

# Analysts mull coalition strategy in spat with Iran-backed forces

Author:

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LONDON: Three days of attacks between US-led coalition forces and Iran-backed Iraqi militias continued with the second attack in a week on the coalition base at Camp Taji, north of Baghdad.

Missiles were fired at the base after US warplanes conducted a series of airstrikes on Iraqi militia positions in the provinces of Babil and Karbala on Thursday night.

The strikes came in retaliation for a missile attack on Camp Taji on Wednesday, on what would have been the birthday of Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, who was killed by a US drone strike in Baghdad in January. Wednesday's attack claimed the lives of two American soldiers – Juan Miguel Mendez Covarrubias and Marshal D. Roberts – and British Army reservist Brodie Gillon.

The Iraqi military said six people were killed in the US strikes, including three soldiers, two police officers and a civilian.

It added that the strikes had been launched against positions occupied by the paramilitary umbrella group Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi, a wing of the Iraqi security forces that includes the militia Kataib Hezbollah.

Jamal Jafar Muhammad Ali Al-Ibrahim, former Al-Hashd deputy chief and Kataib Hezbollah commander, was one of the senior figures killed alongside Soleimani.

Pentagon spokeswoman Alyssa Farah confirmed that the militia was the target, saying the US had “conducted defensive precision strikes against Kataib Hezbollah facilities across Iraq.”

A senior US commander has accused the militia of being behind the attacks on Camp Taji. Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, US Central Command chief, told a committee meeting of the US Senate: “The Iranian proxy group Kataib Hezbollah is the only group known to have previously conducted an indirect fire attack of this scale against US and coalition forces in Iraq.”

## **UK reaction**

UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab praised the decision to launch airstrikes on Al-Hashd positions on Thursday, having previously stated, after confirmation of Gillon's death, that those responsible for the attacks would be “held responsible.”

Raab said in a statement: “The response to the cowardly attack on coalition forces in Iraq has been swift, decisive and proportionate.”

He added: “UK forces are in Iraq with coalition partners to help the country counter-terrorist activity and anyone seeking to harm them can expect a strong response.”

However, the UK's ability to hold people to account is complex, bound up in a multitude of issues including rules of engagement and interaction with coalition partners.

The UK's role in the strikes is unclear – various sources, including USA Today, claimed that the airstrikes were “a joint operation with the British,” though US President Donald Trump is known to have given the final go ahead. “We didn't launch the strike,” a UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) spokesman told Arab News.

Michael Stephens, an associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute for Defense and Security Studies, said coordinated military responses with the US are the most likely course of action the UK will take.

“There are many ways that you can hold people to account. I think it's a combination of messaging and action, and because we lost service personnel and we have joint operations going on in Anbar and the Kurdistan region as well, I don't think it's unusual, necessarily, to have a combination of US and UK activity,” he told Arab News.

“You can have UK assets doing ISTAR (intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance) whilst the US carries out the strike or vice versa, or you can have ad hoc missions. It's not unusual for the UK to be involved in ‘kinetic activity’ in Iraq,” he said.

## **BACKGROUND**

- **The strikes came in retaliation for a missile attack on Camp Taji on Wednesday, on what would have been the birthday of Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, who was killed by a US drone strike in Baghdad in January.**
- **Wednesday's attack claimed the lives of two American soldiers – Juan Miguel Mendez Covarrubias and Marshal D. Roberts – and British Army reservist Brodie Gillon.**

“The lines are quite grey in terms of ‘is this going to be a UK-only response.’ It doesn't really work like that. It's more fluid, and it can simply be a day-to-day set of calculations that determine how we (the coalition) respond.”



Part of the complexity revolves around the fact that Al-Hashd is technically part of the Iraqi security forces, blurring lines about chains of command and responsibility. Stephens was scathing about the ability of diplomatic routes to resolve the situation.

“In terms of diplomatic pressure, the Iraqi government has absolutely no ability to respond when it comes to Kataib Hezbollah or Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi in general,” he said.

