

REPORT

Iraqi F-16s Could Be in Jeopardy Amid Iran Tensions

Sensitive U.S. technology feared vulnerable to Iranian-backed militias after contractors evacuate Balad air base.

By Ellen Ioanes and Lara Seligman



Three Iraqi Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcons fly in formation during a training sortie above an undisclosed location on July 18, 2019. U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. CHRIS DRZAZGOWSKI

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It was supposed to be a gesture of goodwill and a good-

are increasingly concerned that Iraq's F-16 fighter jet program—supplied by the United States and, until recently, secured and maintained by foreign contractors—is vulnerable to seizure by Iranian-backed militias.

Sallyport Global, part of the Caliburn contractor conglomerate based in Reston, Virginia, provided security for the roughly 34-aircraft F-16 squadron at Balad Air Base alongside contractors from Lockheed Martin, who provided maintenance, and Iraqi personnel. But in early January, Sallyport and Lockheed Martin contractors withdrew from the base after facing indirect rocket fire from Iran-backed militias, leaving sensitive U.S. technology potentially vulnerable, U.S. and Iraqi officials tell *Foreign Policy*.

“Due to concerns about the safety and security of their personnel supporting Iraqi F-16 operations at Balad Air

to *Foreign Policy*, noting that the Iraqi Air Force was notified before the evacuation, which was completed on Jan. 8.

Lodewick stressed that the United States is “always concerned about the security of technologies provided to any partner nation through foreign military sales and takes appropriate measures to safeguard against unwarranted divulgence.”

Security relations between the United States and Iraq, a critical U.S. partner in the fight against the Islamic State terrorist group and efforts to counter Iranian influence in the region, have been tested in recent weeks since U.S. President Donald Trump approved a Jan. 3 drone strike that killed Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Suleimani on Iraqi soil. Suleimani’s death sparked outrage across Iraq, prompting the Iraqi parliament to vote on a nonbinding

Tensions only increased after Iran launched a retaliatory missile strike against U.S. and coalition targets in Iraq on Jan. 7, sending U.S. forces and their Iraqi counterparts scrambling and leaving more than 50 U.S. troops with various degrees of traumatic brain injuries. Tehran has since signaled an end to direct military action, but Iraqi militia groups linked to Iran such as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) continue to conduct lower-level attacks on outposts across the country. U.S. and Iraqi forces are on high alert; the State Department has urged all nonmilitary U.S. personnel to leave the country.

vulnerable. Some say it's only a matter of time before PMF militias—Asaib Ahl al-Haq is active in the area around Balad, according to Michael Knights, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy—can access Balad Air Base, and quite possibly the weapons the contractors were there to protect.

One U.S. official familiar with the F-16 program told *Foreign Policy* the “biggest concern” is securing the F-16's sensitive technology. “We just have absolutely no way to verify what they are looking at, what they're carrying away,” the official said.

“Right now, at Balad, there's nothing. There's no U.S. personnel at all providing security,” the official told *Foreign Policy*. “As far as the technology, once that's compromised, that's compromised and there's nothing we can do.”

Other American officials are more confident about the security of the systems. One U.S. military official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss a sensitive issue, said the planes and related equipment are being “well guarded” by Iraqi soldiers.

“We have received assurances from the Iraqi Government that they have taken steps to increase the security of U.S. divested equipment at Balad AB,” said Lodewic, the spokesperson.

For the PMF to seize the base “would require a substantial mobilization and force,” said Michael Mulroy, who served as the Pentagon’s Middle East policy chief until December 2019 and is now a national security and defense analyst with ABC News. “I wouldn’t imagine that they are very concerned about an actual assault or takeover.”

former pilot said aren't being fed adequately—getting meals of only soup and rice—and don't get adequate crew rest. Further, Iraqi soldiers on the base operate on a rotating schedule, with one week on base and one week off so they can seek employment elsewhere, causing potential operations gaps.

Even when Sallyport was providing security on-base, there were serious security infringements, a 2017 Associated Press investigation found. In addition to allegedly smuggling alcohol on base and participating in human trafficking, Sallyport security allowed nearby militias to come onto Balad and take three massive generators.

A statement from Sallyport said at the time that the contractor followed all protocols.

“The longer Lockheed is out, the more difficult to sustain the fleet,” said the U.S. military official. “The Iraqis can’t do it without the contract help coming back in within a few months.”

John Losinger, a Lockheed spokesman, confirmed that its personnel had departed the base “following the U.S. State Department’s alert for all American citizens to depart Iraq due to escalating tension in the region.”

For now, according to the U.S. official familiar with the program, the jets aren’t being flown regularly, which on one hand reduces the need for replacement parts but on the other hand degrades the systems.

“A lot of things on the jets degrade even faster when they’re not being used, so it’s kind of a Catch-22,” the official said.

Islamic State, and the U.S. government urging Iraq to get them back per their initial sale agreement. The militias have been subsumed into the Iraqi military but still maintain their independence and are often backed by Iran.

Iraq initially purchased the F-16s in 2011 and 2012, during the Obama administration's pullout from the country and just before a period of instability that led to the rise of the Islamic State. As Jane's reports, the initial aircraft were delivered in 2014, with the second batch delivered last May. But the twin blows of dropping oil prices and the rise of the Islamic State left Iraq unable to pay for the squadron and other weapons entirely with national funds. So in 2016, the United States extended Iraq a \$2.7 billion credit facility—essentially a soft loan for weapons and maintenance for systems including the

we've always worked very hard to stress the Iraqi role in everything," Knights told *Foreign Policy*. The F-16 sale, he said, pointed to the United States' desire to "show how effectively we were rebuilding the Iraqi military."

But since then, U.S. officials have grown concerned that the Iraqis are not making use of the sophisticated technology. Mulroy said during his time at the Pentagon there were discussions about potentially selling the F-16s secondhand to another party.

"They can't afford them, they can't maintain them," Mulroy said. "It's an example of: Why aren't we having them buy things that they can actually use and won't cost them a fortune to maintain?"

Mulroy and Eric Oehlerich, a retired Navy SEAL commander and a senior fellow for technology and

military force in Iraq has been both extraordinarily expensive and largely unsustainable.

After 10 years of supplying the Iraqi Security Forces with billions of dollars' worth of equipment and training, the report cautions, "an irregular army of lightly equipped ISIS terrorists defeated the internationally supported and equipped ISF, murdered Iraqi leaders, and brutalized Iraqi citizens with very little resistance," with Islamic State forces taking advantage of Iraqi assets.

The desire of the Iraqi government to maintain the mirror-image military that the United States has tried so fervently to stand up is in doubt, too, according to one former senior U.S. official.

"In the past few years, Iranian-influenced members of the Iraqi parliament have sought to reduce funding for

funding to the irregular Popular Mobilization Forces,” the former senior official said.

The former senior official told *Foreign Policy* that the Iraqi government seems to be building a parallel, but dominant, security force like the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Iran, pointing to the government’s reduction in recruiting and funding for the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service—which the former official described as “Iraq’s most professional and successful military service”—as a particularly glaring example of this policy.

Foreign Policy contacted Caliburn International, Sallyport’s parent company, and the Iraqi Ministry of Defense multiple times for comment but did not receive responses by publication time.

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