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Iraqi Military Forces' Capacity in the Wake of a Likely U.S. Withdrawal from Iraq

By Caroline Rose & Carolyn Moorman

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COVER: Joint forces of the Iraqi Army and Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitary search an area of the the Baaj desert for remnants of the Islamic State group on Sept. 15, 2024 in the Nineveh province of Iraq. (Zaid Al-Obeidi / via Getty Images)

Executive Summary

In the wake of an intense regional escalation that severed Iran and its proxies across the Middle East, the U.S. finds itself in a new strategic position in Iraq and Syria, where Iranian influence and capacity have suffered a major blow. With the swift and surprising departure of the Tehran-allied Assad regime and the retreat of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps units and aligned proxy forces during Israeli strikes, there are new opportunities for U.S. interests in the region. With a weakened Iranian grip on Damascus and Baghdad – underlined by a dramatic decrease in Iranian and Iran-backed militia strikes on U.S. and partner assets – the U.S. and its partners in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS face fewer distractions and greater space to improve the capacity of local partners.

However, with opportunities, there are also risks. While the new caretaker government in Syria, led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, has sought to foster a smooth political transition and prevent a power vacuum, external actors' adventurism in contested territories, such as Syria's northeast, and an uptick in ISIS activity have proven that both state and nonstate actors are seeking to exploit this new space for influence. ISIS fighters have consolidated momentum in Syria's badia to prepare for a cross-border resurgence into Iraq – a concern that has prompted the Iraqi Federal Government to ring the alarm bell and seek a longer-term security partnership with the United States. Already, Baghdad has signaled its tentative interest in extending the U.S. timeline for a military withdrawal from Iraq, adding three years to an already-ambiguous drawdown plan to hedge against both Iran and sudden instability.

The U.S. has traditionally perceived a fast withdrawal timeline in Iraq as an opportunity for Iran, ISIS, and other regional malign actors, risking regional stability and human security. Washington additionally has a difficult history with expedited drawdowns from counterterrorism missions: Policymakers continue to be haunted by the memory of the botched Afghanistan withdrawal process in 2021, as well as the fact that only three years after U.S. forces ended their combat mission and pulled out of Iraq, they found themselves back in the country to combat a new terrorist organization that exploited the vacuum U.S. forces left behind.

The second Trump administration marks the beginning of an uncertain chapter for the United States' forward presence in the Levant. The new administration has demonstrated several times its desire to transfer responsibility for regional security in the Middle East to its partner Israel and conduct an immediate military disengagement. Skeptical of the value that a small U.S. forward presence in Iraq and Syria yields for Washington's interests, it's possible that President Donald Trump will authorize a speedy evacuation of U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria.

It's pivotal that policymakers in Washington and its partners abroad assess the scenarios that will unfold in the wake of a U.S. drawdown: how civilian and military missions outside the Global Coalition, such as NATO Mission-Iraq, will be able to stand on their own; how local forces like the Iraqi Security Forces and Syrian Democratic Forces will be able to stave off threats from ISIS and Iran-aligned militias without U.S. assistance; and how external actors may seek territorial contestation or political influence in lieu of a long-term U.S. presence and partnership.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The U.S. should seek to diversify its security influence in Iraq beyond its military presence and capacity-building efforts with Iraqi military forces, seeking to revive law enforcement collaboration, counternarcotics efforts, border security initiatives, and other areas of coordination.

Ahead of a potential U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and Syria or an extended withdrawal timeline to 2029, NATO and the EU should coordinate with

security forces in Iraq to strategize their own footprint in Iraq for the future, identifying gaps their missions can fill as the counter-ISIS fight comes to a close.

With the potential for a withdrawal, the U.S. should seek greater coordination with other military and civilian capacity-building missions, such as the NATO Mission-Iraq and EU Civilian Mission in Iraq, as a sudden American military withdrawal will render these operations vulnerable without thorough planning. NATO and the EU should engage in multilateral discussions with the U.S. government, the Iraqi government, and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq to strategize their own footprint in Iraq in the wake of a potential U.S. withdrawal.

With an increase in ISIS attacks and activity since the fall of President Bashar Al-Assad's regime in December 2024, the U.S. should encourage the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Federal Government of Iraq to engage with the new administration in Syria and Kingdom of Jordan to increase counterterrorism, intelligence, and security cooperation, in anticipation of a potential ISIS overspill from Syria's badia into Iraq and potentially Jordan.

The Grand Al-Nuri Mosque is seen on June 29, 2024, in Mosul, Iraq. The mosque was evacuated and reconstruction work halted after explosive devices were found in its southern wall.
(Ismael Adnan / SOPA Images / LightRocket via Getty Images)

Introduction

In September 2024, the U.S. announced it would start incrementally withdrawing its forces from Iraq and begin the process of formally ending the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.[1] Despite being in the throes of regional escalation between Israel, Iran, and Iran-backed militant organizations, the decision was long-awaited , following years of ministerial meetings, statements signaling a potential withdrawal, personnel reductions, and base transfers in Iraq as the Coalition made significant gains against ISIS cells in the country.

