

The Tight Rope: Detering Militias While Supporting Reformists in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

In November 2019, I wrote a piece for Fikra Forum titled “[U.S. Interests and the Unsustainable Status Quo in Iraq](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/u.s.-interests-and-the-unsustainable-status-quo-in-iraq) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/u.s.-interests-and-the-unsustainable-status-quo-in-iraq>)” where I argued the case that the United States needed to adopt a riskier short-term policy in Iraq in order to be on the right—and winning side—of history in Iraq, as a new generation of Iraqi reformers try to save the country from state collapse.

In that article, I admonished that the United States would need to be willing to risk being thrown out of Iraq in order to remain an effective political actor there. By launching the December 29 strikes on five Kata’ib Hezbollah bases in Iraq and Syria in retaliation for the December 28 murder of a U.S. contractor, the United States has taken exactly this kind of risk. The militias responded by blockading the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, while Iraq’s senior leaders condemned the U.S. strikes (but not the killing of the U.S. citizen).

With this new dynamic, two new questions must be answered: what happens next to the U.S.-Iraq relationship, and how should the United States react if Iran-backed militias undertake more provocations?

WHY DID THE UNITED STATES STRIKE KATA’IB HEZBOLLAH?

The United States is characterizing the December 29 strikes as “defensive” and rightfully claims that the Iraqi government was explicitly forewarned (on May 7, 2019) that the United States would directly retaliate against militias if militias killed an American in Iraq. This earlier warning came against a backdrop of prior militia rocket attacks on U.S. bases in Iraq and resulted in a temporary reduction in such attacks in the summer. Throughout the autumn of 2019 the attacks recommenced, with eleven rocket attacks on U.S. bases in Iraq since late October.

These attacks were becoming increasingly heavy and more dangerous: on November 7, at least seventeen rockets—attributed by U.S. intelligence materials to Iraqi militias—were fired at the U.S.-Iraqi base at Qayyarah West airfield. On December 9 and 11, heavy 240mm rockets were fired at the U.S.-Iraqi special forces base at Baghdad airport,

injuring Iraqi counter-terrorism troops. And on December 28, a thirty-rocket barrage struck the compact U.S.-Iraqi base at Kirkuk, killing one U.S. contractor and wounding several more Americans and Iraqis.

The pattern was clear: a progressive increase in frequency and lethality of Iran-backed attacks, which ultimately resulted in the first U.S. fatality at the hands of Iran-backed militias since a U.S. soldier was killed on October 1, 2017 near Tikrit. The killing of an American is what made this attack different, and it is what triggered a U.S. military reaction.

That U.S. forces were able to identify the culprits of the attack so swiftly should not come as a surprise. If you visit U.S. bases in Iraq and speak with intelligence officers, you will quickly realize that there are some things the United States is very good at finding out. This includes—for unsurprising reasons—the affiliation of people who kill Americans. The United States does not presume Kata'ib Hezbollah fires all the rockets that have been directed at U.S. bases. In the district of Taji or the city of Balad, it is more often the militants of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq who are responsible, and in Baghdad the culprits can be from a wide range of militias that operate there.

But in other more remote areas of Iraq like Qayyarah, Kirkuk, and Anbar, it is Kata'ib Hezbollah that has the local authority to attack U.S. bases, after their leadership confers with Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani. The swift U.S. identification of Kata'ib Hezbollah as the attacker on December 28 was likely built on a combination of firm technical and human intelligence and aided by the retention of weapons components and electronics.

The objective of the December 29 retaliatory strikes was to restore deterrence against further Iran-backed attacks on U.S.-Iraqi bases. The logic behind these strikes is simple: as long as Iran and its allies face no cost to continuing the attacks, they are likely to keep hitting harder and more frequently, and would kill as many Americans as they wanted. The U.S. response selected several important Kata'ib Hezbollah leaders and bases in Anbar and Syria calculated to be of high value to the movement and destroyed them, knowing that the loss of those leaders might dissuade Iran and its militias from continuing or escalating their attacks on the United States. It is worth noting that Kata'ib Hezbollah has never, in its entire existence, lost so many operatives on a single day: 25 killed and over fifty wounded.

In expectation that militias might attack again, the United States will also remain ready to strike increasingly valuable and senior militia targets, including top-level leaders.

The right to self-defense is enshrined in U.S. law and is fundamental to the U.S.-Iraq military partnership. Until Iraq either protects U.S. forces or evicts them, the United States will continue to defend its personnel in Iraq.

THE COST-BENEFIT OF RISKING U.S. EVICTION FROM IRAQ

Following the U.S. strikes, the Iran-backed Fatah electoral list immediately called for the Iraqi parliament to take legal action to remove U.S. forces. This is Iraq's right, if sufficient MPs wish to make such a move and if the cabinet and president support the action, even under the current muddled conditions of open-ended caretaker government.

U.S. military support to Iraq—and probably all U.S. embassy operations—could be suspended quite quickly and American presence could all but vanish from Iraq if we are asked to leave or are exposed to unacceptable risk. This is precisely what the U.S. government has prepared for since issuing its warning in May 2019 against further militia attacks, recalling the earlier September 2018 permanent shuttering of the U.S. consulate in Basra as a result of militia rocket fire. The various helicopter moves between Baghdad airport and the embassy on December 31 are, in effect, preparatory steps and a dress rehearsal for such an event.

