

# [***Americans star on an Iraqi basketball team. Its owners include forces that attacked US troops***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BP6-HJF1-DYMD-61M6-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

BAGHDAD — A pro basketball team in Iraq is owned by a paramilitary group, and some of its forces [*recently attacked U.S. troops*](https://apnews.com/article/iraq-kataib-hezbollah-us-strikes-militias-e2d31a579001f62a12b55b4cbf16ab48). But this hostility toward Uncle Sam has its limits: The team is banking on a high-scoring American to help lead them to a championship.

Like many former U.S. college basketball players facing stiff competition for a spot in the NBA, 27-year-old Uchenna Iroegbu of Sacramento has taken his talents abroad, excelling on teams in Nigeria and Qatar. Now the 6-foot point guard is in Baghdad after signing last month with Hashed al-Shaabi — the Popular Mobilization Forces — just in time for the Iraqi Basketball Super League playoffs.

From a basketball perspective, signing Iroegbu was a no-brainer; he led Qatar’s league in scoring, averaging 27 points per game. Politically, it’s a little more complicated.

The U.S. has had a fraught relationship with Iraq since its invasion in 2003, which was followed by years of occupation. And that was before Iranian-backed forces within the group that owns Hashed [*attacked U.S. troops in the region*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-american-service-members-killed-jordan-iran-5cb774fd835a558d840ae91263037489).

Iroegbu, who has been shooting hoops since he was old enough to hold a ball, keeps his focus on basketball and avoids talking about ***politics***. He had never even heard of Hashed before the team made him an offer.

One of three U.S. citizens on the team, Iroegbu considers this assignment to be just like any other — despite the unique security risks and political tensions in his host country.

“I'm a pretty simple guy. I go to practice, and if I’m not practicing, I’m in my room. I hang out with my teammates, play video games, read books — the same old, same old,” he said during a break from practice. Nearby, a young boy walked through the aisles hawking strong Arabic coffee to the few spectators in attendance.

The Americans communicate with their Iraqi teammates using basic English, but on the court they mostly rely on hand gestures and the “language of basketball,” said Iroegbu, who played in college for Stony Brook University in New York.

All of Iraq’s teams are state-owned and sponsored by different wings of the government, such as the oil and interior ministries, and they receive partial funding from the Ministry of Youth and Sport. Games are broadcast on a state-run TV channel dedicated to sports.

Hashed is owned by a coalition of primarily Shiite, Iran-backed forces that joined in the fight against [*the Islamic State militant group*](https://apnews.com/hub/islamic-state-group) in 2014 after it seized large sections of Iraq. Two years later, the Iraqi government designated them as an “independent” unit of its army.

At the time, the Hashed militias were allies of convenience with forces from a [*U.S.-led international coalition*](https://apnews.com/article/iraq-us-talks-to-end-coalition-mission-f782db4c6550ab31ef02ef3c1793ee7b) fighting the Islamic State. But today, some of the groups have a hostile relationship with the U.S.

Some of the militias launched multiple drone attacks against U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria in retaliation for America's support of Israel in its war in Gaza.

The attacks came to an abrupt halt in February, however, after a drone strike killed three American soldiers stationed in Jordan near the Syrian border. The U.S. launched retaliatory strikes in Iraq, including one that killed a militia commander in the center of Baghdad.

The commander of Iran’s elite Quds Force, Esmail Ghaani, made a special trip to Iraq to demand that the armed factions stop targeting U.S. forces, according to two Iraqi political officials who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters.

The coach of Hashed, Akil Najem, said those tensions have no bearing on the team or its players.

"The club is a civilian organization and we’re dealing with civilian people, so it doesn’t have any relationship to these ***politics***,” said Najem,

The head of the Hashed sports club is Jamal Fadel, a former player on Iraq's national team. Fadel said he has high hopes for his team, which went 10-10 during the regular season. He believes the Americans will help launch the team to national and regional prominence.

“All of the Iraqi teams depend on the international players," who contribute as much as three-quarters of the team's points in a given game, he said. "We have no issue if this player is an American, that one is Jordanian or Syrian.”

Just as soccer teams around the world recruit Argentinian and Brazilian talent, international basketball teams have long relied on recruiting U.S. players, including in the Middle East.

Basketball made its way to the region in the later 19th and early 20th century via American missionaries, said Danyel Reiche, a professor at Georgetown University-Qatar who studies the intersection of sports and ***politics*** in the Middle East.

Basketball wasn't the only American sport the missionaries brought over, but it found a mass following in the region, becoming nearly as popular as soccer in some areas, he said.

Americans playing in Iraq earn more than their teammates who were born there, but they're not enjoying the high-rolling lifestyle of NBA stars back home.

The Americans earn anywhere from $5,000 to $6,000 a month, tax-free, Fadel said, and they also receive free housing.

Iraqi teams began recruiting American basketball players soon after the last U.S. troops withdrew in 2011, eight years after an invasion that deposed former dictator Saddam Hussein. Dozens of Americans have played in Iraq since then.

Each team is allowed three non-Iraqi players, with no more than two on the court at any given time. More than 20 Americans are playing in Iraq this season.

Isaac Banks of New Orleans, a 6-foot, 7-inch forward who previously played with another Iraqi team, is another American on the Hashed squad. Since playing for East Tennessee State University, Banks has done stints as a pro in England, Georgia, Luxembourg, Ukraine and Syria.

The Iraqi players and fans are “welcoming and loving,” said Banks, who doesn't dwell on political or security matters.

“I just let God handle all that,” he said. “I’m from America — we have stuff going on over there all the time."

Fadel said the club looks out for the international players' security and is "ready for anything."

Well, almost. Before a recent game against the team owned by Iraq's oil ministry, the American players were nowhere to be seen.

It turned out they had all come down with food poisoning after eating out, their coach explained while puffing nervously on an electronic cigarette.

He had good reason to be anxious. Without his star Americans, the team lost 102-94.

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