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# The Addition of Trainers to Iraq: Background for Congress

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# Introduction

Responding to recent setbacks in Iraq and Syria in the fight against the Islamic State organization (IS, aka ISIL/ISIS/*Daesh)*, on June 10, 2015, President Obama authorized the deployment of an additional 450 troops to train, advise, and assist the Iraqi Security Forces.[1] These U.S. forces are to join the 3,100 already in theater, which would bring the total number of U.S. forces in Iraq up to approximately 3,550.[2] Approximately half of those additional forces would advise the 8th Iraqi Division on the use of its ground forces and help build connections between the government in Baghdad and local Sunni tribes in Anbar province.[3] The other half are to perform logistic and force protection functions.[4] Reflecting the shift in the campaign's center of gravity away from Mosul in northern Iraq, new troops are to be based in Anbar Province at Taqaddum, an Iraqi air base situated between Ramadi and Fallujah. This would be the fifth training site established in the counter-IS campaign; U.S. trainers are also operating out of Al-Asad, Besmaya, Irbil, and Taji.[5] The deployments appear to be evolving into a "lily-pad" basing footprint across the country.[6] As of May 21, 2015, the United States spent upwards of $2.57 billion on military operations in Iraq and Syria since August 2014; the average daily cost of counter-IS operations in both Iraq and Syria was $9.0 million.[7]

[1] Statement by the White House Press Secretary on Additional U.S. Steps in the Counter-ISIL Effort, June 10, 2015. For more information on the Islamic State and related U.S. strategy and policy, see CRS Report R43612, *The "Islamic State" Crisis and U.S. Policy*, by (name redacted) et al.

[2] Actual numbers on the ground vary day to day due to troops rotating in and out of theater.

[3] Tyrone C. Marshall Jr, "U.S. to Deploy Modest Increase in U.S. Troops to Iraq," *DoD News*, June 10, 2015. http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=129019

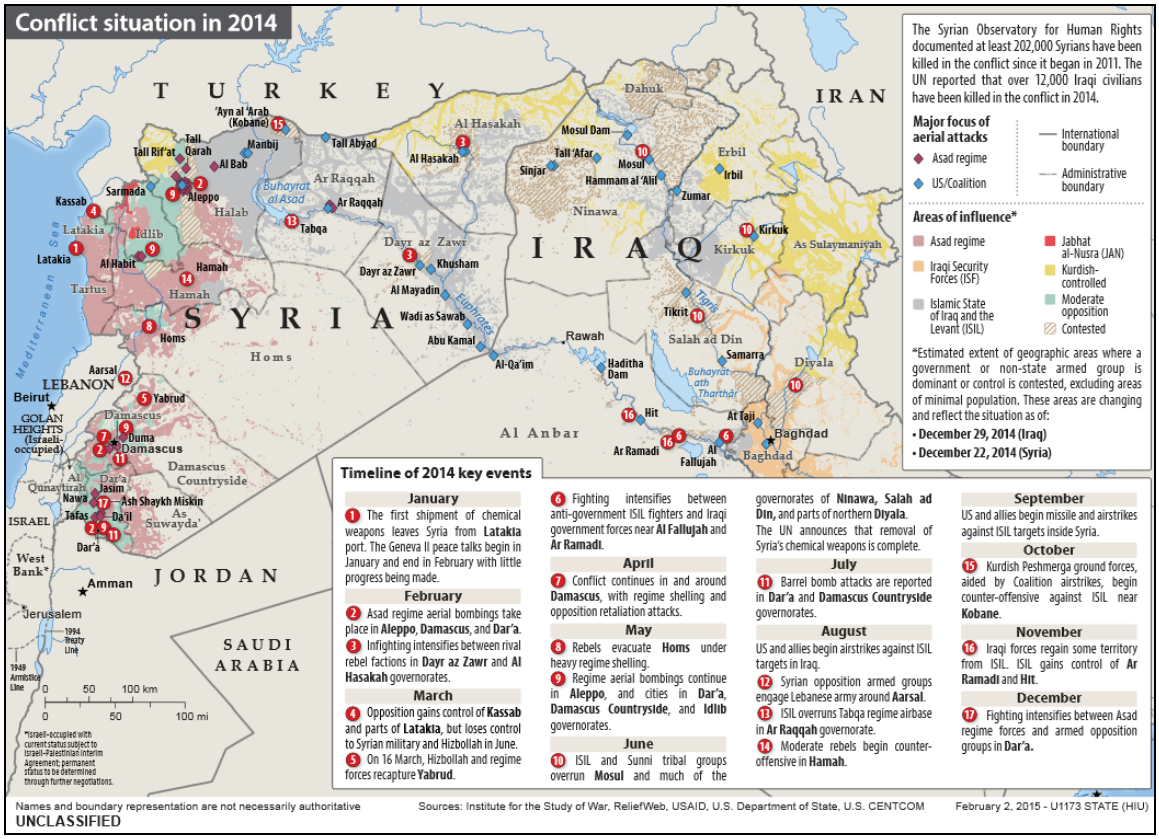
[4] Robert Burns & Lolita Baldor, "General: New U.S. Hub in Region Could Be Model," *The Associated Press*, June 11, 2015, http://bigstory.ap.org/article/9b57a8e86ddc44af9107aebeec28be7b/us-orders-more-troops-iraq-aid-sunni-integration

