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Iraq's Sudani walks a tightrope after Syria's fall

With the region's Resistance Axis on the back foot, Iraq's ability to insulate itself from turmoil depends on Sudani's diplomatic finesse, domestic leadership, and the maintenance of the PMU as a cornerstone of sovereignty.



Photo Credit: The Cradle

In the aftermath of significant strategic setbacks for West Asia's Axis of Resistance, Iraq has emerged as the focal point of an escalating regional crisis. But for many Iraqis, the scale of the brewing storm has not been immediately apparent.

The trajectory has been unmistakable: from the assassination of Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah on 27 September, to Israel's ominous "threat message" to Iraq on 18 November, culminating in the fall of the Syrian government and its far-reaching repercussions.

The challenges Iraq faces today extend far beyond its borders. Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani is proceeding with extreme caution, akin to crossing an active

minefield. His administration is weighed down by internal pressures, security threats, and regional dynamics while also contending with foreign demands, including resisting calls from the US and its allies to dismantle the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) – the Iraqi military backbone in the fight against ISIS.

These forces are seen as a key pillar of Iraq’s security architecture and a counterweight to Iranian influence in the region, despite the support some of the factions within the PMU umbrella receive from Tehran.

Dr Hussein al-Moussawi, a senior media official with the PMU’s Al-Nujaba Movement, tells *The Cradle* that both the Shia religious authority and Iraqi people “did not and will not accept any compromise on the dissolution of the Popular Mobilization Units,” accusing the US “occupation” of trying to extend its presence in Iraq, which “[they] will not accept.”

Baghdad’s regional role

An Iraqi government source also reveals to *The Cradle* that Iraq shares its deepening concerns with neighbors such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the UAE, and Egypt. Following the upheaval in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria, many Iraqis fear their country might be next in the chain of regional destabilization.

According to the source, Washington conveyed a message to Tehran through Swiss intermediaries, warning of a major strike – potentially targeting a nuclear facility – in early 2025.

Meanwhile, a UN official based in Paris shared with *The Cradle* that the Axis of Resistance underestimated the scale of the current offensive against the region, failing to comprehensively initiate the Unity of Fronts strategy.

Initially viewed as a reckless Israeli gambit, the attacks on Gaza and Lebanon have since revealed themselves as being part of a broader, opportunistic, western-backed strategy to reshape the balance of power in West Asia.

In Iraq, the signs of heightened tension are visible everywhere. Along the 600-kilometer border with Syria, the Iraqi army and PMU maintain a vigilant presence, deploying armored brigades, thermal cameras, and watchtowers to prevent a repeat of the 2014 ISIS invasion.

A PMU leader confirms to *The Cradle* that its leadership decided early on that it would not cross the border to support Syrian forces – first, because the Syrian army itself was not deployed for the fight, and second, because then-president Bashar al-Assad had restricted the activities of allied forces in recent years. Those restrictions increased as the Gaza war escalated and as Assad began to mortgage his country's fate to both the Russians and his newfound Gulf state relationships.

The vigilant Iraqi presence on the Syrian border is matched with Baghdad's close monitoring of Turkiye's force build-up in the Suruj area near Kobani (Ain al-Arab) accompanied by tanks and heavy artillery. They are also watching the incursion of Israeli forces into Syria's Quneitra governorate, descending from the Golan Heights to reach the Yarmouk Basin in Deraa governorate, along the opposite side of Rashaya, Hasbaya, and the Lebanese western Bekaa, toward the Masnaa Crossing – the only currently operating border crossing between Syria and Lebanon.

Compounding this are revelations that the actual number of US troops in Iraq and Syria is significantly higher than previously disclosed, with thousands stationed in the region to counter Iranian influence and provide logistical support to their Kurdish allies. Worse yet are the unconfirmed leaks that Sudani is not only prepared to accept the extension of US troops' presence in Iraq beyond the 2026 withdrawal deadline, but may also allow Americans to enhance their Iraq–Syria border monitoring missions.

While the Pentagon officially reported a total of 3,400 US soldiers in the two countries – 900 in Syria and 2,500 in Iraq – it now states the figure is at least 4,500, with 2,000 soldiers in Syria as a rear operations base to support US forces in Iraq.