Through the end of 2026, 2,500 U.S. forces are set to withdraw from Iraq, first drawing down their presence at strategically important bases such as Ain al-Assad and consolidating posture in the capital of Iraq's northern Kurdish Region, Erbil.[2] The effort will formally end the 87-member Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS by the end of the first phase of drawdown in 2025.[3] The U.S. and Iraq will also begin the process of building the foundation of a bilateral, advisory security relationship that will maintain a portion of American military personnel in the country , though the exact number is unclear.

The reelection of President Donald Trump, a known isolationist critical of the U.S. forward posture abroad with a track record of drawing down in the Levant region, further increases chances for an American departure from Iraq by 2026. Furthermore, the likely withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria increases chances for a withdrawal from Iraq. The Trump administration will seek to offload security commitments to local actors, perceiving a reduced threat from ISIS, potential stabilization in Syria post-Assad, and an opportunity to utilize Israel as a proxy force against Iran-aligned forces in the region. It is therefore likely that the Trump administration will seek to conduct either a phased or simultaneous withdrawal from Iraq and Syria under the Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) mission.

While the road to an American withdrawal in Iraq has become much more certain, there remains great uncertainty about what effect this will have on Iraq's security landscape – particularly the capacity of Iraq's fragmented military forces.[4] The loss of the U.S. presence in Iraq, combined with the likely drawing down of its partners' foreign military forces that depend on the U.S. security umbrella there, will heavily impede the intelligence and reconnaissance collection, artillery, and command-and-control capabilities of Iraqi military forces. An absence of U.S. forces, once used as a deterrent against Iran and its proxy forces, will pave a steady path for Iran-aligned militias under the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) to consolidate greater control over the country's security infrastructure. Furthermore, as there is a recorded uptick in activity and strikes by previously dormant Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) cells in Syria, the departure of U.S. forces from Iraq could introduce an opportunity for cross-border resurgence that would threaten not only local security within Iraq and Syria but also the region at large.

Ahead of an impending push within the Trump administration to terminate the Counter-ISIS mission and withdraw from Iraq and Northeast Syria, it's critical for policymakers to examine how local partners such as the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), Kurdish Security Forces (KSF), and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) will be able to counter local threats without the assistance of U.S. forces.

METHODOLOGY

To properly assess the capacity and capabilities of Coalition partner forces, as well as the status of the operational environment in Iraq and Northeast Syria, this report utilizes data and assessments compiled from quarterly reports authored by the Office of the Inspector General to the U.S. Congress between Jan. 1, 2019, and October 2024. This period features a wide spectrum of political and security challenges to U.S. and partner forces in the region that can expose vulnerabilities or resiliency trends – such as waves of militia strikes on positions and Turkish operations in northern Syria and northern Iraq.

There are three partner forces of focus in Iraq: the ISF, Counter Terrorism Security forces (CTS), and the KSF. This report's authors compiled a data set recording Coalition partner regression and/or progress in 10 areas: intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); command and control; planning; artillery and indirect fire weapons systems; sustainment and logistics; personnel professionalism; force integration; ground operations; air operations; and force modernization reforms and recruitment.

This analysis qualitatively assesses these quarterly reports, given the fact that partners reflected both progress and regression simultaneously in certain quarters, creating challenges for any quantitative assessment. Additionally, this report incorporates press releases and other issued updates about how both civilian and military operations are evolving for the Coalition, NATO Mission-Iraq, and the EU Civilian Mission to Iraq. Each quarterly report contains information regarding the progress – or lack thereof – that U.S. training efforts have achieved in building operational capacity of partners such as the SDF, ISF, and Peshmerga on the ground.

The authors note that the language used in these reports – no matter how inconsistent, ambiguous, or limited – is extremely significant, as it is the primary mechanism used to educate constituents and congressional representatives about the nature and progress of U.S. capacity-building efforts and missions around the globe.

FORCE CAPACITY

This report identifies significant fluctuations in reported partner capacity among Iraqi and Syrian partners under Operation Inherent Resolve, relating to operational performance, force structure, and resiliency. Such fluctuations point to key deficiencies of U.S. partners that would leave them vulnerable to competing actors – such as the PMF, domestic threats like a resurgent ISIS, as well as external actors, such as Iran or Türkiye – in the wake of an American partial or full-scale withdrawal.

Assessing partner capacity in 2024 alone, quarterly reports from the Department of Defense indicated that partner forces exhibited consistent dependency on Coalition-provided intelligence, ISR, air support, U.S. drone strikes , and planning for combined arms operations. Also, while the U.S. does not conduct artillery support in Iraq, there additionally was a severe capacity gap among Iraqi military forces in artillery and fires – an element that proved crucial in the counter-ISIS fight. Furthermore, nearly all partners suffered from a lack of integration and mutual trust between branches and security forces due to political rifts, lack of funding, or budgetary disagreements that hindered intelligence exchange and coordination in planning.

