-based factions, including the Badr Organization and Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) - key allies of Nujaba and Kata'ib Hezbollah. Another Framework list, which took 35 seats, was headed by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, whose 2006-2014 term as Iraq's chief executive was marked by close alignment with Iran and Iran-inspired repression of Iraq's Sunni Arab community. The third Framework slate, which won 23 seats, includes Ammar al-Hakim, leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, which Iran supported during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war. Also on that list was the relatively moderate former Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi. Despite the political dominance of the Coordination Framework, Sudani and other moderate Shia figures view it as unwise a request for U.S. forces to depart Iraq, particularly at a time when ISIS might be demonstrating renewed strength in Syria, Iran, and elsewhere. It is not at all clear that U.S. strikes on pro-Iranian factions in Iraq will cause an irreparable break between Washington and Baghdad, even if producing that split is a core Iranian security goal.