Sudani's defensive diplomacy

Sudani's recent diplomatic maneuvers underline the gravity of the situation. An informed Iraqi source discloses to *The Cradle* that following the Israeli threat, Sudani convened leaders from Iraq's Coordination Framework and the State Administration Coalition to discuss potential responses.

The same source adds that US intermediaries later delivered a second Israeli message, listing targets that might be struck if drone attacks launched from Iraq were not halted. Although opinions within Iraq's political and security circles diverged, the PMU leadership leaned toward de-escalation, prioritizing Iraq's stability.

Despite this, Iraqi resistance factions have carried out several operations, often aligning with attacks by Yemen's Ansarallah-aligned armed forces. These acts of defiance, however, have not deterred Baghdad from seeking a delicate balance.

For instance, the Iraqi government has resisted Iranian requests to transit forces through Iraq to Syria, citing the risks of further destabilization. According to sources close to the PMU, this approach reflects a calculated effort to shield Iraq from the spiraling Syrian crisis and preserve its fragile sovereignty.

As one Iraqi politician close to the resistance factions explains to *The Cradle*:

“Sudani's performance is good, and the Iraqi opinion is present in the decision, and we are trying to spare Iraq the repercussions of what is happening in Syria. We certainly do not want the same fate, and Iraq is strong. We are with the government in all its decisions because they are in the interest of Iraq, and we have authorized it to take what steps are necessary. We are following Sudani's movements, and we see that Iraq has begun to regain its regional health, and has become present in the region, and we support him in this.”

On 11 December, Sudani landed in Amman to meet with Jordan's King Abdullah II, one of the most apprehensive Arab leaders regarding the situation in Syria. Shortly after, he traveled to the Al-Mualla resort to meet Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

By 13 December, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken made an unannounced visit to Iraq, emphasizing US priorities in controlling Iraq's borders with Syria and preventing the continued flow of Iranian arms to Lebanon. This flurry of diplomacy illustrates Iraq's central role in regional and foreign security calculations.

PMU as a 'wall of defense'

Sudani's diplomatic outreach extended beyond these high-profile meetings. According to an Iraqi source, before the opposition's attack on Syria escalated, the Iraqi prime minister dispatched PMU head Faleh al-Fayyadh to Ankara and Damascus to mediate between the two sides. However, this effort failed, leaving Sudani with no leverage to pacify armed factions or mitigate potential Iranian pressure.

An Iraqi government source denies any formal assurances or threats from the US regarding Syria but confirms to *The Cradle* that prior warnings had been issued to resistance leaders. For example, Qais Khazali, the Secretary-General of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, has reportedly relocated to Iran as a precaution.

But other sources say that Sudani's government did receive US warnings for Iraqi forces to stay out of the Syrian battle in support of the former Assad government, a position that was ultimately supported by Iraq's main political forces and blocs, including maverick Sadrist Movement leader Muqtada al-Sadr.

However, this support will have its limits and red lines; one of these is the PMU, and the other is the US occupation. Al-Nujaba's Moussawi emphasizes that the PMU, alongside other Iraqi forces, remains an essential bulwark against both internal and external threats and rejects any compromise on the PMU's existence, describing it as a “wall of defense” for Iraq amid escalating regional tensions.

Moussawi also reiterates Iraq's continued support for the Palestinian cause and accuses the US of prolonging its occupation under dubious pretexts. He warns that Iraqis, particularly the resistance factions, are fully aware of these tactics and remain resolute in opposing any foreign military presence:

“The resistance remains stronger than ever and will adapt to the evolving challenges to defend Iraq’s sovereignty and interests.”

The stakes for Iraq could not be higher. For Sudani, the mission is not just to shield Iraq from the chaos engulfing its neighbors but also to establish it as a stabilizing force in an increasingly turbulent region. Achieving this will demand diplomacy and resilient leadership, as well as an unyielding defense of Iraq's sovereignty against relentless geopolitical pressures and the unquenchable ambitions of the expansionist, US-backed Israelis – a task in which the continued existence of the PMU remains non-negotiable.

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