

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

Updated July 31, 2024

After a months-long pause (**Figure 1**), the recurrence of attacks on facilities in Iraq hosting U.S. personnel in April and July 2024 and a U.S. defensive strike in Iraq on July 30, 2024, could affect U.S.-Iraqi talks on the future of U.S. forces in Iraq. 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, and, in response, President Joe Biden ordered U.S. air strikes in Iraq and in neighboring Syria.

Iraqi security officials visited Washington, DC, in July 2024 for [Joint Security Cooperation Dialogue talks](#), and the two sides “decided to begin work on a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to provide an enhanced framework for their bilateral security relationship.” After attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria during and following the July talks, U.S. forces reportedly conducted a defensive strike in Iraq on July 30. Press [reports](#) indicated the strike killed members of the state-affiliated 47th Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) brigade, which reportedly consists of members of the Iran-backed, U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization Kata’ib Hezbollah (KH). An Iraqi official [called](#) the U.S. strike “a heinous crime” and said it could “significantly undermine” joint diplomatic and military efforts and could embroil Iraq in regional conflict.

The attacks and U.S. strike may affect talks that [began](#) in January on the “evolution” of the coalition mission to “enable the transition to an enduring bilateral security partnership.” That month, Iraq’s government, citing risks to Iraq’s security from the attacks and U.S. counter-strikes, [announced](#) 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.

In June 2024, 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. As of December 2023, 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 have been [more active](#). U.S. forces [report](#) that attacks since October 2023 have required resource reallocation and greater force protection.

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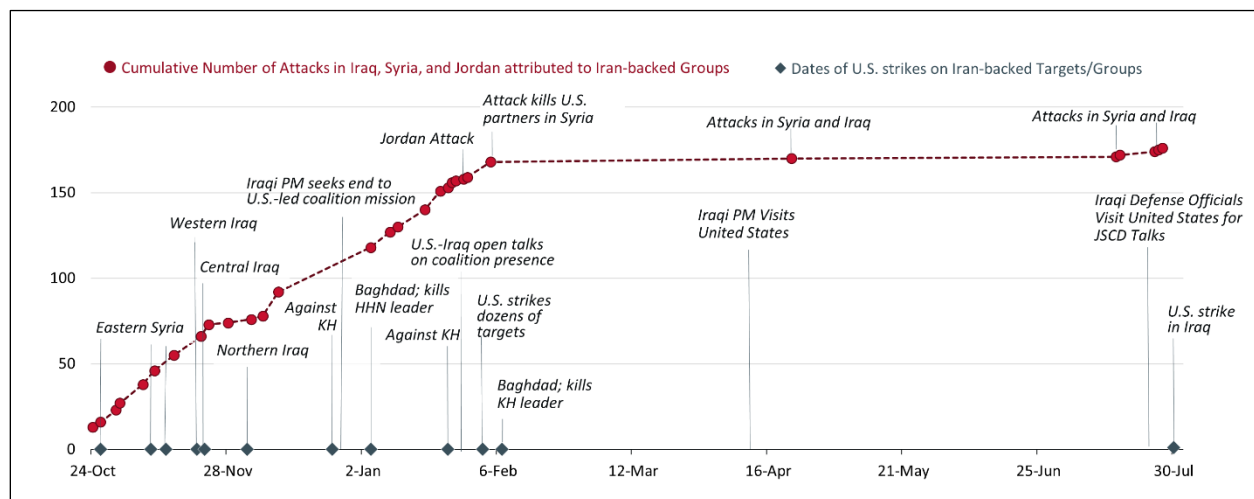
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Attacks, U.S. Strikes, and Iraqi Responses

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

Since October 17, 2023, and as of July 31, 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.

From October 2023 to February 2024, [observers](#) 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. Reportedly, U.S. response strikes destroyed facilities of the IRGC and of an Iran-backed Iraqi group in Syria and Iraq, and killed some members of Iraqi groups inside Iraq. Iraq's government has [described](#) attacks on U.S. forces as hostile acts while saying U.S. strikes on Iraqi territory violate Iraqi sovereignty. 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." After a U.S. strike on February 7 killed a KH leader, relative calm prevailed, but subsequent attacks and the U.S. strike on July 30 suggest that previous patterns could resume.

Some members of Iraq's [parliament](#) call for the expulsion of U.S. forces. Iraq's parliament could play a role in ratifying any future bilateral security agreements.

Possible Considerations for Congress

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.

In considering possible outcomes of regional security developments and U.S.-Iraqi talks, executive branch requests for [regular](#) and [supplemental](#) funding, and defense authorization provisions in 2024, Congress may assess the following:

- 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 if at all should U.S. [defense](#) and [foreign assistance](#) funding and authorities evolve?

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