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## **IRAQIS, NOT US TROOPS, MUST BE THE ONES WHO COUNTER IRAN'S INFLUENCE IN IRAQ**

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Military Times (18 May 2020)

Gil Barndollar

The third time was the charm. After six months of uncertainty and chaos, last week Iraqs parliament finally confirmed Mustafa al-Kadhimi, the third nominee for the post, as prime minister. Kadhimi faces a pandemic, plummeting oil prices, ISIS remnants, and a simmering anti-corruption movement that has had hundreds of its demonstrators killed by security forces. The last thing he needs is a proxy war on his soil.

A few thousand U.S. troops remain in Iraq today, despite being hamstrung by both the coronavirus pandemic and the force protection measures that followed Januarys flare up in tensions with Iran. These troops are a liability, not an asset: bottled up on big bases, they are hostages to Iranian military power in the region. The U.S. presence in Iraq enables Iran to escalate at will, with at least some deniability via its Iraqi proxies in the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) militias.

At the tactical level, trading missiles with Iranian proxies is a fight America should avoid. Last month the Pentagon conducted operational planning to destroy the Iran-sponsored Kataib Hezbollah militia □ a task that is not achievable without enormous U.S. military escalation on the soil of an American partner. The U.S. commander in Iraq, Lt. Gen. Robert P. White, bluntly warned against just that.

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