

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

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Iran-backed armed groups have attacked U.S. personnel in Iraq [more than fifty times](#) since the October 7, 2023, Hamas-led attacks on Israel and the onset of the war in Gaza. 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 will seek 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. On January 25, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin [announced](#) plans to start U.S.-Iraq talks on the "evolution" of the coalition mission and to "enable the transition to an enduring bilateral security partnership."

In December 2023, President Biden [cited](#) the Iraqi government's invitation for U.S. forces and the coalition to remain in Iraq in his semi-annual 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 [more active](#) IS fighters and the detention by U.S. partner forces of thousands of IS fighters highlight ongoing risks posed by the group.

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.

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 Qassem 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

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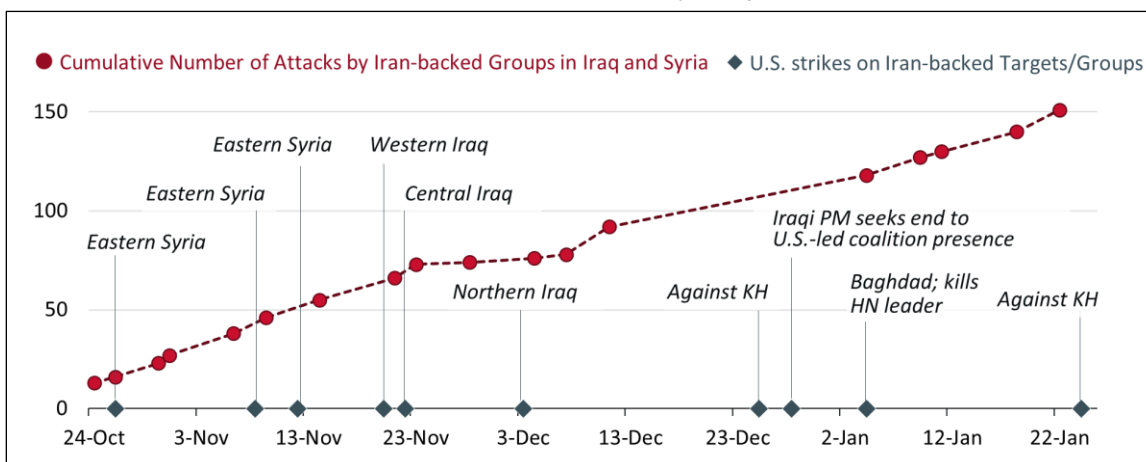
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successors engaged U.S. counterparts in talks that led in December 2021 to an [announced](#) end to U.S. combat operations and a transition to training and advisory support. Intermittent attacks on U.S. forces in Syria and Iraq continued through early 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.

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, and Israel. Some attacks in 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 its 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.

Figure 1. Attacks on U.S. Personnel and U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria

Since October 17, 2023, and as of January 24, 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 al Nujaba. CRS cannot validate reported attack and strike details.

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.”

A U.S.-Iraq Higher Military Commission (HMC) [is set](#) to begin meetings that could result in substantial, partial, or no changes to the U.S. military presence. 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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