CONTEXT AND CHANCES OF WITHDRAWAL

The likelihood of an expedited, full-scale withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq and Syria and the formal conclusion of the Counter-ISIS OIR Mission has

Fighters stand guard during a joint security operation for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) at Camp Roj, where foreign relatives of people suspected of belonging to the Islamic State group are held in Derik, Syria, on April 5, 2025. (Delil Souleiman / AFP via Getty Images)

increased with the second Trump administration. Trump has explored both a partial and a full-scale withdrawal under OIR on two separate occasions.

First, in December 2018 and then in October 2019, Trump made multiple announcements that roughly 2,000 to 2,500 American personnel operating under OIR in partnership with the Kurdish-led SDF would swiftly withdraw from Northeast Syria. Trump said ISIS had been defeated in the area, no longer necessitating U.S. presence.[5] The announcement and order to withdraw troops in a tight space of 30 days created space for a Turkish incursion, as well as encroachment from Iranian, Russian, and Syrian regime forces into contested areas in Syria's northeast.[6] While the withdrawal was reversed just a week later, after resignations from Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Envoy Brett McGurk and congressional pushback, U.S. posture in Northeast Syria still was reduced to roughly 900 personnel and an undisclosed number of military contractors.[7] Force levels largely remained at that level well into the Biden administration, until an announcement shortly after the fall of the Assad regime in 2024 that confirmed that over 1,000 U.S. forces were deployed to Northeast Syria, increasing the U.S. posture to 2,000.[8]

The second drawdown under Trump's first administration occurred at the start of 2020, following a precision strike on Baghdad International Airport that killed two of the most strategically important commanders: General Qassem Soleimani, a key leader of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps and architect of Iran's proxy strategy in the Levant, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a deputy chief of the PMF, an umbrella organization made up of many Iran-aligned militias operating in Iraq.[9] The strike induced a severe Iranian counteroffensive against several U.S. strategic posts, with one strike on the Ain al-Assad Air Base causing no fatalities but over 109 traumatic brain injuries to U.S. forces.[10]

In the wake of the escalation, the Trump administration incrementally and quietly drew down U.S. presence over the spring and summer of 2020. By that December, roughly 2,700 American military personnel had withdrawn from Iraq, and control of eight bases – some of which were in strategic locations like al-Qaim and Camp Taji – was transferred to the ISF.[11] The partial withdrawal resulted in a more than 50% reduction in U.S. presence in the country, with 2,500 American forces (not including contractors) remaining in Iraq.[12]

Iraqi Security Forces

In the last year of OIR quarterly reports submitted to Congress, the Office of the Inspector General outlined that the ISF made gradual improvements in aspects of command and control, sustainment and logistics, and air operations.[13] However, prevailing deficiencies in force integration, inter-branch coordination, and maintenance, combined with deeply rooted mistrust and communication issues between directorates and within Joint Operations Command-Iraq (JOC-I), have rendered it largely dependent on elements of Coalition support, such as the provision of ISR and target development – a dependency that would weaken it were the Coalition to withdraw.

Deep-rooted factors have contributed to the ISF's deficiencies. First, an accumulating political and sectarian divide in Iraq has infiltrated Iraq's armed forces and distracted planning initiatives within JOC-I.[14] Second, prevailing distrust – exacerbated by a budgetary dispute over oil revenues – between the Federal Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has translated into lack of coordination, exchange of knowledge and best practices, communication and intelligence exchange, and joint training between the ISF and KSF.[15]

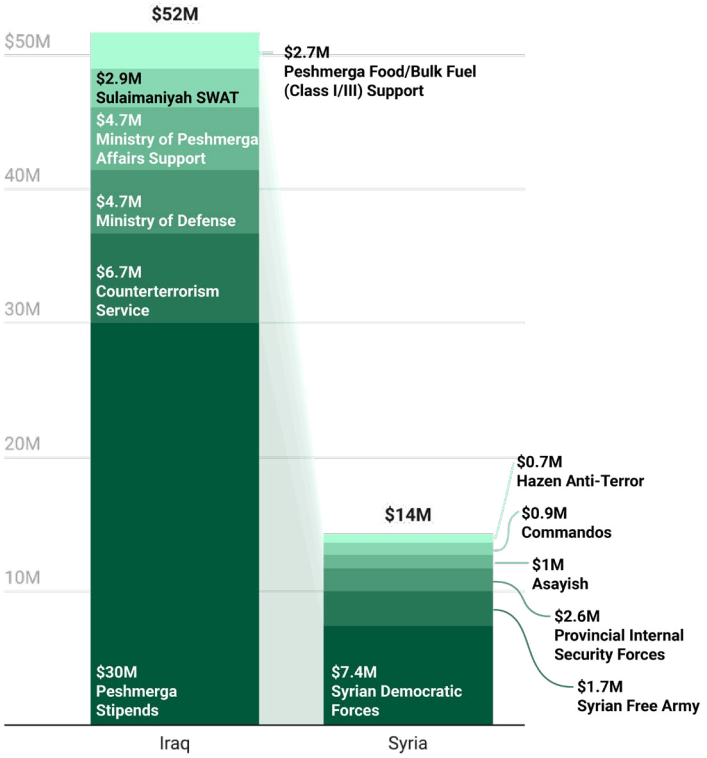
INTELLIGENCE, SURVEILLANCE, AND RECONNAISSANCE

