

Iraq's Air Defense Conundrum: Options for U.S. Policy

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Baghdad is under pressure to show it can protect its airspace, but procuring Russian or Iranian equipment might complicate U.S.-Iraq relations without addressing the triggers for Israeli strikes.

On September 10, an explosion rocked a Popular Mobilization Forces base in Iraq's Anbar province, killing one militia member and wounding another. PMF spokesmen stated that Israeli drones entering from Syria were responsible for the strike; they also claimed it was carried out "under the cover of U.S. jets in the region as well as a large observation balloon placed near the area," referring to a U.S. surveillance aerostat deployed around an American base. Coming on the heels of other recent airstrikes and the PMF's September 5 announcement of a new air defense unit, the incident points to Iraq's growing domestic clamor on the issue, and the potential complications this holds for relations with Washington.

IRAQ'S AIR DEFENSE CHALLENGES

Public and elite discourse in Iraq has been roiled all summer by a series of explosions at local PMF bases, along with attacks on convoys and facilities belonging to specific groups that operate on both sides of the border with Syria. On July 19 and August 20, explosions were reported in two camps connected to Kataib Hezbollah, [an Iranian-backed Shia "special group"](#) that has been designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. government. Similarly, one of the group's logistical convoys was destroyed on the Iraqi side of border on August 25. Another large explosion—the August 12 detonation of rocket munitions at Camp al-Saqr in south Baghdad—further set nerves on edge.

Iraqis have blamed these incidents on suspected Israeli airstrikes of one type or another, shining a spotlight on the government's inability to monitor and defend its airspace. The strikes may have been launched from across international borders using planes or long-range drones, or undertaken from close range using small explosive drones or loitering munitions—in either case, Baghdad was powerless to prevent them. Asking its U.S. partner for help on this matter is no easy fix either. The mission of U.S.-led coalition forces in Iraq does not include defending sovereign airspace, and requesting American assistance on preventing foreign operations against Iranian-linked groups would place Washington in an especially delicate position with its Israeli ally. As a result, Iraq may be seeking other ways to show that it is not a "house with no roof."

Under Saddam Hussein, Iraq developed a formidable integrated air defense system with the help of France and the Soviet Union. That network was comprehensively diminished during the 1991 Gulf War and never recovered, but Iraq still faces a multidirectional air defense challenge today:

- **Israel.** To the west, Israel is adamant about preventing Iranian-backed special groups from using Iraqi territory for either of two purposes: (1) as a [strategic line of supply for Lebanese Hezbollah](#) and Iranian forces bent on threatening Israel's borders, or (2) as a direct launching area for Iranian missiles against Israel. Iraq has also been mentioned in past years as a possible corridor for Israeli air operations against Iran's nuclear program.
- **Turkey.** To the north, Turkey mounts near-daily airstrikes against Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) forces in Iraqi territory.
- **Iran.** To the east, Iran has repeatedly launched missile and drone attacks [against Iranian Kurdish opposition targets](#) in northern Iraq and eastern Syria. It has also been known to fly through Iraqi airspace while delivering military supplies to Syria and Lebanon.
- **Saudi Arabia.** To the south, Saudi oil facilities were attacked by Kataib Hezbollah drones on May 14, and the kingdom may retaliate against Iraq if such incidents are repeated.

BAGHDAD'S OPTIONS

Going forward, Iraq's main air defense priorities are to prevent Israeli strikes and to closely watch U.S. aerial movements for signs of collusion. In pursuing those goals, the government will probably seek to bolster its air defenses, even if only to make a public show of protecting its sovereignty. Baghdad has a range of international options if it decides to go that route:

- **United States.** In August 2013, Iraq requested the purchase of a U.S.-built, \$2.4 billion integrated air

defense system, with the aim of deploying it by 2020. The package included three modernized Hawk-21 medium-altitude surface-to-air missile (SAM) batteries with a 35-56 km engagement range, forty Avenger air defense systems that use guns and missiles to engage low-altitude targets up to 8 km away, and associated surveillance radars, command-and-control systems, underground operations centers, and training. So far, though, only eight Avengers have been delivered; the rest of the package is on hold. The Iraqi air force has since received several new F-16IQ jets, but Baghdad's de-prioritization of air defense during the war against the Islamic State and the slow pace of U.S. foreign military sales have prevented it from fielding an effective radar and threat intercept capability to support those aircraft.