[5] BBC News, "President Obama to Boost Army Advisors in Iraq," *BBC News Worldwide*, 10 June 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-33083359

[6] Helene Cooper, "U.S. Weighing More Military Bases in Iraq to fight ISIS, Top General Says," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2015.

[7] U.S. Department of Defense "Operation Inherent Resolve: Targeted Operations Against ISIL Terrorists," Accessed June 11, 2015. http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814_iraq/

**Figure 1. Syria and Iraq: Conflict and Crisis in 2014—Map and Timeline**




**Source:** U.S. State Department, Humanitarian Information Unit, Syria Conflict Without Borders: 2014 in Review, February 2, 2015.

**Note:** Ramadi fell to IS in May 2015.[8]

The deployments were announced in support of the Administration's core goal in its anti-IS campaign, to "degrade and ultimately destroy IS through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy so that it's no longer a threat to Iraq, the region, the United States, and [U.S.] partners."[9] In order to accomplish this overarching objective, the United States organized a counter-ISIL coalition of upwards of 60 countries along the following lines of effort, each of which is led by at least two countries.[10]

- Supporting military operations, capacity building, and training (led by the United States and Iraq);
- Stopping the flow of foreign terrorist fighters (led by the Netherlands and Turkey);

[8] Tim Arango, "Key Iraqi City Falls to ISIS as Last of Security Forces Flee," *The New York Times*, May 17, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/18/world/middleeast/isis-ramadi-iraq.html?_r=0

[9] The White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Fact Sheet: Strategy to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)," The White House, September 10, 2014. https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/fact-sheet-strategy-counter-islamic-state-iraq-and-levant-isil

[10] General John Allen (Ret), "Remarks at Brookings-Doha U.S. Islamic World Forum," The Brookings Institution, Doha, Qatar, June 3, 2015.

- Disrupting ISIL access to financial resources (led by Italy, Saudi Arabia, and the United States);
- Providing humanitarian relief and stabilization support (led by Germany and the United Arab Emirates); and
- Countering IS messaging and defeating IS as an idea (led by the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States).

# The Military Campaign

The Iraq-focused element of the counter-IS military campaign, called Operation INHERENT RESOLVE, has two primary components that are both designed to support the Iraqi Government: coordinated air strikes and training and equipping the Iraqi Security Forces. The philosophy underpinning the White House's strategy for INHERENT RESOLVE is that the fight against the Islamic State will require a long-term campaign for which Iraqis and their neighbors must take the lead; U.S. and coalition forces must therefore focus on supporting Iraqis, Syrians, and others rather than taking on ground combat roles themselves. Air strikes in Iraq therefore provide close air support to Iraqi Security Forces and Kurdish *peshmerga*,[11] remove IS forces from the battle space, and eliminate IS-controlled facilities and sustainment infrastructure (such as IS-controlled oil refineries).[12] Meanwhile, the training and equipping effort is designed to better prepare Iraqi forces to combat IS. This training is conducted on bases—and not at or near the front lines—in order to prevent casualties and incur minimal risk to American forces. This represents a significant departure from training and mentoring models over the past decade and beyond, whereby military teams partnered and performed offensive operations with their local Iraqi (and, in another region, Afghan) counterparts. The United States is also streamlining the process to provide equipment to Iraqi forces. The Administration has underscored that this recent addition of 450 troops does not represent a departure from its overall strategy to defeat IS.[13]