Building up the ISF's ISR capabilities has been a key feature of Coalition advise-and-assist activities, enabling the ISF to develop actionable intelligence that can translate into precise strikes against ISIS networks operating within Iraq. In 2024, the ISF demonstrated incremental progress in coordinating ISR collection with JOC-I, which has helped it use its own assets to develop ISIS targets and overwatch. Following unfavorable reports in the fourth quarter of 2019 that the ISF was unable to "find and fix" targets and unable to exploit adversaries without Coalition assistance, the Coalition worked with the ISF to improve ISR collection capabilities, implementing a network of thermal cameras and platforms.[16]These improvements allowed the ISF to conduct a string of intelligence-driven air

and ground strikes against ISIS cells in the country, particularly in the second quarter of 2023.

Since 2023, the Iraqi Air Force has conducted strikes targeting ISIS hideouts in strategic hotspots for the terrorist group, such as the Wadi (Valley) al-Shay, without Coalition assistance.[17] Still, quarterly reports indicate that the ISF is largely dependent upon human intelligence,[18] lacks medium- and long-range platforms for surveillance, and has struggled to transfer gains in actionable intelligence collection to the Iraqi Air Force, which continues to struggle with enacting precision strikes. Most concerning for the Coalition has been the ISF's inability to implement a division dedicated to the collection and exchange of ISR across branches of Iraq's military forces. In the third quarter of 2023, the Office of the Inspector General noted that while this gap was repeatedly brought up to Iraqi military command at JOC-I headquarters, there seemed a lack of willingness to implement such a division – something that would ultimately relegate Iraqi branches and units to act upon their own ISR, siloed from any larger coordination and exchange.[19]

Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund Budgets for Iraq and Syria in Q3 of 2024



Note: Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred thousand for clarity. Totals may not sum exactly due to rounding.

Source: CJTF-OIR • Created with Datawrapper

PLANNING AND COMMAND-AND-CONTROL CAPACITY

Planning has been an essential element of ISF efforts and Coalition training, cultivating the ISF's ability to conduct ground and air operations against ISIS as well as broader combined arms operations that are essential to the ISF's long-term resiliency. Since 2023, quarterly reports indicated that planning has been a consistent deficit in the ISF due to the lack of interagency coordination within JOC-I. Reports have cited a lack of mutual trust as well as distractions, such as political campaigns, for the lack of planning among JOC-I directorates.

Furthermore, the Office of the Inspector General reported that ISF divisions at JOC-I struggled to identify contingency plans when ongoing operations deviated from original designs, lacking the capacity to assess "operations in progress."[20] The June 2024 quarterly report illustrated this lagging progress, indicating that ISF planning suffers from a lack of structure and an inability to integrate its warfighting functions – deficiencies that prevented the ISF from executing a major counter-ISIS operation planned for that quarter.[21]

The recent ISF adoption of command-and-control technologies, such as the Harris radio system and Shout NANO satellite tracker and messaging device, has translated into incremental gains. However, adoption has been uneven across ISF branches and divisions, with only a few Iraqi units utilizing the Harris radio system.[22] The units that have adopted these technologies have performed below Coalition standards for daily operations. Furthermore, the OIR congressional reports in 2024 show consistent challenges with promoting better coordination and communication between divisions and JOC-I. This is particularly the case with rotary wing units that are not under the command of JOC-I and therefore are siloed from communication during air-to-ground strikes and broader planning initiatives.

FORCE MODERNIZATION, RECRUITMENT, AND INTEGRATION

When it comes to introducing modernization reforms, improving force strength through recruitment, and integrating units within the ISF and with key external partners, the Coalition has reported delayed progress,

largely due to political fragmentation, lack of willpower and momentum, increasing distrust between the Iraqi Federal Government and the KRG, and the enlarged influence of Iran-backed militias in the government of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani.

Following years of political gridlock and paralysis that severely impaired the ISF's budget, the Iraqi Parliament passed a three-year defense budget in 2023 that accounted for new reforms within the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior, enabling the recruitment and rehiring of over 37,000 personnel – a 5.8% increase in ISF personnel.[23] These developments have been welcomed by the Coalition and its partners, as it has demonstrated greater political resolve toward an overdue goal of improving Iraq's force posture and readiness. However, these developments have been accompanied by the increasing influence of the PMF – which, like the ISF, receives federal funding.[24]

The Coalition reported that the ISF also has had challenges coordinating with the KSF, a divide that has only been exacerbated by the ongoing federal-KRG budgetary dispute. This has impeded the ISF's capacity to plan, resource, and execute combined arms operations and counter-ISIS missions. Without collaboration and coordination between Erbil and Baghdad, this lack of communication and coordination will increase, creating room for outside actors such as Iran and terrorist organizations such as ISIS to exploit.