“I think this is something that a lot of countries are trying to work on, in terms of building the resilience of the Iraqi state,” he added.

“Vis-a-vis Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi, there’s not much you can do. If you start threatening more coercive diplomatic tactics or sanctions, you’re effectively just making a lot of innocent Iraqis suffer. It can be counterproductive, and the problem you’ve got is this very strange legal status for Al-Hashd, which just sort of attaches to the state when it wants to, and behaves as if it’s not part of the state at other times,” Stephens said.

“That’s a highly complicated equation. If you’re putting pressure on Baghdad, you may not get a result because Baghdad is both unwilling to do it and doesn’t have the actual leverage to do it either. You’ve then got to apply diplomatic pressure that doesn’t make the situation more difficult.”

**Clear message**

Military responses range in terms of method and intention. A source familiar with UK foreign policy told Arab News on condition of anonymity: "It can range from a Reaper (drone) to a team, and it can be subtle or it can be 'shock and awe.' Both have their uses, but the overarching message is clear: If US or UK forces want you, they'll find you. How obvious they make it depends on the message they wish to send to other actors."

Stephens suggested that may have been behind the very public way the coalition had struck Kataib Hezbollah.

"A straight military response (like this) shows 'escalation dominance – they kill three, we kill 25.' I don't really think there's any other way to deal with this," he said.

"It makes sense to simply increase the cost on these militias. If they go outside the remit of the state – and their strikes kill Iraqi service personnel as well – they're hurting themselves. But of course these militias are only thinking about themselves, not the wider Iraqi question."

In terms of what might follow the latest attack on Camp Taji, Stephens believed little would change.

"That's the response. I think more will come. Sure, summon the British ambassador, summon the US ambassador, but that won't stop what's going on here," he said.

"Eventually I think this will come to a head and both sides will have to climb down when they realize the cost is getting too high politically – and from the militia's side, they just lose too many people."

The anonymous source said: "You simply won't know the full extent of what's going on. That's the thing about secret military operations – they tend to stay that way."

The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office did not comment on whether the government had tried to undertake a diplomatic route in identifying the attackers.

The MoD declined to comment on whether the coalition had relayed its intention to the Iraqi government to strike Al-Hashd targets prior to the attack. "But we're in constant communication," its spokesman told Arab News.



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## [Netanyahu challenger Gantz chosen to form new Israeli gov't](#)

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JERUSALEM: Israel's president on Sunday said he has decided to give opposition leader Benny Gantz the first opportunity to form a new government, following an inconclusive national election this month.

President Reuven Rivlin's office announced his decision late Sunday after consulting with leaders of all of the parties elected to parliament.

The decision raises questions about Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's political future as he leads the country's battle against the coronavirus threat and prepares to go on trial for corruption charges.

Netanyahu's Likud emerged as the largest party in the March 2 election,

Israel's third in under a year. But with his smaller religious and nationalist allies, he received the support of only 58 lawmakers during Sunday's consultations, leaving Likud three seats short of the required majority in parliament.

Gantz's Blue and White received the support of parties representing 61 seats, a slim majority. However, those parties are also divided, and it is not clear whether Gantz will succeed in putting together a coalition. One lawmaker refused to endorse either side.

Rivlin said he would formally designate Gantz with the task on Monday. Once formally tapped, Gantz will now have a month to cobble together a governing coalition.

Given the possibility of continued deadlock, Rivlin summoned both Netanyahu and Gantz to an emergency meeting late Sunday.

Rivlin had earlier suggested the two men form a power-sharing unity government to lead the country through its many crises. If the two rivals cannot reach a unity deal, the country could find itself in a fourth consecutive election campaign.

"Anyone who has watched the news in recent days understands that this is a time of trial, and that these are not regular consultations," he said. "We must now deal with forming a government as soon as possible ... at this complex time."

Israel's president holds a largely ceremonial role, but is responsible for designating the candidate he thinks has the best chance of being able to form a government by securing a parliamentary majority.

That task has been complicated by the results of the March 2 election.