Considerable debate exists as to whether or not these efforts are sufficient to meeting the objective of countering the Islamic State, especially in the wake of IS territorial gains across northern and western Iraq, including the fall of the key Iraqi cities of Mosul and Ramadi. Concerns are mounting that IS forces are gaining momentum faster than the Iraqis can build the capacity to match it, and that IS is consolidating its positions in Iraq. While the United States maintains it is eliminating upwards of 1,000 IS fighters per month through air strikes, estimates of their overall numbers have remained relatively constant, suggesting that ISIL is still able to actively recruit as many soldiers as it is losing.[14] And despite calling in over 3,309 air strikes as of

[11] Non-U.S. coalition nations which have conducted airstrikes in Iraq include: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Jordan, Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. See http://www.centcom.mil/en/news/articles/june-10-military-airstrikes-continue-against-isil-terrorists-in-syria-and-i

[12] Department of Defense News Transcript, "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Lt. Gen. Hesterman Via Telephone from the Combined Air and Space Operations Center, Southwest Asia in the Pentagon Press Briefing room" June 5, 2015. http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=5637

[13] The White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Press Conference Call on Additional Steps to Counter ISIL," The White House, June 10, 2015. https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/10/press-conference-call-additional-steps-counter-isil

[14] Sean D. Naylor, "Airstrikes Killing Thousands of Islamic State Fighters But It Just Recruits More," Foreign Policy Magazine, June 9, 2015. http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/09/airstrikes-killing-thousands-of-islamic-state-fighters-but-it-just-recruits-more/

May 27, 2015, and training upwards of 9,000 Iraqi Security Forces personnel (with an additional 3,100 in the pipeline) since August 2014, many believe that these efforts have thus far largely failed to translate into durable security and stability in Iraq. Some therefore argue that the United States should cease its train-and-equip efforts in Iraq.[15] Other analysts argue there is little reason to believe that these modest force increases will be any more successful without augmentation of the mission itself. As Anthony Cordesman at the Center for Strategic and International Studies argues, "generating or rebuilding forces in the rear is not enough, and is an almost certain recipe for failure."[16] As such, some suggest that a more forward-leaning approach might be required, such as embedding U.S. forces within Iraqi units to better coordinate air strikes, or deploying U.S. ground combat troops to halt, if not reverse, IS's progress. However, given limited U.S. presence in Iraq there are concerns about the vulnerability of troops that would be embedded within Iraqi units, should such an approach be executed.[17] Administration officials stress that taking on too much responsibility could inhibit progress toward building stable and sustainable Iraqi Security Forces, and that advising the Iraqis at the division level, to include assistance with planning, intelligence, and mission command, is an urgent requirement.[18]

# Strategic-Level Challenges

The military campaign is but one element of a broader strategy to defeat IS. Given that IS was able to gain a foothold in Iraq due to local and provincial-level grievances toward the Shia-dominated Baghdad government, addressing the root causes of the conflict likely requires addressing the governance challenges in the region. While the United States is constrained in its ability to build legitimate governance in Iraq, Congress may wish to consider whether the lines of effort to defeat ISIL as agreed by the international community actually address the root causes of the conflict. Furthermore, the assignment of different coalition partners to take the lead on different lines of effort can present its own challenges. As was demonstrated in recent military campaigns (and particularly in Afghanistan), without a single authority responsible for prioritizing and adjudicating between different civilian and military lines of effort, different actors often work at cross-purposes, often without intending to. This can make it considerably more difficult to consolidate gains and achieve campaign success. This dynamic may be exacerbated by the fact that other actors in the region—some of whom are coalition partners—have different, and often conflicting, longer-term regional geopolitical interests from those of the United States.

15 See H.Amdt. 475 to H.R. 2685.

16 Cordesman goes on to argue, "It is also important to remember that no one can create effective combat leaders and forces from the rear. New and weak units need to have a small, but experienced team of combat leaders embedded with them. New combat leaders and units need months of on-the-ground help in getting the essentials of combat operations right." Anthony Cordesman,"Creating a Strategy for Iraq, Syria, and the War Against ISIL: a Need for Change, Integrity, and Transparency," Statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, Jun 3, 2015. See http://csis.org/publication/creating-strategy-iraq-syria-and-war-against-isil-need-change-integrity-and-transparency

17 Greg Jaffe and Missy Ryan, "In White House's Iraq Debate, Military Brass Pushed for Doing Less," The *Washington Post*, June 13, 2015. http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-white-houses-iraq-debate-military-brass-pushed-for-doing-less/2015/06/13/8db17e30-1138-11e5-9726-49d6fa26a8c6_story.html.

18 The White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Press Conference Call on Additional Steps to Counter ISIL," The White House, June 10, 2015. https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/10/press-conference-call-additional-steps-counter-isil

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