The U.S. government has announced in background briefings on December 30 that it is not overly concerned about the risk of a parliamentary eviction notice. This is despite widespread condemnation of the U.S. strikes from figures

as diverse as Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Moqtada al-Sadr, Ammar al-Hakim of the Hikma movement and President Barham Salih.

One reason may be that the United States is still pleasantly surprised that it did not face a major eviction challenge after President Trump offended Iraqis twice in the opening months of the year, first by visiting unannounced and then by admitting the United States was in Iraq “to watch Iran”, or even after Israel began striking militia bases in Iraq. Evidently, either it is more difficult to forge the consensus required to remove U.S. forces or Iran-backed politicians prefer the U.S. in Iraq, with equities to protect and where other international players continue to play a supportive role as long as Washington also does.

Could it be different this time? Was the U.S. complacent when it again risked eviction this December?

Based on my conversations with U.S. officials, I would argue that the recent strikes indicate that the U.S. government is actually seeing things clearly, at last. There is no point in being “in Iraq” if the price of admission is to ignore the killing of Americans. Likewise, the U.S. military and diplomatic presence in Iraq should not be used by Iraq’s government as a lever to prevent the United States from pointing out actual gross violations of Iraqi sovereignty by Iran or the mass murder of Iraqi civilians by militias.

SECURING U.S. INTERESTS OR SECURING U.S. PRESENCE?

As my earlier piece noted, U.S. interests are certainly served by aiding the survival of a sovereign, stable, and democratic Iraq—as defined by Iraq’s constitution. The United States should always help Iraq protect these qualities from attack by any and all enemies—be they Islamic State-style extremists or foreign-backed militias.

But what has instead developed in the U.S. establishment over the past few years is a “cult of presence”—which I myself have been guilty of preaching for at certain points—in which the sovereignty, stability, and democratic qualities of Iraq are seen as negotiable so long as the Iraqi elite let the United States keep its forces in Iraq.

This was arguably worth it at one point—particularly when the Islamic State was a huge threat and when rebuilding Iraq’s professional military leadership seemed possible. That moment may have passed: the Islamic State is years away from beginning a serious recovery, the militias are purging professional officers from the military faster than we can train them, and we are being excluded from anti-Islamic State operations, penned up in bases, blocked from moving, and excluded from airspace with no-fly zones.

U.S. military presence is a means to an end, not the end in and of itself. No U.S. service-person or contractor (or diplomat) should be in Iraq, kept away from their families at huge expense to the taxpayer, if they are prevented from doing their job and if they are not protected by the Iraqi government.

If we stay in Iraq, we should be there for one reason—to maximize the chance of a sovereign, stable, and democratic Iraq emerging. This is the real objective, and we should work with those who support this mutual interest and against those who don’t. It should be no surprise that those who want an Iran-dominated, weak, undemocratic Iraq would want to see the U.S. removed or, more likely, neutered.

BE WILLING TO LEAVE SO WE DON’T HAVE TO

In November, I wrote that the U.S. needed to “be willing to leave, so we don’t have to;” this remains the case. U.S. military presence in Iraq is not a favor bestowed upon America by a generous Iraqi government. Instead, the contribution of the U.S. forces and U.S. financial support to Iraq is a powerful gesture of friendship by the American people and government towards Iraq.

Writing plainly, it is nonsense to expect the United States to continue deploying thousands of our service-persons away from their families and providing hundreds of millions of dollars a year in military grants to a country that not only fails to protect our troops and diplomats, but even threatens to evict us when we defend ourselves, months after

we warned that this would be the case and pleaded with Iraq to protect its guests.

The calculated risk now being taken by the United States is based in strong commonsense logic. Iraq currently has the support of the greatest international coalition ever assembled—the majority of the G-20 nations are committed to Iraq’s defense and survival for the first and likely the last time. The keystone of this commitment is the U.S. military presence in Iraq, without which the coalition would unravel.

If Iraq is prepared to sacrifice this coalition to continue covering up for the misdeeds of Iran-backed militias, then the United States and the coalition have no reliable partners in federal Iraq, with little to lose by leaving.

If, on the other hand, a majority of Iraqi factions must rhetorically condemn the attacks but secretly recognize the value of ongoing U.S. friendship, then there will be no eviction of U.S. forces and the United States still has effective partners in Iraq.

The United States is betting that there are still more reasonable nationalist actors in Iraq’s leadership than pro-Iranian stooges. The coming day—when the blockade of our embassy must be lifted, and the coming months, when the de-legitimized government may be replaced—will settle whether that is the case. ❖

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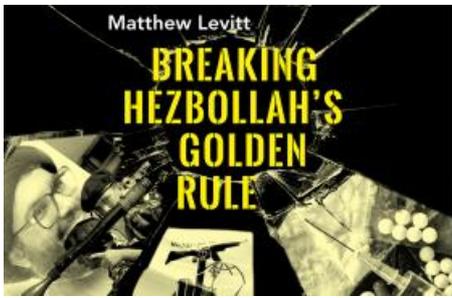
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