

# What the U.S. Should Demand in a Dialogue with Iraqi PM Sudani

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Brief Analysis

**With regard to Sudani's visit to America, we need to see what the Iraqi PM can achieve before confirming this important invitation. Sudani can be a real prime minister of a real sovereign state if he wants to be, but that will require taking risk.**

**O**n January 30, 2024, the Iraqi terrorist group Kataib Hezbollah declared that it would suspend its attacks on U.S. bases (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/kataib-hezbollah-secretary-general-tries-forestall-us-strikes>) (in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere, presumably) “in order to prevent embarrassment to the Iraqi government.” Kataib Hezbollah is the closest Iraqi group to Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Militia Spotlight profile of them can be found here (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-hezbollah>). Hot on the heels of their announcement, a publicist (<https://twitter.com/farhad965/status/1752442730381214031>) for the Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani claimed that the suspension of attacks was due to the “intense” efforts of Sudani who had been “working hard” to rein in the militias.

With Sudani desperate to realize his ambitions of a state visit to the White House this year, perhaps in April, he has every reason to want to appear to be impactful and a positive influence. For Sudani, and any world leader trying to maintain respect inside their country and outside, being accepted into the Oval Office is the gold standard of international endorsements and would aid his chances of reappointment after the October 2025 general elections in Iraq.

But the tawdry current reality is that Sudani was only appointed after the politicized judiciary stole Iraq's 2021

elections (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/iran/iraq-quietly-falling-apart>) in favor of the Coordination Framework—led by a cabal of Iran-backed terrorist groups. Sudani was brought into the premiership with the instructions to simply administer their “resistance government” (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/muqawama-lauds-resistance-government-iraq>) as its “general manager”. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sudani-general-manager-how-militias-view-iraqs-new-prime-minister>) As one prominent supporter of U.S.-designated terrorist movements in Iraq noted (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/muqawama-lauds-resistance-government-iraq>) after Sudani’s appointment, his role was to “provide political cover for the resistance.”

More credibly, the real driver for Kataib Hezbollah’s stepdown yesterday was the arrival of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Force (IRGC-QF) leader to Baghdad the day prior. IRGC-QF is the terrorist group that formed Kataib Hezbollah and controls it today. This visit was likely motivated by Iran’s desire to avoid getting struck by the United States, hence Kataib Hezbollah’s ridiculous claim that Iran was unaware of the group’s many attacks on Americans. Likewise, Iran probably does not want a large chunk of the Kataib Hezbollah leadership to be killed by the Americans.

If the Iran-backed “resistance” wants to prevent embarrassment for Sudani, it is for two reasons only: first, because it suits the Iran-backed terrorist groups to have Sudani as a non-sanctioned façade nominally leading Iraq, and second, because it expects Sudani to imminently deliver the removal of U.S. forces from Iraq within a defined timeframe. This expectation is particularly important for Iran since the United States is close to sanctioning and striking many parts of the Iraqi state that have been captured by Kataib Hezbollah and the other terrorist groups during the Coalition Framework takeover of many state portfolios.

### **What Should Washington Demand of Sudani?**

I’ve met and talked with Sudani a number of times in the past as he worked his way up the ladder of Iraqi politics, so I have some insight into the man and his career—which is an undoubtedly impressive one. He has served at every level of Iraq’s government: as a mayor, a governor, a minister (multiple times) and now as premier. In all likelihood, he does not enjoy being a servant for the militias and aspires to more as a real prime minister of a real country. However, such a goal is unattainable unless he gets strong international and domestic support to change Iraq’s rotten system. Inside today’s Sudani is a hard-working leader who simply cannot get free of the terrorist groups and militias with whom he struck a devil’s bargain to become prime minister in the first place.

I also know how Washington works from the inside, and have a sense of how effective Washington’s leverage can be in Iraq when applied in a thoughtful and targeted manner. If I were in charge of Iraqi policy, I would give the following recommendations as a suitable price for staying our hand and forestalling major military retaliation to escalating provocations from Iraq’s Iranian-backed proxies.