SUSTAINMENT AND LOGISTICS

One of the most consistent deficiencies in ISF readiness and capacity, throughout the Coalition's advise-and-assist mission, has been sustainment and logistics. The last several OIR Inspector General reports from 2023 and 2024 reveal an under-maintained, under-resourced ISF that struggles daily to maintain its assets and equipment, let alone acquire new technologies.

The ISF suffers from a lack of contractor support for maintaining equipment, in addition to an increasing demand for spare parts for platforms, particularly the ISF's fleet of aircraft. By the end of 2023, the war in Ukraine's drain on spare parts for Russian-made aircraft particularly impacted the ISF's inability to maintain and fix its fleet of air platforms outside of dependency upon U.S. contractors such as Sallyport for the Iraqi Air Force's F-16 program.[25]

While the Coalition has sought to introduce processes to streamline how the ISF acquires new equipment, the lack of an institutionalized maintenance and logistics process has imposed a heavy hit to overall ISF readiness and capacity. As the U.S. has begun to wind down the OIR mission in Iraq, it has encouraged the ISF to pivot away from procuring new equipment and instead emphasize maintenance and sustainability for its existing rolling stock.[26]

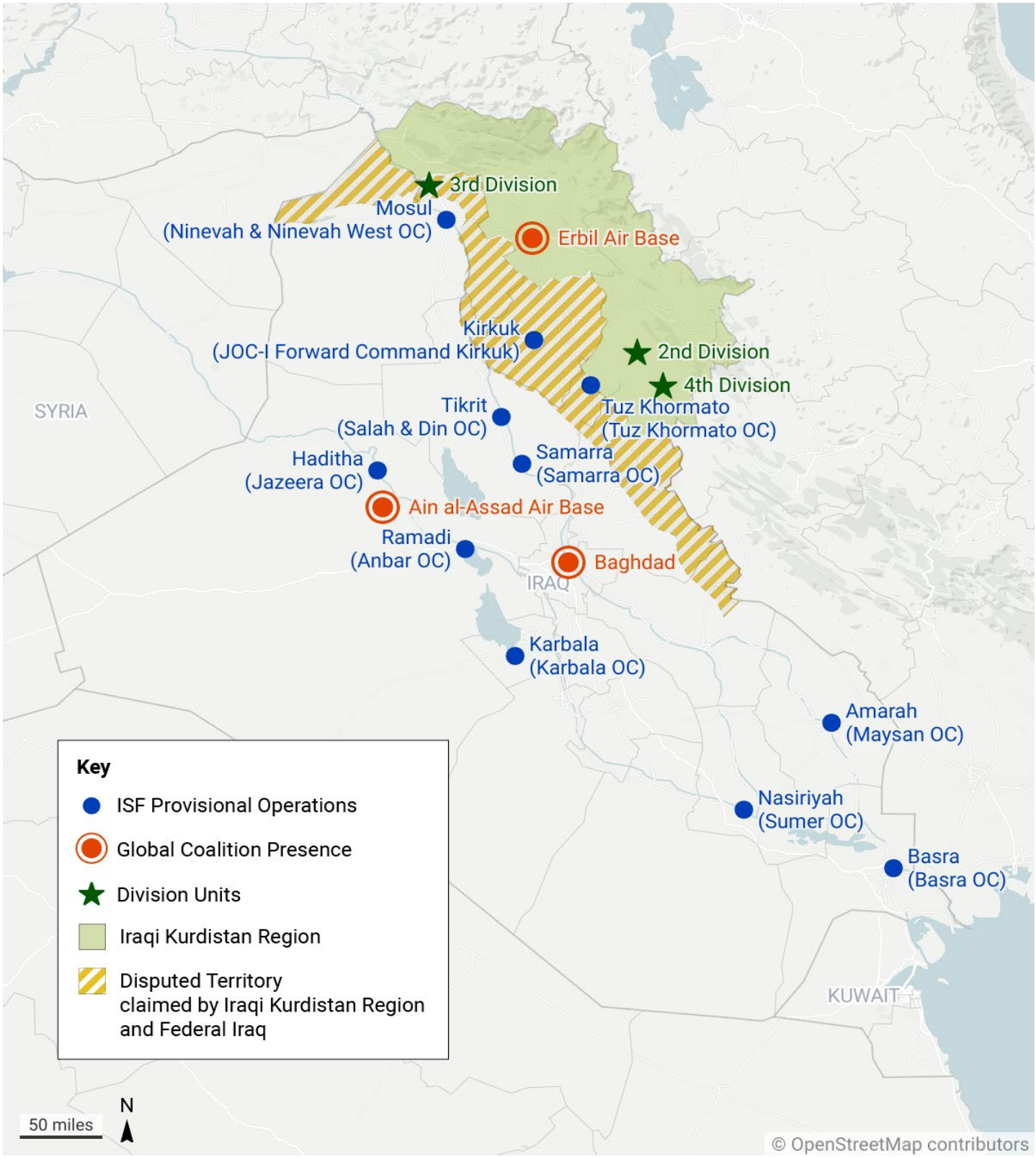
GROUND, ARTILLERY, AND AIR OPERATIONS

Throughout 2024, OIR Inspector General reports reveal that the ISF has demonstrated proficiency in conducting multiday, complex ground operations against dormant ISIS cells and has shifted its focus to air operations.

The ISF largely relies upon the Coalition to support units and vehicles moving and assaulting a target. While the ISF Air Force has been able to conduct occasional independent strikes against ISIS beddown locations, it has relied upon the Coalition at "every step," particularly training target development to conduct precise strikes, given the lack of coordination and absence of ISR provided by JOC-I.[27] This lack of provided intelligence and support did impose a reduction in C-ISIS strikes during the fourth quarter of 2023, in addition to poor weather conditions that grounded Iraqi aircraft.[28] Furthermore, throughout 2023, the ISF experienced a breakdown in air-to-ground integration with unmanned systems.[29] While the Iraqi Air Force has integrated tactical air controllers and has improved the participation of AC-208 Cessna Aircraft in strike operations alongside reliable platforms like F-16s, accumulating maintenance challenges have heavily affected readiness levels, particularly among rotary wing platforms.[30] In the third quarter of 2023, the Coalition reported that nearly all Russian-made helicopters had been grounded and that the majority of remaining aircraft were out of service.[31]

While there are key deficiencies in the Iraqi Air Force's capacity, the low readiness of ISF artillery units draws the most concern across quarterly Coalition reports. There is no fire cell or artillery representation within the JOC-I, preventing major planning and execution

Coalition Forces in Iraq



Source: CJTF-OIR • Created with Datawrapper

of artillery operations.[32] The ISF has failed to meet Coalition expectations of integrating artillery units into operational commands so that cannon and rocket fires can be used alongside airstrikes in planned and dynamic operations. The closure of the Besmaya training facility in 2020, amidst the U.S. partial drawdown and a series of base transfers, exacerbated the ISF's artillery capacity dilemma.[33] While Iraq adopted a fire support team in 2022, the ISF has lagged in integrating artillery units – something that the Office of the Inspector General attributes to the lack of proper staffing and equipment.

