



The Iranian Proxy Response to the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue

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Key Takeaway: *Iran likely ordered its Iraqi proxies to sustain low-level, harassing attacks on US forces in Iraq until after the October 2021 parliamentary elections and to return to more lethal attacks toward the end of 2021. Iran is recalibrating its campaign to expel US forces from Iraq following the results of the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue, during which the United States announced a mostly symbolic withdrawal of all its combat forces from Iraq. Proxies may continue larger-scale attacks on US forces in Syria before October and may also expand their attacks to target US aircraft, bases, and allies throughout the Middle East.*

Context: The United States announced that “there will be no US forces with a combat role” in Iraq by the end of 2021. The announcement came after the fourth and final round of the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue in Washington, DC, on July 26.¹ That shift in the role of US forces will not constitute a large-scale withdrawal from the country. US forces largely ended their combat mission in Iraq in 2020 and will remain in training, advising, assisting, and intelligence-sharing roles. Iran’s Iraqi proxies have attacked US forces in Iraq and Syria in recent months to catalyze this withdrawal. Proxy attacks deescalated immediately before the Dialogue as Iran and its proxies debated how to respond to the outcome. Proxy militants have threatened further attacks if the United States does not completely withdraw from Iraq by the end of 2021.²

Iranian Proxy Response:

Iran and its Iraqi proxies have likely agreed to limit major attacks on US forces in Iraq until the end of 2021. IRGC Quds Force Commander Esmail Ghaani reportedly met with representatives of at least five Iraqi proxy militias in Najaf and Baghdad on July 27 and ordered them to temporarily deescalate.³ He also told Iraqi officials on July 28 that Iran would take a “wait and see”

approach but would order its proxies to attack US bases at Erbil and Harir if US forces did not withdraw by the end of 2021.⁴ The United States has not indicated that such a withdrawal will occur.

The proxies will likely obey Ghaani's orders. The Iraqi Resistance Coordination Commission declared that militias would remain ready to conduct attacks and would do so if the United States does not withdraw its forces from Iraq.⁵ The Commission includes representatives of Iran's key proxies in Iraq, including US-designated terrorist organizations Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba. Its statement accused the United States of deceptively re-labeling its forces in Iraq to "prolong the occupation," setting conditions to escalate again in the future.

Iran and its proxies will likely sustain low-level harassing attacks on US forces for the remainder of 2021. Ghaani met with senior Kata'ib Hezbollah official and Popular Mobilization Forces Chief of Staff Abu Fadak al-Mohammedawi in Baghdad on July 27.⁶ Ghaani likely ordered Abu Fadak to re-up harassing attacks while limiting larger-scale attacks that could trigger an unintended escalation. Likely Kata'ib Hezbollah-affiliated militants claimed six IED attacks on Iraqi logistics convoys contracted by the US-led Coalition from July 29 to August 1, an increase in tempo compared to recent months.⁷ Likely Iranian proxies also fired two rockets at the US Embassy in Baghdad on July 29.⁸ Kata'ib Hezbollah denied responsibility and blamed the United States for the attack.⁹ These operations indicate that Ghaani greenlit continuing IED attacks that target Iraqi contractors and therefore do not risk US casualties, as well as small-scale harassing rocket attacks that are unlikely to cause substantial damage, to maintain pressure on US decision-makers. Iran's proxies likely intend these harassing attacks to remind the United States that larger-scale attacks could resume if the United States does not withdraw.

Iran and its proxies are likely setting political conditions to resume major attacks against US forces in Iraq around the end of 2021. Ghaani reportedly ordered the proxies to form a parliamentary committee to pressure the Iraqi government politically to implement a US withdrawal. Ghaani met with Badr Organization Secretary General Hadi al-Ameri in Baghdad on July 27, likely to discuss coordinating the committee and the proxy approach to Iraq's October 2021 elections.¹⁰ Ameri leads Iraq's second-largest parliamentary bloc, Conquest Alliance, which uncharacteristically praised Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi's team after the Dialogue and described its outcome as a "national achievement."¹¹ Ameri will likely focus on that committee and legitimate political avenues to expel US forces. Ghaani may intend such a committee to provide a thin veneer of legitimacy to future larger-scale proxy attacks when the committee finds that US forces are not withdrawing en masse. The committee will likely announce its determination that US forces are not withdrawing between the October 10 elections and December 31 deadline that US and Iraqi negotiators set to end the US combat presence. That delay will allow for Iran-aligned Iraqi politicians to focus on elections preparations and maintaining domestic stability even as Iran prepares its Iraqi proxies for future escalation cycles.¹² The next Iraqi prime minister could also unilaterally order the complete expulsion of US forces from Iraq should Conquest Alliance secure an electoral outcome that would allow them to select the next premier.¹³ That scenario remains unlikely but dangerous to US interests. Some proxy groups will continue their bellicose rhetoric and calls for attacks on US forces.¹⁴ Some of that saber-rattling is likely an attempt to appease their base.¹⁵ However, the groups most upset with the Dialogue's outcome are more likely to conduct larger-scale attacks outside of Iraqi territory to follow Iran's directives.

