



Iraq: Attacks and U.S. Strikes Reopen Discussion of U.S. Military Presence

Updated February 16, 2024

Iran-backed armed groups attacked U.S. personnel in Iraq [more than 60 times](#) between the October 2023 onset of the Israel-Hamas war and February 4, 2024. In response, President Joe Biden has ordered U.S. air strikes in Iraq and in neighboring Syria. Iraq's government, citing risks to Iraq's security from the attacks and counter-strikes, [says](#) it seeks to end the presence in Iraq of the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State (IS, aka ISIS/ISIL) and to engage in bilateral discussions about the future of the U.S. military presence. U.S.-Iraq talks [announced](#) by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin have begun on the "evolution" of the coalition mission and to "enable the transition to an enduring bilateral security partnership." After Iraq-coalition talks on February 11, an Iraqi military spokesman [said](#), "a timetable will be formulated for a deliberate and gradual reduction, leading to the end of the mission of the international coalition forces ... and the transition to a bilateral relationship, as long as peace is not disturbed."

In December 2023, President Biden [cited](#) the Iraqi government's invitation for U.S. forces and the coalition to remain in Iraq in his semiannual comprehensive war powers report to Congress. That same month, U.S. Central Command [reported](#) that approximately 2,400 U.S. military personnel were deployed in Iraq and 800 in Syria. The U.S. military presence in Iraq and U.S. military access to Iraq's airspace and land border with Syria facilitate U.S. [military operations](#) in Syria, where IS insurgents are [more active](#) than in Iraq and U.S. partner forces secure prisons holding thousands of IS fighters.

In December 2023, Congress [authorized](#) U.S. counter-IS partnership programs in Iraq and Syria through December 2024. Members of Congress may consider how potential changes to the U.S. and/or coalition presence in Iraq may affect U.S. interests in the region; whether changes should be made to patterns of U.S. assistance to Iraqi and Syrian partners; whether additional consultation with the executive branch or oversight is warranted; and how attacks on U.S. personnel and U.S. strikes [comport](#) with the [War Powers Resolution](#) and the [2001](#) and [2002](#) legislative authorizations for the use of military force.

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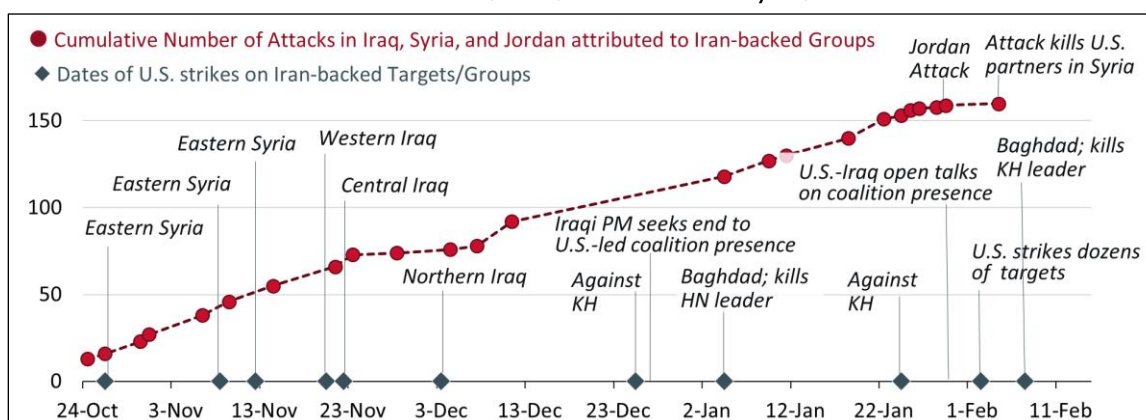
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Escalating Attacks and U.S. Strikes Follow Hamas-Led Attacks on Israel and Onset of Gaza War

Following the U.S. [killing](#) in Iraq of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)-Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani and an Iraqi security official (both U.S.-designated terrorists) in January 2020, Iraq’s parliament [voted](#) to direct the Iraqi government to expel foreign forces and deny foreign access to Iraqi airspace, territory, and waters. Iraq’s then-caretaker government did not do so, and its successors engaged U.S. counterparts in talks that led in December 2021 to an [announced](#) end to U.S. combat operations and a transition to training and advisory support. Intermittent attacks on U.S. forces in Syria and Iraq continued through early 2023, with some attributed to Iran-backed Iraqi armed groups. Observers noted [changes](#) in the pattern of such attacks in relation to developments in Iraq, Syria, and the wider region. President Biden directed [strikes](#) following some attacks on U.S. personnel in Syria and Iraq, and the Administration has stated its intent to defend U.S. personnel with “[proportional](#)” responses.