Counter Terrorism Service

INTELLIGENCE, SURVEILLANCE, AND RECONNAISSANCE

In the last year, the Office of the Inspector General reported that while CTS, often referred to as the "Golden Division," is able to conduct its ISR, it is largely reliant upon the U.S. provision of ISR given its limited access to the Iraqi Ministry of Interior's Intelligence and Investigations Agency.[34] Notably, and despite Coalition advisors working with CTS at operational and strategic levels, OIR congressional reports since June 2024 have omitted an assessment of CTS capacity,[35] likely due withdrawal plans that have forced the mission to prioritize other capability gaps associated with JOC-I planning, force integration and reform, modernization, and increased ISF-KSF coordination. This illuminates the CTS' dwindling influence and presence within Iraq's security landscape.

PLANNING AND COMMAND-AND-CONTROL CAPACITY

While the CTS demonstrated proficiency in planning sporadically throughout 2022 and 2023, reporting in quarterly OIR congressional reports included little context on how it was either increasing or decreasing in its ability to plan long-term, complex operations against ISIS cells. However, by 2024, Coalition reports did note that the CTS coordinated less with ISF partners on counter-IS operations than it previously had, instead increasing its coordination with Coalition partners.

FORCE MODERNIZATION, RECRUITMENT, AND INTEGRATION

The Iraqi CTS has increased its proficiency in counter-ISIS operations, demonstrating in the third quarter of 2023 that some of its units could carry out operations "relatively independently" of the Coalition.[36] In the last quarter of 2023, the CTS conducted fewer and shorter operations against suspected ISIS cells than previously, but that largely was due to fewer ISIS attacks conducted and reduced Coalition support.[37] The Coalition noted that there was less information sharing between the CTS and its Coalition partners as

Syrian Kurdish security forces patrol a street in the city of Qamishli in northeastern Syria on Feb. 26, 2025. (Delil Souleiman / AFP via Getty Images)

a result; the results of CTS operations conducted that quarter were not shared with the Coalition.[38]

While the CTS has been deemed one of the most effective ground fighting forces against ISIS cells in Iraq and a key partner in the Coalition's success, there are concerns among Washington and its partners that its dwindling budgetary allocation, flailing recruitment numbers, and isolation from the ISF will dilute its readiness and capacity levels over time.[39] The CTS is completely reliant upon the ISF for rotary wing and air support, in addition to the external provision of ISR. The lack of integration and coordination with the ISF is a key item of concern for the Coalition, particularly as Coalition support for the CTS and ISF declines and the ISF assumes greater responsibility for Iraqi security. For years, the CTS has faced a series of structural challenges that threatened the longevity of its readiness, including aging command, lack of recruitment, and few graduates from specialized academies. While the three-year budget for Iraq,[40] passed in June 2023, encompassed greater funding for the ISF at large and allotted the CTS to recruit 3,500 more personnel – the first reform for force generation since 2017/18 – the CTS's force strength was still ultimately reduced by 14.3%.