Iran and its proxies may continue attacks against US forces in Syria and begin to target US aircraft or US bases elsewhere in the region. Kata'ib Hezbollah has claimed previous attacks on US bases in Syria and threatened to conduct future attacks to oust the United States.¹⁶ Iran's proxies conducted at least three rocket and drone attacks on US facilities in Syria between June 28 and July 10, 2021, and likely falsely claimed several more.¹⁷ Those attacks may continue even as proxy groups de-escalate in Iraq in the leadup to Iraqi elections; attacks in Syria are less likely to destabilize Iraq but fulfill the objective of harassing US decision-makers to catalyze a full withdrawal. Iran's proxies may attempt to inflict US casualties in Syria to impose a political cost on the Biden Administration, as they tried to do with their June 28 attack.¹⁸

Proxy groups may be developing new surface-to-air capabilities to threaten US air operations. The Iraqi Resistance Coordination Commission emphasized that they may attack "any foreign aircraft in Iraqi airspace" if they determine that the United States is not withdrawing.¹⁹ Iranian proxy rhetoric has increasingly threatened to shoot down US aircraft in 2021.²⁰

Iran and its proxies may also target US bases outside of Iraq and Syria if tensions re-escalate in the coming months. A Kata'ib Hezbollah spokesperson emphasized on July 27 that the group could target "any base [in] ... Arab or non-Arab countries which could be used by the Americans ... to launch attacks inside Iraq."²¹ Kata'ib Hezbollah has long-range drone capabilities that could reach Kuwait, Jordan, Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia and is likely responsible for previous drone attacks targeting Syria, Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan, Jordan, Israel, and Saudi Arabia.²² Iran's ultimate objective is to curtail US military presence and influence not only in Iraq and Syria but across the region. Iranian and proxy rhetoric could portend a push to expel US forces, aircraft, and influence from Iraq, Syria, and the entire Middle East.

Alternatives: Iran and its proxies may resume larger-scale attacks in Iraq earlier than they have planned. Iran and its proxies are managing a regional conflict with Israel that could force Iran to reevaluate its preferred plan for managing violence in Iraq through the end of the year.²³ Iran is likely attempting to compartmentalize its escalations against Israel and the United States.²⁴ However, Iran views Iraqi Kurdistan as a hub for Israeli and US intelligence. Israeli airstrikes inside Iraq or covert Israeli attacks inside Iran could trigger Iranian attacks in Iraqi Kurdistan, reopening the Iraqi escalation cycle before the end of 2021. Any attacks that also target US forces or facilities could derail the planned de-escalation.

Iran may also reconsider its decision to limit attacks in Iraq through the end of the year if the Vienna nuclear talks become linked to Iran's Iraqi escalations. That scenario remains unlikely. Iran's new president, hardliner Ebrahim Raisi, and its supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, could change Iran's approach to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) talks and choose to reinvigorate violence against the United States if JCPOA negotiations fall through. That violence would aim to retaliate for the continuation of the maximum pressure campaign and to impose a military cost on the United States. In either of these scenarios, Iran could order its proxies to resume larger-scale attacks on US assets in Iraq and the region before the end of the year.

¹ <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-u-s-iraq-strategic-dialogue-2/>

² <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/iran-file/iranian-proxies-increase-attacks-on-us-forces-to-catalyze-a-us-withdrawal-from-iraq>

³ skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1453835-

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⁴ <https://twitter.com/nafisehkBBC/status/1420508568793518086?s=20>

⁵ [Alaraby dot co dot uk/politics/%D9%81%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84-](https://alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D9%81%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%A8%D9%82%D9%89-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%A7-%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A9)

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⁶ skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1453835-

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