Figure I. Attacks on U.S. Personnel and U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria

Since October 17, 2023, and as of February 15, 2024



Source: CRS, using U.S. Department of Defense announcements and media reports. On October 24, 2023, the Department of Defense acknowledged 13 attacks on U.S. forces since October 17, 2023.

Notes: KH = Kata’ib Hezbollah. HN = Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba. CRS cannot validate attack and strike details.

Since October 2023, [observers](#) have documented more than 150 claimed attacks by the “Islamic Resistance in Iraq” on U.S. and other targets in Iraq, Syria, Israel, and Jordan, including the January 28 [attack](#) in Jordan that killed and injured U.S. servicemembers. Some attacks in Syria and Iraq have resulted in injuries to [U.S.](#) and [Iraqi](#) personnel. Reportedly, U.S. response strikes have destroyed facilities of the IRGC and of an Iran-backed Iraqi group in Syria and Iraq, and have killed some members of the Iraqi groups inside Iraq. Iraq’s government has [described](#) attacks on U.S. forces as acts hostile to Iraq while saying U.S. strikes on Iraqi territory violate Iraqi sovereignty. A January 4, 2024, U.S. strike in Baghdad [killed](#) a leader of an Iran-backed U.S.-designated terrorist group who also served as a commander in Iraq’s state-affiliated Popular Mobilization Forces. Dozens of U.S. strikes on February 2 [targeted](#) militia groups in Iraq, prompting Iraq’s government to [summon](#) the U.S. chargé d’affaires and submit a letter of protest over what it [described](#) as “a new act of aggression.” A U.S. strike on February 7 killed a leader of the U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization Kata’ib Hezbollah. An Iraqi military spokesman [said](#) the coalition had deviated from the reasons for its presence in Iraq and that the current “trajectory compels the Iraqi government more than ever to terminate the mission of this coalition.”

On February 10, some members of Iraq's [parliament](#) convened a session to call for the expulsion of U.S. forces, but they were denied a quorum by other members refusing to attend. Iraq's parliament could play a role in ratifying any bilateral U.S.-Iraq agreements that result from planned talks.

Possible Considerations for Congress

Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has [said](#) U.S. forces remain “focused on the mission of defeating Daesh [IS/ISIS/ISIL], and we are here for no other purpose,” and in January 2024 he [reiterated](#) U.S. “commitment to deepen our security cooperation to advance stability within Iraq and the region.” In August 2023, a U.S.-Iraq [Joint Security Cooperation Dialogue](#) agreed “to consult on a future process ... inclusive of the Coalition, to determine how the Coalition’s military mission will evolve on a timeline according to the following factors: the threat from ISIS, operational and environmental requirements, and [Iraqi] capability levels.” As part of those discussions, the Iraqi government “reaffirmed its commitment to protect U.S. and Global Coalition personnel and advisors, convoys, and diplomatic facilities.”

[Ongoing meetings](#) of the U.S.-Iraq Higher Military Commission (HMC) and other working groups could result in substantial, partial, or no changes to the U.S. military presence. A Pentagon spokesperson has [said](#) “The HMC meeting is not a negotiation about the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq.” In considering possible outcomes, executive branch requests for [regular](#) and [supplemental](#) funding, and defense authorization provisions in 2024, Congress may consider the following questions:

- How essential is the U.S. and coalition military presence in Iraq? How does the U.S. military presence in Iraq relate to U.S. efforts to counter and deter Iran? How does it affect risks of wider conflict?
- How might changes to the U.S. and/or coalition presence in Iraq affect
 - U.S. operations in Syria? U.S. embassy security? the [NATO mission](#) in Iraq?
 - Iraq’s security and regional security?
 - relationships between Iraqi groups and the Iraqi government, including the Kurdistan Regional Government and U.S.-supported *peshmerga* forces?
- How might abrupt changes affect perceptions of the United States?
- How if at all should U.S. [defense](#) and [foreign assistance](#) funding and authorities evolve?

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