1. **Iraq’s Prime Minister needs to flex his muscles.** Sudani has been meek in his dealings with the terrorist groups and militias inside his government. The United States should encourage him to take a risk and publicly say: “According to the constitution, the Iraqi prime minister is the commander-in-chief, not a bunch of militia leaders. It is past time for groups like Kataib Hezbollah to stop talking in public like they run the Iraqi state. Kataib Hezbollah has embarrassed Iraq, as they admit, and they will be punished.” Sudani will be biting the hand that feeds him but if he is ever to become a real leader, there’s no better time than now, and if he fails now, the U.S. should recognize that he never intends to get out from the shadow of the terrorist sponsors.
2. **Kataib Hezbollah personnel should be expelled from the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) senior leadership.** No senior Kataib Hezbollah member—of which the U.S. can easily furnish a list—should be running Iraqi state institutions, especially the state-supported umbrella PMF. That includes (to name just a few) Abu Fadak (aka Abdul-Aziz al-Mohammadawi), the current operational head of the PMF; Abu Zainab al-Lami (aka Hussein Falah Aziz al-Lami), the

corrupt (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/coordination-framework-militias-exposed-stealing-baghdad-real-estate>) PMF head of security who is sanctioned for human rights abuses (<https://ofac.treasury.gov/recent-actions/20191206>); and Abu Iman (aka Imad Naji al-Bahali, Adhab Kaytan al-Bahali, Sattar Jabbar al-Taaban), the U.S.-sanctioned (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/ofac-designates-iraqi-militiamen-part-1-kataib-hezbollah-commanders>) PMF intelligence chief. The three KH brigades of the PMF (45<sup>th</sup>, 46<sup>th</sup>, 47<sup>th</sup>) should eventually be disestablished.

3. **Kataib Hezbollah's leader Abu Hussein) should be exiled from Iraq.** When Iranian proxies have been targeted by the United States in the past, they have often left for Iran for a period of time. This should be expected of the KH Secretary General Abu Hussein (aka Ahmad Mohsen Faraj al-Hamidawi) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/exposing-kataib-hezbollahs-royal-family-insights-recent-leaks>) and any other key members the United States identifies. As long as they do not re-enter Iraq, they will not be targeted.
4. **Kataib Hezbollah must be expunged from financial and industrial systems.** The United States has recently targeted one KH airline (Fly Baghdad (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2037>)) and one KH bank (Al-Huda (<https://www.state.gov/taking-financial-measures-against-iraqi-bank-and-designating-its-owner/>)). This process must go much deeper, including removal of KH-affiliated businesses from Iraq's entire banking system, intelligence services, airports, customs posts, and industrial sector.
5. **The January 27 attackers should be prosecuted for terrorism and serve their full sentences.** The Iraqi terrorists who killed three Americans on January 27 in Jordan should be found by a joint Iraqi-U.S. investigation, prosecuted under Iraqi terrorist statutes, and serve the maximum jail time allowable. Their names and faces must be publicly known, in contrast to previous cases where Americans were expected to simply trust the "resistance government" that a real person was jailed and remained in jail.

Kataib Hezbollah is not the whole problem: hardly. There are similar terrorist groups like Asaib Ahla al-Haq (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-asaib-ahl-al-haq-0>), Kataib Sayyed al-Shuhada (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-sayyid-al-shuhada>), and Hezbollah Harakat al-Nujaba (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-harakat-hezbollah-al-nujaba>) that also need to be rooted out and expunged from key government and commercial systems. And there are terrorist-adjacent groups like Badr (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-badr-organization>) that need to be explored as potential targets for sanctions due to their pivotal involvement in enabling designated terrorist movements to run mammoth corruption projects in Iraq. However, Kataib Hezbollah is a very good symbolic test for Sudani. Securing the above achievements is a good first step in the dialogue that will then begin about reducing U.S. presence in Iraq—but first thing's first. The United States is not going to withdraw from Iraq under fire, so a sustained suspension of attacks is a vital first step.

With regard to Sudani's visit to America, we need to see what the Iraqi PM can achieve before confirming this important invitation. One might ask, was Sudani not "working hard" or making "intensive" efforts before January 30, when (since October 17, 2023) U.S. forces were attacked almost 180 times (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis>) from and in Iraq, or by Iraqis at U.S. bases in Syria and Jordan? Is this too little, too late? One might ask whether Sudani deserves a White House visit—welcomed into the Oval Office in the same manner as Volodymyr Zelenskyy—if all he has done is belatedly try to bandwagon on a ceasefire offered by Iran and their terrorist partners because the United States was about to strike.

Being concerned about losing one's job is not enough to justify being feted in the White House. Washington should first let Sudani prove that he is more than the "general manager" for a cabal of terrorists running today's Iraq.

Sudani can be a real prime minister of a real sovereign state if he wants to be, but that will require taking risk. Then maybe he can receive a hero's welcome in Washington. ❖

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