

The Shiite Militias in Iraq and the Swords of Iron War

Yaron Schneider | No. 1884 | July 29, 2024

Since early November 2023, as part of the military response to the Swords of Iron war by the Iranian-led “Axis of Resistance,” Shiite militias in Iraq have been launching missiles and UAVs targeted at Israel. These attacks, which have proliferated in recent months, reflect a shift in the patterns of the militias’ terrorist activity by the militias, which for years mainly attacked American forces in Iraq and Syria. Given this development, it is crucial for Israel and the United States to coordinate their response to this common threat, as the militants’ audacity will only increase without restraining measures.

Since early November 2023, after Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen became involved in the Swords of Iron war against Israel, pro-Iranian Shiite militias in Iraq have been targeting Israel with barrages of missiles and UAVs. This development signifies a transformation of the war between Israel and Hamas into a confrontation between Israel and the Shiite axis led by Iran. It also introduced another innovation: The Shiite militias in Iraq have signed off on their attacks on Israel, as well as on American military bases in Iraq and Syria since October 2023, as “The Islamic Resistance in Iraq”—a name that is similar to the “Islamic resistance in Lebanon” (Hezbollah’s moniker).

With the start of the war, Iraqi militias have claimed responsibility for more than 100 missile and UAV launches targeting Israeli targets and have carried out some two hundred strikes against bases in Iraq and Syria where both US forces and those of the international coalition against ISIS are stationed. The attacks against US targets have declined considerably after an incident in late January 2024, in which three US soldiers were killed by a UAV at a base in Jordan. The deadly incident, which prompted a US decision to retaliate militarily—including against “Iranian interests”—led to Iran’s direct intervention. Esmail Qaani, the commander of the IRGC’s Quds Force, quickly arrived for talks with militia representatives in Baghdad, and shortly afterward, a spokesperson for the “Hezbollah Brigades” (the organization accused by the United States of being responsible for the incident) announced that the attacks against American targets would be halted. Since February, the “Islamic Resistance in Iraq” has focused on attacks against Israel only and has even increased its pace over the past three months.

Even if not all the attacks for which the “Islamic Resistance in Iraq” has claimed responsibility were actually carried out—as evidenced by US military sources—the conscious effort of the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq to present themselves as being

mobilized to take an active part in the regional military confrontation with Israel, as well as branding themselves as the “Islamic Resistance in Iraq,” are both outward and inward statements of intent. Outwardly, these attacks are against the opponents of the “Axis of Resistance,” in particular the United States, Israel, and the regional regimes that cooperate with them; at the will of the militias, Iraq can become another link in the chain of “consolidation of the fronts” in the regional conflict, and not just a mere transit station or logistical hinterland between Iran and Syria and Lebanon. Inwardly, these military developments take place in the context of a process of expansion of the activities and political influence of the pro-Iranian Shiite militias in Iraq, which simultaneously enjoy the support of both Iran and the partners in the government of Iraq’s prime minister, Mohammad Shi’a al-Sudani. Some of the partners in the current ruling coalition in Baghdad are senior members of these militias. The militias’ umbrella organization, the “Popular Mobilization,” is entitled to a government budget and even to military equipment and state-owned military bases. In this sense, the military escalation during the Swords of Iron war is an emphatic message by the militias that is also directed at Iraq’s prime minister, its army, and the official security apparatuses, in the midst of an ongoing internal debate about the militias’ “boundaries.”

Prime Minister al-Sudani is determined to maintain ties with the United States, including the military assistance it gives to the Iraqi army as part of its training program and force building, especially to continue fighting against ISIS, as a vital security need. Meanwhile, the militias are threatening to resume and even intensify their attacks on US forces if an agreement is not reached soon between the Iraqi government and the US administration on the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq. A clear signal of this is a series of acts of vandalism carried out by operatives from the Shiite militias against American fast-food chains in Baghdad in early June, following which suspects from the “Hezbollah brigades” were arrested on the orders of the interior minister. The militia even issued a statement calling to boycott and expel American businesses from Iraq.