- **Russia.** Iraq has received a steady flow of Russian systems since 2014. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, it ordered the following in 2012: 48 Pantsir-S1 missile/gun mobile air defense systems with an engagement range of 12 km, similar to the Avenger; 1,200 associated missile rounds; and 500 Iglu-S man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) in shoulder-fired and vehicle-mounted versions. Further purchases from Russia would have three drawbacks for Iraq, though. First, Moscow has been slow to give SAM customers such as Syria full control over such systems, and has delayed the training of local crews. Second, even the deployment of Russian-crewed S-300 systems in Syria has not prevented Israeli airstrikes against Iranian forces there. Third, under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), Washington is required to restrict military cooperation with Iraq if it buys arms from Russia. The resultant sanctions could damage the bilateral defense relationship and disrupt U.S. support for Iraqi F-16IQs, air-to-air missiles, radars, and other sensitive technologies.
- **Iran.** Under Annex B of UN Security Council Resolution 2231, formal Iranian arms sales to Iraq are prohibited until January 2021. Yet Tehran may covertly transfer air defense systems to its PMF allies before then, [just as it has done with the Houthi rebels](#) in Yemen. Potential systems could include mobile mid-altitude SAMs such as the Talash, Bavar-373, or the "3rd of Khordad," the latter of which has a claimed range of 75 to 100 km and shot down a U.S. RQ-4A surveillance drone over the Strait of Hormuz on June 20. Alternately, it could provide low-level Misagh MANPADS, improvised systems such as the Pirooz (Iran's version of the Kornet antitank guided missile, with an auto-tracker that allows for short-range air defense uses), or virtual radar receivers like those Tehran has given the Houthis. Perhaps most effective, Iran might provide electronic warfare support to its PMF partners, building on its proven capability to interfere with the control systems of U.S. drones. Since the recent attacks on militia targets began, [Iranian and Iraqi commanders have discussed](#) joint air defense training, coproduction of related defense and surveillance systems, and activation of a 2017 intelligence agreement to share air traffic data in order to better monitor "common enemies."
- **Other nations.** If purchasing Russian or Iranian weapons proves too difficult, Iraq could acquire European or Chinese air defense systems such as the Aster, FM-2000, or HQ-22. Baghdad bought four armed CH-4 drones from Beijing in 2014, indicating a willingness to diversify its military vendors.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

The widely held Iraqi public perception that Israel is behind the recent explosions has placed Washington and Baghdad in a bind. Iraqi officials are under pressure to act even if their actions prove largely symbolic, while the United States would not willingly impede Israel from striking Iranian-backed groups that proliferate advanced weapons. Even if the air defense assets that Iraq ordered from Washington in 2013 are delivered in full, they are unlikely to stop any future Israeli strikes, which would presumably employ local covert cells, locally launched drones, or stealth aircraft such as the F-35.

One can therefore expect Iraq to express interest in Russian and Iranian systems, and for the PMF to continue floating ideas like forming its own air defense arm. Washington should not immediately overreact to such proposals, however. On the one hand, the deployment of advanced Russian-operated air defenses is rightfully a redline for the NATO members that make up most of the coalition contingent in Iraq, and this line should be communicated clearly, recalling the recent S-400 crisis with Turkey. Likewise, Washington should carefully consider how it will react if Iran gifts or loans SAM systems and crews to Iraq. The resultant sharing of radar information would essentially make Iraq an extension of Iran's own air defense network, a scenario that U.S. officials should design policy positions for in order to avoid being caught flat-footed.

On the other hand, Washington should react more coolly to politically motivated Iraqi actions that fall short of being military game-changers. Examples include signing no-commitment security agreements with Russia or Iran, undertaking technical cooperation, or receiving low-level air defense equipment. After all, neither Tehran nor Moscow has been able to protect Hezbollah and the Assad regime from Israeli strikes, so assistance from them is no guarantee of safety for bad actors within Iraq's PMF.

Washington's preferred option would be [for Baghdad to rein in the destabilizing militia activity](#) that Israel is reportedly attacking—namely, the transfer of rocket and missile technology from Iran, in some cases for delivery to Syria and Lebanon. Toward that end, U.S. officials should be more active in bridging the gap between Israeli security imperatives and Iraqi concerns. Neighboring Jordan faced a similar situation decades ago and was gradually able to achieve a kind of neutrality by barring militants and foreign governments from using its territory to attack Israel. Washington should help Iraq work toward the same type of sovereignty.

For instance, the Trump administration could assign a senior official to quietly and precisely convey Israel's strategic concerns to Iraqi leaders, including intelligence that helps them shut down proscribed activity. If Iraq proves responsive in preventing further Iranian abuses, then Israel could eschew future strikes. And if Iraq fails to respond or misuses the provided intelligence, at least Washington will have discharged its responsibility to mediate between its partners, leaving Baghdad to live with the consequences of its choices.

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