

Iran Vies for More Influence in Iraq at a Budget Price

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Brief Analysis

Tehran aims to earn hard currency for its relatively cheap military hardware, ideally boosting its leverage in Baghdad at a fraction of the cost that the United States has been spending there.

On November 14, a large Iraqi defense delegation began a four-day visit to Tehran as a follow-up to previous exchanges with Iranian officials. The trip was led by Sunni defense minister Juma Saadoun al-Jubouri and included the commanders of each Iraqi military branch. According to Jubouri, its main goal was to “deepen” bilateral military and security cooperation. Three days later, the commander of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), Brig. Gen. Esmail Qaani, reportedly paid a secret visit to Baghdad.

These exchanges are all the more notable because they came after the UN ban on arms deals with Iran expired in October. Tehran is now free to market and sell its weapons abroad, and several potential customers have already shown interest—not just Iraq, but also Syria, Venezuela, and other players. To be sure, all of these governments are financially constrained, and the United States will likely continue disrupting such deals via existing secondary sanctions, most of them based on UN Security Council resolutions adopted between 2006 and 2015. Yet the risk of Iranian missiles, drones, air defense systems, and other equipment winding up in Iraq should not be dismissed.

BROAD AGENDA FOR THE IRAQI VISIT

Jubouri’s delegation was given a comprehensive tour of Iran’s domestically made military hardware, including long-range armed drones and missile systems. During the meetings, Iranian defense minister Amir Hatami expressed the regime’s readiness to boost Baghdad’s defensive capabilities, while also demanding the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. Similarly, Armed Forces General Staff chairman Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri reiterated Iran’s eagerness to deepen bilateral military ties, “fulfill the requirements of the Iraqi armed forces,” and

“participate in Iraq’s reconstruction.”

Bagheri also noted that the countries were finalizing two new defense and security agreements. These accords could lend more permanence to their periodic bouts of extensive military cooperation over the past few years, as seen in the fight against the Islamic State (2014-2017) and the close ties Tehran still holds with top militias in Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

The visit held maritime implications as well. On November 15, Iraqi naval commander Rear Admiral Ahmed Jassim al-Maarij met with his IRGC Navy counterpart, Commodore Alireza Tangsiri, and their discussions reportedly focused on training, joint search-and-rescue drills, and operational coordination. One consequence of their meeting is that Iraq may start sending some of its cadets to Iran’s two main naval academies.

Tehran is also trying to attract Iraqi interest in its aircraft and air defense systems. Among the Iraqi delegation were air force commander Maj. Gen. Shihab Jahid Ali Shakarchi and air defense chief Maj. Gen. Zaid Ibrahim Alwan, who met with officials from both the IRGC and Iran’s national armed forces (Artesh). The discussions included potential cooperation on training, repair, and overhaul as well as hardware purchases.

Regarding aircraft, Iranian officials offered to jointly produce helicopters of undetermined types. This offer is questionable because Iran hardly produces any helicopters by itself (with the partial exception of the IRGC’s small Shahed model, which is based on the American JetRanger and powered by smuggled U.S.-made Allison engines). Yet Tehran can offer repair services to Baghdad—Russia’s Ulan-Ude Aviation Plant has licensed Iranian firms to repair and overhaul Mil Mi-17/171 utility helicopters, a large number of which are in Iraqi service (though Iranian support for Iraq’s American-made Bell helicopters is likely out of the question given U.S. sanctions and Tehran’s lack of proper licenses). As for fixed-wing aircraft, Tehran might offer maintenance services for Iraq’s Su-25 ground-attack jets, which it returned to Baghdad in 2014 years after they sought sanctuary inside Iran during the 1991 Gulf War.

Another area of noticeable Iraqi interest was unmanned aerial vehicles, particularly Iran’s Shahed-129 armed drone, which was used extensively in the Syria war, as well as offshoots of the American RQ-170 that Iranian forces captured in 2011. Although Iraq purchased several Chinese CH-4 armed drones in 2015, they suffered from very low serviceability.