Netanyahu's Likud party emerged as the largest single party, but short of a 61-seat parliamentary majority with its allies of smaller religious and nationalist parties.

While Gantz is backed by a slim majority, the opposition is deeply fragmented – with the predominantly Arab Joint List and the ultra-nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu among them – giving Gantz slim odds of being able to form a government.

Yisrael Beiteinu's leader, Avigdor Lieberman, and two members of Gantz's own Blue and White party have said they would oppose a government that relies on support from the Joint List. Lieberman told the president that he supports Gantz, but also called for the formation of an "emergency" unity government to deal with the coronavirus threat.

Netanyahu, in his caretaker role, has invited Gantz to join him in an emergency government. Gantz has left the door open to such an arrangement, but also dismissed the offers as insincere.

Over the past week, the coronavirus scare has overshadowed the country's precarious political standoff – which comes as Netanyahu prepares to go on trial for corruption charges.

Netanyahu got an important reprieve on Sunday when the Jerusalem court handling the case postponed his trial for two months because of restrictions connected to the coronavirus pandemic.

Netanyahu was scheduled to appear in court Tuesday to face charges of fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes in connection to a series of scandals. But following the emergency health measures the government enacted restricting the gathering of people in public places, the court announced that it was pushing back the hearing until May 24.

Netanyahu is accused of receiving expensive gifts from wealthy friends and offering to exchange favors with powerful media moguls. The long-ruling Israeli leader denies any wrongdoing and says he is the victim of a media-orchestrated witch hunt.

Much of the country ground to a standstill Sunday, with schools, malls and places of entertainment shut down. Employees were encouraged to work from home and strict restrictions have been placed on personal interactions. The virus has spread to more than 100 countries, infected more than 150,000 people worldwide and killed more than 5,700. In Israel, some 200 people have been infected with no casualties yet, as severe measures seem to have proven effective so far.

The coronavirus crisis has raised calls for an emergency unity government. Netanyahu formally extended an offer Sunday to Gantz to join a government aimed at halting the spread of the virus, suggesting two frameworks, including one that would see an alternating leadership between them over the course of four years.

Gantz's centrist Blue and White party seems to consider the outreach yet another ruse after what has been an extremely acrimonious campaign that included unfounded smears against Gantz.



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Israel's Gantz vows to form government without Netanyahu

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# Egypt launches app to recycle electronic waste

Mon, 2020-03-16 00:20

CAIRO: Egypt's Ministry of Environment is preparing to launch the E-Tadweer application, which will enable people to dispose of their electronic waste. The public will also receive discount vouchers when purchasing electronic appliances from companies that support the application.

The application, launched in collaboration with the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, helps people to reduce their consumption of electronic devices.

Egyptian Minister of Environment Yasmine Fouad announced that the government had granted seven licenses to factories so they could safely recycle electronic waste.

Fouad said that the amount of e-waste in Egypt is about 88,000 tons annually. Minister of Communications and Information Technology Amr Talaat met Fouad and the Swiss Ambassador to Egypt Paul Garnier to discuss ways to help sustainable recycling projects in Egypt.

## **FASTFACTS**

- **The application helps people to reduce their consumption of electronic devices.**
- **The government granted seven licenses to factories so they could safely recycle electronic waste.**
- **The amount of e-waste in Egypt is about 88,000 tons annually.**

This followed the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Communications and the Swiss Embassy in 2016 to support the integration of small- and medium-scale companies in recycling electronic waste in Egypt. It was agreed to extend the duration of the project from 2020 to 2023.

Talaat said that since there was a trend toward greater digitization, measures were needed to safely dispose of electronic waste in an environmentally friendly manner.

The minister said that the new project would aid in the creation of job opportunities for people in the electronic waste treatment field. He said this would include programs to train a number of people to prepare them to work in the field.

The Swiss Embassy is to take part in the endeavor by providing technical support in safely managing electronic waste.

Following the steps being taken toward a safer disposal of electronic waste,



an awareness campaign will be launched on the dangers of not disposing of electronic waste safely, and educating people on proper methods of disposal.