Kurdish Security Forces

INTELLIGENCE, RECONNAISSANCE, AND SURVEILLANCE

The KSF demonstrated incremental progress in reducing dependency upon Coalition-provided ISR and achieving efficient intelligence collection.[41] In the last year, Office of the Inspector General reports have reflected better informational exchange between the KSF and other partners, such as the ISF. Additionally, in the third quarter of 2023, the KSF demonstrated proficiency in using intelligence fusion – the sharing of intelligence across agencies and with key stakeholders like the ISF – into its intelligence cycle.[42] However, the latest quarterly report indicates that the KSF still primarily relies on human intelligence, much like its ISF counterparts. Additionally, the Coalition has reported challenges in intelligence exchange and coordination among units within the KSF, particularly between Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs units and partisan 70s and 80s Peshmerga commands. The 70s and 80s brigades are regional guard brigades affiliated with different political parties within the KRG,[43] serving as capable counterterrorism forces whose integration into the KSF stalled due to the political dispute between Iraqi Kurdistan's largest political parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party.[44]

PLANNING AND COMMAND-AND-CONTROL CAPACITY

The KSF made additional incremental improvements in establishing greater command and control, facilitating communication between units. In the third quarter of 2023, two new divisions were activated, and the KSF made plans for a fully operational operations center for 2026. However, the Coalition reported consistent deficiencies in the KSF's "elementary" control over subordinate brigades, logistics, and air and fire support,[45] and it was ultimately unable to exert control over large-scale operations.[46] With little involvement from the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, the KRG's body for security and defense, and a broadening disconnect between planning and command and control, the Coalition reported key gaps in the KSF's ability to develop, communicate, and synchronize a common operating plan in line with the intent of commanders.

SUSTAINMENT AND LOGISTICS

While the KSF has proved itself to be a sufficient fighting force capable of counter-ISIS operations, it remains dependent on supply chains through U.S. military support. This was made clear in the third quarter of 2023, when a two-month pause in Coalition-provided food and fuel supplies forced the KSF to rely upon provisions from the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. As a result, projects and operations such as upgrading ammunition warehouses and activating two logistical hubs were severely delayed until 2024.

GROUND, ARTILLERY, AND AIR OPERATIONS

The KSF demonstrated an increasing capability to plan and execute dynamic counter-ISIS missions – a capability that has particularly increased, as reported in OIR reports since 2020. In the first half of 2023, the Coalition noted paused operations and unexecuted plans due to budgetary constraints within the KSF, the lack of a permanent defense minister, and the growing

perception that ISIS was no longer a significant threat in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. However, in the second half of 2023, OIR reports indicated that KSF units were conducting independent, limited combined-arms operations supported by the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs against ISIS capabilities. In the third quarter of 2023, KSF units even expanded their counter-ISIS operations to the hard-to-reach Kurdistan Coordination Line.[47]

The KSF's artillery capabilities, however, are all but nonexistent. There has been no live-fire, combined armed exercise since 2017, exposing an unpracticed, ineffective artillery capability within the KSF. Aside from a few annual exercises – what Inspector General reports estimate as one to two exercises per year – the KSF's 1st Support Forces Command Artillery Battalion has not participated in counter-ISIS operations near the Kurdistan Coordination Line in nearly seven years. Ammunition shortages, limited coordination with the ISF, and poor internal perceptions of the operational environment, specifically about how effective artillery fires can be in targeting small ISIS cells, have constrained artillery exercises and operations.[48]

FORCE MODERNIZATION, RECRUITMENT, AND INTEGRATION

Internal political disputes between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, especially regarding the KSF's integration of Peshmerga units affiliated with the parties, have been the main obstacle to the KSF's modernization. The 70s unit, which is heavily affiliated with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, and the 80s unit, which is heavily affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party, have proven to be formidable fighting forces, as well as collaborative partners in joint operations with the ISF, but the broadening political rift between the parties delayed plans for the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs to absorb 50,000 personnel from 70s and 80s units, transforming them into apolitical Regional Guards Brigades.[49] While some personnel were able to transfer at the start of 2023, the internal political dispute has spilled over into rifts over equipment allocation to units, ultimately preventing the Coalition from being able to advise these units and hampering broader KSF security reform.[50]