Although the militias do not closely coordinate all of their maneuvers with their Iranian patron, they do consider themselves pivotal players and seek to establish themselves as active partners in the moves that Iran is instigating against Israel amid the war in Gaza as well as within the framework of a strategy of a regional response to the war. Like Hezbollah and the Houthis, the Shiite militias in Iraq also usually direct their attacks on Israel against military targets (air force and naval bases) or civilian targets with strategic value (seaports and gas rigs). Beyond an attempt to damage Israel’s aviation and maritime branches, this is an attempt to challenge the country from other fronts—the east and northeast—and to overburden its warning and interception systems. The militias in Iraq also joined Iran’s attack on Israel on April 13, in response

to the assassination of Iranian general Mahdavi in Syria, illustrating the ability of the “Axis of Resistance” to mount a combined air strike against Israel.

Most of the missiles and UAVs that have been launched from Iraq toward Israel or have crossed into its territory along the eastern border—from the Golan Heights to Eilat—have been intercepted before reaching their targets, with the exception of a few strikes that caused relatively little damage in comparison to Hezbollah’s attacks. The attacks against the bases where American forces are stationed in Iraq and Syria resulted in dozens of casualties and three soldiers killed (in the unusual attack in Jordan) and led to retaliation attacks by the US military on the militias’ bases as well as targeted killings on Iraqi soil against those involved in the attacks.

Ostensibly, this challenge is secondary to the developments on Israel’s northern border, given the sharp rise in the intensity of the confrontation with Hezbollah and the military capabilities it has used to broaden the scope of the targets struck in Israel. However, Iraqi militias are already seeking to expand their involvement in the conflict with Israel in a number of ways. In recent weeks, announcements were published in Iraq claiming shared responsibility for the “Islamic Resistance in Iraq” and the Houthi rebels in Yemen—a clear signal of the growing cooperation between these two players, who have so far operated separately. In the backdrop of this, there were reports about overt meetings in Iran between representatives of the militias from Iraq and Yemen as well as military cooperation between them. Saudi media reported that the Houthis were undergoing training in Iraq at Popular Mobilization bases. In addition, there have been reports about strengthening ties and meetings between the Hamas leadership and militia leaders and representatives of the Iraqi government, including the opening of a Hamas office in Baghdad that could serve as an alternative to the current location of the Hamas leadership abroad in Qatar.

Another development that poses a high security risk for Israel is the efforts of Iraqi militias to infiltrate into Jordan to carry out cross-border terrorist acts into Israeli territory. This is in addition to, and possibly part of, attempts by Iran and its agents to smuggle arms through Jordan and provide assistance to the Palestinian terrorist organizations in the war against Israel. In April, a senior official in the Iraqi “Hezbollah Brigades” organization declared a willingness to provide 12,000 Jordanians with various weapons to work together against Israel. Officials in Jordan have also recently admitted that since October 7, Iraqi militias have tried to infiltrate into Jordanian territory to reach the border with Israel. Moreover, in Jordan there have been attempts to destabilize the kingdom by Iran and the militias operating under its auspices.

Israel has been vague about the growing wave of attacks from Iraq. Recently, the IDF Spokesperson presented the interception of aircraft and missiles launched from Iraq (according to the timing of the messages) as the interception of aerial targets that

made their way into Israel from the east. This ambiguous wording may be a deliberate avoidance of highlighting attempts to attack Israel from Iraq—as long as the defense systems operating in the space are able to effectively deal with them and minimize the damage caused. Moreover, in the current state of war, Israel may be refraining from openly acting against the sources of the shooting in Iraq, assuming that such a move could lead to a wide-scale resumption of military offensives against US forces in Syria. However, the analysis of current trends shows that the attacks from Iraq since the beginning of the war have been on the rise, as has the severity of the threats from the Iraqi militias with Iranian encouragement. Even if Israel is currently focused on the main fronts in the south and north, it should prepare to deal with all these scenarios, including working together with the United States and its allies in the region, as part of the regional confrontation against Iran and the “Axis of Resistance.”

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