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Electronic waste disposal a big challenge

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## [Abu Dhabi shuts tourism, cultural venues](#)

Sun, 2020-03-15 00:25

DUBAI: Abu Dhabi announced on Saturday it was shutting major tourism and cultural venues, including the Louvre Abu Dhabi museum and the Ferrari World theme park, from March 15-31, as Arab states in the Gulf stepped up measures against coronavirus.

The latest announcement was made in tweets by the Abu Dhabi Government Media Office. Abu Dhabi is the capital and largest emirate in the UAE.

The UAE Civil Aviation Authority also announced a suspension of all flights from and to Lebanon, Turkey, Syria and Iraq, starting March 17 until further notice.

Dubai said it was canceling all events planned in March and asked hotels not to host wedding celebrations during this period.

A number of shops have voluntarily closed in Dubai to contribute to the containment efforts.

Gulf Arab states have stepped up measures to contain the coronavirus outbreak, with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait taking the most drastic decisions by canceling all international flights.

The UAE will suspend all visa issuance, except to foreign diplomats, starting on March 17, the official news agency WAM reported, citing immigration authorities.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a group of six oil-rich Arab countries, has reported nearly 850 coronavirus infections, mostly people who had traveled to Iran or who were contaminated by them. No death has been reported in the GCC.

Oman, which has the lowest number of infection in the region at 20, announced on Saturday a one-month closure of schools and educational institutions, a precaution taken by other GCC states.

Qatar confirmed on Saturday 17 new infections, bringing the total number of people diagnosed with the disease to 337, the highest in the GCC, followed by Bahrain, 211, and Kuwait, 104. Gulf health authorities have intensified pleas to the population to avoid gatherings, carrying out campaigns to sanitize public places.

“I urge you by God to stay at home,” said Kuwaiti Health Minister Basel Al-Sabah on state TV.



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Syria death toll 384,000 after nine years of war UK reiterates desire for two-state solution

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## [Syria death toll 384,000 after nine years of war](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-03-15 00:05

BEIRUT: At least 384,000 people have died in Syria, including more than 116,000 civilians, since the war began in March 2011, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said on Saturday.

Sparked by deadly repression of peaceful pro-democracy protests, the conflict has drawn in outside powers in a complex war involving opposition factions, militant groups and foreign interests.

As the war enters its 10th year, the regime of Bashar Assad now controls more than 70 percent of Syrian territory, thanks to the military support of its allies Russia, Iran and Lebanese militant group Hezbollah.

The conflict is the "worst manmade disaster since World War II," the UN human rights chief declared in 2017.

The war has destroyed the economy and caused more than 11 million Syrians to flee their homes.

According to the Observatory, which relies on a network of sources in Syria, the latest death toll includes about 22,000 children and 13,000 women.

At least 129,476 regime soldiers, allied forces and militiamen have died, according to the Britain-based war monitor, including 1,697 members of Hezbollah.

Nearly 57,000 opposition figures have died, as well as 13,624 members of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, which spearheaded the US-backed campaign against Daesh, the Observatory said.

The Observatory tallied 67,296 deaths among militants loyal to Daesh or to Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, an alliance led by a former Al-Qaeda affiliate that dominates the last opposition enclave in the Idlib region in the northwest.

### **FASTFACTS**

- **The war has destroyed the economy and caused more than 11 million Syrians to flee their homes.**
- **The latest death toll includes about 22,000 children and 13,000 women.**

The death toll included 421 unidentified victims.

After recent regime advances, Idlib province is the last battleground between regime forces, and the militants and their allies.

Damascus launched an offensive to take the region in December, causing close to 1 million people to flee, according to the UN, before Ankara and Moscow negotiated a cease-fire earlier this month.

NGOs continue to denounce human rights abuses by the Syrian regime, including lethal chemical attacks, torture and arbitrary arrest.

Tens of thousands of people have been subject to forced disappearances by the government or a myriad of armed groups, NGOs report.

The war has destroyed infrastructure and crucial sectors of the economy including the oil industry.



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