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# The Hidden Motive behind Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani's Visit to Erbil: Navigating the Uncertainty of 2025

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## Authors

Ziryan Rojhelati

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Iraq's pressing political and security concerns for the near future are driving Baghdad's urgency to promptly see a new Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) formed, alongside a moderate resolution to ongoing disputes between Erbil and Baghdad.

The ongoing conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon, coupled with the escalating hostilities between Iran and Israel, have heightened fears in Baghdad of being drawn into a broader regional conflict. This sense of urgency is further compounded by the prospect of Donald Trump assuming office in 2025. If Baghdad had been a little sure that it would not have major problems under the Biden administration, this time, it would have had to think twice about how to deal with these issues

## **Iraq faces three primary concerns for 2025:**

**The first** is how to persuade armed groups to cease attacks on Israel originating from Iraqi territory. While the Biden administration tolerated frequent but limited attacks by these groups, it remains unclear how a Trump administration would respond. Even after Trump's election victory, Iranian President **Masoud Pezeshkian** stated that Iran must take control of its relation dossier with the United States directly. In this context, a country like Iraq is compelled to brace itself for the next phase of [Trump's presidency](#).

**The second** concern is the risk of Iraq becoming a hub for resistance groups, akin to Lebanon in the 1980s, with the arrival of members from Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis. Many Shiite politicians agree that while humanitarian support for Lebanon and Hamas is important, Iraq must avoid involvement in the ongoing regional conflict.

Ayatollah al-Sistani has recently emphasized that weapons should remain under state control. This statement, made at a time when certain armed groups from Iraq are carrying out limited but frequent attacks on the Golan Heights, was particularly noteworthy. It signals support for state authority and could enable Prime Minister al-Sudani to take a firmer stance in managing the crisis.

Moreover, the number of armed groups operating independently and launching attacks without government oversight is at an all-time low. Al-Sudani enjoys both direct and indirect backing from traditional Shiite leaders and the supreme marja'a. He aims to leverage this support to persuade Iran to refrain from using Iraqi territory for its regional agendas.

**The third** concern is whether Iraq can find a way to prevent Israel and Iran from using its territory and airspace to launch attacks against each other.

The Iraqi Foreign Minister has stated that Iran has promised not to [use](#) Iraqi territory in its anticipated attack on Israel (True Promise-3). However, this commitment will be politically and militarily challenging to uphold if Iran proceeds with the attack. With Trump returning to power, it remains uncertain whether Iran will follow through—either via proxy groups or direct missile strikes.

In reality, it is difficult for Iran or Israel to persuade any state to officially grant access to its land and airspace for such attacks unless the strikes are symbolic and pre-negotiated. Given that both Syria and Iraq lack robust air defense systems and are characterized by pluralism and instability, they present the most viable options for both sides.

Tightening Iraqi air security could ensure that no one can easily exploit it, a move that may align with Iranian interests. Baghdad's efforts in this regard might be why Tehran has made this promise to Iraq.

Following the October 25 Israeli attack, Iranian Foreign Minister **Abbas Araghchi** accused the United States of opening an [air corridor](#) for the Israeli military to strike Iran, and in this regard, Iraq sent a letter of condemnation of Israel to the [UN Secretary-General](#). One of Iraq's primary concerns is preventing the unauthorized use of its airspace by other countries. However, achieving this requires advanced radar systems, missile defense capabilities, and strong coordination with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

Iraq has been pursuing missile defense systems for several years and recently signed a multi-billion-dollar deal with South Korea to acquire them. However, to ensure comprehensive airspace coverage, Iraq must prioritize protecting the Kurdistan Region's airspace as much as Baghdad's and Anbar's. Politically, this requires Iraq to strengthen its ties with Erbil and gain Turkey's agreement, particularly given Turkey's ongoing operations in the region. The recurrence of incidents like the recent downing of a Turkish drone in Kirkuk underscores the potential for escalating tensions—an outcome Iraq is now keen to avoid.

While Iraq does not require Turkey's permission to deploy radar or missile defense systems in the Kurdistan Region, it will likely need to engage in negotiations. The success of these efforts hinges on resolving at least some of the outstanding issues with the Kurdistan Region, and accelerate forming a new government to ensure effective coordination with Erbil.

From this perspective, viewing al-Sudani's visit to Turkey, the Council of Ministers' decisions on oil and other issues with the Kurdistan Region, and Araj's visits to the Kurdistan Region and subsequently to Iran as part of a broader context reveals a clear and cohesive picture.

Immediately after the Israeli attack, National Security Advisor **Qasim al-Araji** arrived in Erbil. As his visit was [described](#) as being at the recommendation of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and to be his envoy, a significant military matter was likely on the agenda. During their recent meeting with the Iraqi security delegation led by Araj, Iranian officials expressed gratitude to Baghdad and Erbil for implementing the security agreement between them, suggesting that this was not a primary focus of the discussions.

It is more likely that one of the key topics was Iraq's efforts to prevent Israel and Iran from using its airspace. This raises an important consideration: the installation of radar or even missile defense systems. In the Kurdistan Region, the Harir military base, vacated by U.S. forces earlier this year—contrary to some international reports suggesting a more recent evacuation—might be the most strategic location for such systems.

In a previous analysis following the elections in the Kurdistan Region, I noted that the process of forming a government would be complex and time-consuming. However, the current geopolitical climate and Iraq's determination to address future threats are likely to [accelerate the formation process](#). While a long list of agenda items could be drawn up for al-Sudani's visit to the Kurdistan Region, the overarching factor driving these discussions is the uncertainty surrounding the security and political landscape in 2025.