



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

Updated September 10, 2024

After a months-long pause (**Figure 1**), recurrent attacks on facilities in Iraq hosting U.S. personnel and U.S. defensive measures 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. Iraq's government, citing risks to Iraq's security from the attacks and U.S. counter-strikes, [announced](#) in January 2024 that 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. Attacks recurred in April, July, and August 2024, including an attack that wounded U.S. personnel on August 5. A U.S. defensive strike on July 30 marked the first such U.S. strike since February 2024.

At July 2024 [Joint Security Cooperation Dialogue talks](#), the two governments “decided to begin work on a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to provide an enhanced framework for their bilateral security relationship.” Press [reports](#) indicated the July 30 U.S. 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 embroil Iraq in regional conflict.

In September, a [press report](#) citing an unnamed senior U.S. official said the United States and Iraq have reached an unannounced agreement that would see some U.S. forces withdraw from Iraq in 2025, with a residual force remaining in the Kurdistan Region until 2026 to support operations in Syria, with a bilateral security cooperation mission continuing thereafter.

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 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. U.S. forces [warn](#) the IS attacks have increased during 2024 and [report](#) that Iran-backed groups' attacks since October 2023 have required resource reallocation and greater force protection.

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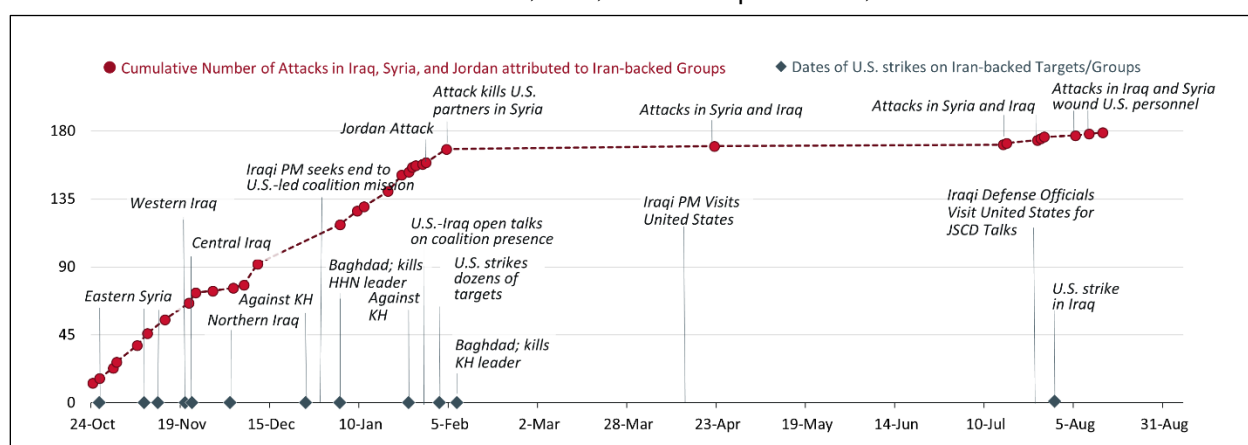
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Attacks, U.S. Strikes, and Iraqi Responses

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 into 2023, with some attributed to Iran-backed Iraqi 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 I. Attacks on U.S. Personnel and U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria

Since October 17, 2023, and as of September 10, 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. Attack incidents involving multiple targets may be considered a single incident. Unreported/unacknowledged incidents not reflected. Data approximate and subject to revision.

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 in Iraq violate Iraqi sovereignty. 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. 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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