

# **Russia warns U.S. to not ‘look for excuses to start a new conflict’ after report claims Iran Killed 600 U.S. soldiers**

Moscow expressed skepticism toward Washington’s recent allegations that Iran was behind the deaths over 600 U.S. troops in Iraq and warned against launching any new wars in the Middle East.

During a Tuesday press briefing at the State Department, Brian Hook, U.S. special envoy to Iran, revealed “based on declassified U.S. military reports, that Iran is responsible for the deaths of at least 608 American service members” throughout the course of the Iraq War.

Hook claimed that “this accounts for 17 percent of all deaths of U.S. personnel in Iraq from 2003 to 2011” and did not take into account “the many thousands of Iraqis killed” by Shiite Muslim militias allegedly trained by Iran’s elite Revolutionary Guards.

While Iran has yet to respond to the remarks, its partner in neighboring Syria has deemed the claim suspicious amid President Donald Trump’s campaign to discredit the revolutionary Shiite Muslim power. Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova told reporters Thursday that she was “surprised” by the allegations, as “we haven’t heard of any clashes between Americans and Iranians on the territory of Iraq, so our Washington colleagues have to explain what exactly they mean by Teheran’s involvement.”

“There should be no doubt that American intervention against Iraq will remain in history as the gravest violation of international law and a de facto criminal act,” added Zakharova. “We advise the United States not to look for excuses to start a new conflict, increasing the suffering throughout the world with its aggressive policy.”



U.S. Army troops take position as they come under sniper fire during sporadic fighting with Shiite Muslim militiamen, in Najaf, Iraq, on August 20, 2004. Though the U.S. was predominantly focused on battling Sunni Muslim groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq—later ISIS—troops also confronted Shiite Muslim fighters allegedly backed by Iran. JOE RAEDLE/GETTY IMAGES

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The U.S. invaded Iraq in March 2003, seeking to overthrow then-President Saddam Hussein, based on accusations that he possessed chemical weapons and harbored ties with Al-Qaeda. Though the goal of removing Hussein from power succeeded, the allegations he had weapons of mass destruction was later proven false. Troops subsequently faced insurgencies waged by Baath loyalists, ultraconservative Sunni Muslim groups such as Al-Qaeda and Shiite Muslim paramilitary forces said to have received Iranian support.

While the Pentagon counted over 3,500 troops killed in action from 2003 through 2011, Zakharova noted that “there is no exact figure” as to how many civilians died, though it may be in “the hundreds of thousands.” Lower estimates, like that of the Iraq Body Count project, placed the number of verified violent civilian

deaths throughout these years at over 114,000. Higher estimates, such as a 2013 study published by PLOS Medicine, placed the toll of all Iraqis killed at in excess of 405,000.

These reports did not include tens of thousands killed in Iraq in the ensuing eight years, but the latter figure resembled estimates of the half-million believed dead in neighboring Syria since the outbreak of a 2011 rebel and jihadi uprising backed by the U.S. and its regional allies. By 2014, Al-Qaeda offshoot the Islamic State militant group (ISIS) had taken large parts of both Iraq and Syria and the Pentagon formed an international coalition to begin bombing the group in both countries.

At this point, the U.S. and Iran found themselves on the same side battling ISIS in Iraq, where they both supported the Shiite Muslim-dominated leadership in Baghdad, but waging opposing campaigns against the jihadis in Syria, where Tehran backed the same government that Washington had attempted to depose. Russia also entered the conflict in 2015, supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad—who, like Hussein, the West has accused of war crimes—and his allies against insurgents and militant groups alike.

With ISIS now mostly eradicated thanks largely to efforts by all three countries and their local allies, the U.S. has turned its attention toward expelling groups said to be under Iranian command from the region. Tehran's alleged support for U.S.-designated terrorist organizations such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades were cited as part of the reason that the White House left a landmark nuclear deal in 2015, enacting new sanctions designed to strangle the Iranian economy.





Syrians wave the national flag, along with those of Iran and Russia, as they ride in a vehicle carrying the flag of the Lebanese Shiite Muslim Amal Movement and portraits of President Bashar al-Assad, late Syrian President Hafez al-Assad and Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah as citizens gather at the Umayyad Square in Damascus on April 14 to condemn the strikes carried out by the U.S., U.K. and France. LOUAI BESHARA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

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Russia has been careful not to characterize its relationship with Iran as a formal alliance, but rather as a “strategic partnership” with the common interest of supporting Assad. Both countries had mutual grievances with the U.S. due to long-running rivalries and more recent economic restrictions, but their visions for the region as a whole diverged at times.

Ties between Russia and Iran’s sworn foes, Israel and Saudi Arabia, have particularly alienated Moscow from the so-called “Axis of Resistance” group comprising Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and other allied militias across the Middle East. The group’s name derived from President George W. Bush’s “Axis of Evil” speech that included Iraq, Iran and North Korea and was later expanded by then-Undersecretary of State John Bolton to include Cuba, Libya and Syria.

Bolton, now the U.S. National Security Advisor, has supported military

action against all of these countries with the potential exception of Cuba, whom he has increasingly targeted in recent months as part of the Trump administration's intensifying efforts to overthrow the socialist government of Venezuela.

Russia, Iran and Syria were among the countries supporting the government of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in the face of what they deem to be a coup attempt backed by Washington and its allies in support of the Venezuelan opposition. The U.S. and dozens of its allies do not recognize Maduro's authority in Venezuela, and instead has backed opposition leader Juan Guaidó.

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