AIR DEFENSE COOPERATION MORE LIKELY

When Gen. Alwan visited the facilities of the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Defense Force (IRIADF) on November 17, he received briefings on the regime’s latest and most-capable systems. In addition to digital command-and-control systems, these included the Bavar-373 (Tehran’s rival to the Russian S-400 and American Patriot long-range air defense systems) and the 15th of Khordad (a medium-to-long-range system that recently entered operational service). Iraq seeks similar capabilities and has previously shown interest in acquiring the Patriot and S-400.

Besides offering the above systems on several occasions, Tehran has asked Iraq to **integrate its air defense network infrastructure (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-syria-air-defense-pact-could-disrupt-allied-operations>)** with Iran’s at the hardware and software levels—a first step toward establishing what it characterizes as a “regional defense architecture.” It has also offered technical assistance to maintain and modify Iraq’s existing surveillance and target acquisition network. Baghdad’s response so far has been cautious, but with no related sanctions on the immediate horizon, some level of air defense cooperation between the two countries can be expected.

Previously, Iran sold significant quantities of equipment to Iraq’s military and militia forces. Going forward, Baghdad’s debts to Iran may complicate—or, paradoxically, hasten—future military purchases. According to various estimates, Iraq currently owes Tehran \$2-5 billion for natural gas and electricity deliveries. In addition, the Islamic Republic may eventually demand reparations from the Iran-Iraq War, which it believes it is owed based on a **1991**

[letter \(https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/133224?ln=en\)](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/133224?ln=en) that the UN secretary-general wrote to the Security Council declaring Baghdad as the aggressor in that conflict. By threatening to make these bills come due, Tehran could try to strong-arm its neighbor into purchasing new military systems or services. Even if Baghdad cannot pay for such items in the near term, Tehran would likely be satisfied with the boost in influence for now.

In short, Iran and Iraq are in the process of cementing their security ties following a long period of informal cooperation spurred by the joint fight against the Islamic State. Tehran's ultimate aim is to replace the U.S. presence in Iraq—either after Washington completes a voluntary withdrawal or perhaps even through forced removal using militia proxies. For its part, Baghdad is avoiding confrontation with Tehran and currently seems more interested in securing Iranian intelligence and training support than buying significant quantities of its military hardware. Yet the possibility of bilateral arms deals should not be dismissed. This includes the potential transfer and coordination of air defense systems and capabilities, which might be portrayed as a bid to enhance regional security but serve Iranian interests instead.

CONCLUSION

Tehran clearly expects its military relations with Iraq to grow to “strategic levels” in the future, but this will largely depend on whether Baghdad can muster enough funds and political will to support such a goal. In response, the United States should make clear to Iraqi officials that deeper military cooperation with Iran would be detrimental to U.S. interests. In particular, any moves that threaten regional stability—such as the transfer of surface-to-surface or long-range surface-to-air missiles, or integration/close coordination of air defense networks—would be unacceptable.

Ultimately, little may result from last month's meetings. Baghdad has a wide range of options and sellers to choose from for its defense procurements, and purchasing arms or services from Iran would be a negative public relations move for the current Iraqi government. Still, the breadth and seniority of officials involved in the visit—not to mention its timing, so soon after the expiration of the UN arms ban and the election of a U.S. president who has promised to reenter the Iran nuclear deal—raises the suspicion that Iraq is truly interested in expanding bilateral military ties, especially if Tehran offers discounts or other incentives. Any lessening of U.S. sanctions may therefore accelerate Iran's game of influence, not just in Iraq, but on other regional fronts as well.

Farzin Nadimi is an associate fellow with The Washington Institute, specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Gulf region. ❖

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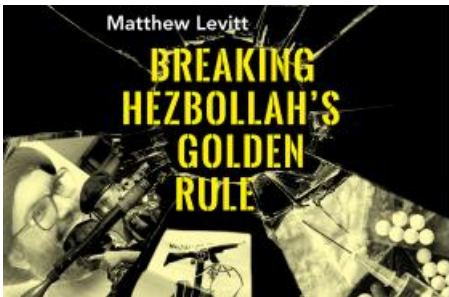
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