

While Israel Now Wants to Go After Iraqi Militias, Trump May Not

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

Dec 23, 2024

Also published in Al Majalla

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Linda and Tony Rubin Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Articles & Testimony

The Hashd may already be deterred somewhat by recent events, but Trump will likely seek to maintain the pressure by withholding annual military assistance to Baghdad.

President-elect Donald Trump wants to end ongoing wars in the Middle East before he takes office. “Get it over with, and let’s get back to peace and stop killing people,” he said in April.

While Mr. Trump’s sentiments are commendable, they are also aspirational. While Israel and Lebanese Hezbollah have reached a tenuous ceasefire, a conclusion to the war with Hamas in Gaza remains a distant prospect.

Meanwhile, Syria’s al-Assad regime has been toppled, signalling what could be a messy, perhaps violent transitional period, and the Houthis in Yemen continue to blockade the Red Sea. And facing several profound strategic setbacks, Tehran—may very well launch another missile barrage on Israel or race toward a nuclear bomb.

The Biden Administration will bequeath its successor a Middle East on fire. And in the coming weeks, it could get worse. Over the last two months, Iranian-backed militia in Iraq have attacked Israel with drones and cruise missiles on nearly 150 occasions, killing three Israeli soldiers in early October. For *its* part, Israel has interdicted and absorbed attacks by Iraq’s Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) or Hashd militias since July 2023. Before Inauguration Day, however, Israel may elect to settle the score with these proxies in an effort to establish a modicum of deterrence.

These Hashd militias were established in 2014 after the Islamic State (IS) conquered nearly 1/3 of Iraq, and they participated alongside the Iraqi military and coalition forces during the campaign to liberate the state. Today, these forces include over 70 different factions, including a handful of designated terrorist groups like Harakat al Nujaba, Asaib al Haq, and Kataib Hezbollah, loyal to Iran.

All told, there are some 238,000 men under arms with an annual budget of \$3.6bn provided by Baghdad. The Hashd have a dedicated military college, receive pensions on retirement, and have a company capitalised by the government—similar to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's Khatam al Anbiya firm—that provides an independent revenue stream for the militants. Notwithstanding Government funding, these Iranian-backed Hashd militias are not answerable to Baghdad.

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al Sudani is concerned that Israel will retaliate and his country will be dragged into a war. His apprehensions are well-founded. Iran's proxy Hezbollah attacked Israel, and Lebanon subsequently sustained \$8.5bn in damage. To forestall a conflagration, Al Sudani has sought to cajole the PMF to take a hiatus from their attacks. He has also appealed to Tehran to help reign in its Hashd proxies and reportedly asked for assistance from the Biden Administration in restraining Israel.

There is little doubt Al Sudani would like to avoid an Israeli military response. It appears that aside from his diplomatic entreaties, he has taken little action to prevent Hashd assaults. At the same time, Al Sudani continues to pay Hashd salaries, including those of groups aligned with Iran. In 2022, Al Sudani leveraged the political support of these militias to become premier.

To be sure, it would be difficult for Al Sudani to bring the Hashd to heel. His predecessor, Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, tried. In the summer of 2020, Al-Kadhimi arrested 15 members of Kataib Hezbollah for firing rockets into the US Embassy in Baghdad. The group responded by surrounding the premier's home, demanding the release of its detained militiamen. A year later, the Hashd attempted to assassinate Al-Kadhimi with armed drones.

Since Hamas's catastrophic October 7, 2023 assault, Israel has been reluctant to let unprovoked Iranian-sponsored aggression go unanswered. Yet lately, the need to target the Hashd has become more urgent. In October, leaked Israeli intelligence suggested that Iran is storing ballistic missiles in Iraq. The last time this occurred—in the summer of 2019—Hashd weapons caches inexplicably started blowing up. With the toppling of the Assad regime and the degradation of Hamas and Hezbollah, the Hashd has taken on added importance for Tehran. With the US presidential inauguration approaching, Israel may see a fleeting opportunity to act.

While Washington favours de-escalation, Israel's inclination to respond is understandable. During the last Trump Administration, American troops and diplomats in Iraq were frequently attacked by the Hashd. Baghdad famously refused to honour its Geneva Convention obligations to protect the US Embassy. It came as little surprise, then, that when the US assassinated Iranian Revolutionary Guard Quds Force chief Qasem Soleimani in January 2020, Hashd commander and Iraqi Government employee Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis perished with him.

Preoccupied with Gaza, Lebanon, and the existential threat of Iran, Israel may elect to defer retribution against the Hashd. The attacks have let up in recent weeks after Israel delivered a letter to the United Nations Secretary-General complaining about pro-Iranian militia aggression. And the fall of al-Assad—and Israel's destruction of the remnants of the regime's conventional military and chemical weapons stocks—may obviate the immediacy for military action against the Hashd.

In any event, given his stated aversion to wars in the region, Mr. Trump is unlikely to partner in any prospective Israeli foray into Iraq. It's hard to imagine, however, that President Trump will continue to provide \$250mn in annual US military assistance to a Baghdad increasingly beholden to Tehran.

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Rubin Program on Arab Politics. This article was originally published [on Al Majalla's website](https://en.majalla.com/node/323585/politics/while-israel-now-wants-go-after-iraqi-militias-trump-may-not)

<https://en.majalla.com/node/323585/politics/while-israel-now-wants-go-after-iraqi-militias-trump-may-not>



RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Alawites Under Threat in Syria?

Dec 31, 2024

Fabrice Balanche

(/policy-analysis/alawites-under-threat-syria)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

A Fateful Debate in Tehran

Dec 30, 2024

Ehud Yaari

(/policy-analysis/fateful-debate-tehran)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

The Current and Future Houthi Threat to the Middle East

Dec 29, 2024

Michael Knights

(/policy-analysis/current-and-future-houthi-threat-middle-east)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