The KRG approved a plan to depoliticize and integrate the 70s and 80s units into the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, reorganizing them into 11 units.[51] There have also been delays to the joint KSF-ISF brigades that were supposed to initiate operations in June 2024 – what would have constituted an important step for interoperability between Iraqi Kurdistan and the Iraqi Federal Government.[52] While the recent KRG parliamentary election in October 2024 – one that had been continually postponed for over two years – has created greater space for intra-Kurdish unity, continued PUK-KDP infighting threatens progress on Peshmerga reform as well as broader KRG autonomy from the Federal Government of Iraq.[53] [54]

Members of the Kurdish Peshmerga register to vote ahead of the parliamentary election in the capital of the autonomous Kurdish region, Erbil, on Oct. 18, 2024. (Safin Hamid / AFP via Getty Images)

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The potential partial or full-scale departure of U.S. forces in Iraq between 2025 and 2026 would have implications for Iraq's security forces and infrastructure. While segments of Iraq's military, such as the CTS and KSF, have proven efficient in counterterrorism operations, several gaps exist in Iraq's conventional capabilities, including artillery, command and control, inter- and intra-branch planning, and trust. These deficits and the absence of collaboration raise serious questions about whether Iraq's security forces will be able to hedge against internal and external challenges, such as the rising political and economic influence of Iran-aligned PMF militias, in the absence of U.S. deterrence and the U.S.-provided security umbrella.

Additionally, because fronts in Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen have been added to the war in Gaza, there is a rising chance for an additional front between Israel, Iran, and Iran-aligned militias, which would mean designating Iraqi military forces as a key security guarantor in the crosshairs of regional escalation. It is paramount that the U.S. and military and civilian missions dedicated to capacity building in Iraq, such as NATO and the EU Mission-Iraq, continue efforts to advance Iraqi military forces' capabilities for a stronger, more resilient Iraq. Forces should focus on interbranch communication, command and control, intelligence and reconnaissance collection, and maintenance as key areas of focus for the partners analyzed above.

In the wake of the announcement of a two-year withdrawal timeline,[55] the U.S.' top priority has shifted from capacity building with Iraqi forces to executing a smooth, safe departure of American forces amid mounting regional tensions. However, recent signaling by officials in the Iraqi government about extending the withdrawal timeline, potentially to the end of 2029[56] [57] – giving the U.S. and its partners four years for training – presents an opportunity to advance the capacity of Iraqi forces and prepare for a more incremental, responsible withdrawal process. While Washington and Baghdad have reiterated their desire to establish strengthened bilateral security relations and maintain an unspecified number of American forces on the ground in Iraq, this remains a distant aim without a clear strategy. It is crucial that the Department of Defense and its Coalition partners begin to work with local Iraqi and Syrian partners in designing a post-OIR security landscape.

In the April-June 2024 quarterly report from on Operation Inherent Resolve to the U.S. Congress, the Office of the Inspector General stated that CJTF-OIR has begun to "set conditions" and identify priorities for Iraq's post-withdrawal security landscape.[58] These priorities include the repatriation of ISIS detainees, handing over funding for the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund, and transitioning Coalition responsibilities to local partner forces.[59]

It is important, therefore, that the U.S. begin strategizing what it wants its security relationship with Iraq to look like and account for the existing gaps in Iraq's security infrastructure. While the U.S. will have a lessened capacity on the ground to collaborate with Iraq's military actors, the shift from a counterterrorism model to a bilateral security model provides opportunities for the U.S. and Iraq to make progress on more long-term, conventional security goals.

Ahead of potential withdrawal, the Department of Defense should continue stressing the importance of advancing intelligence and reconnaissance collection, artillery and fires, and command-and-control capabilities to security forces in Iraq. It should also seek to protect the CTS from outside influence and eventual collapse, instead using it as a model for expanded capacity building throughout Iraq's security landscape. The Department of State should continue its efforts to bridge political gaps between different actors in Iraq, particularly between the Federal Government of Iraq and the KRG.

The Defense and State departments should begin the process of curating a new security vision for bilateral security ties with Iraq. This should encompass coordination between U.S. forces, the KSF, and ISF, and should extend into broader collaboration with law enforcement, border security, and intelligence agencies that can collectively strengthen Iraq's self-standing, rule of law, and state capacity as a whole.

For example, the U.S. should explore reviving the Iraq Police Education Program that was formally ended in 2015. This program fostered collaborative exchange of expertise, best practices, and training between the U.S.

Department of State's International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Bureau and the International Association of Chiefs of Police to strengthen Iraqi law capacity in patrols, investigative techniques, and accountable policing practices.[60] By reviving the program, the U.S. can diversify its security influence while also preparing Iraq to face additional challenges to rule of law and public security, such as an uptick in criminal activity among armed militia groups and the escalating amphetamine-type stimulant industry in Iraq.[61] By strengthening and diversifying security collaboration with Iraqi institutions and agencies, the U.S. can help hedge against increasing influence from Iran and its proxies in Iraq.

Finally, advisory military and civilian missions stationed in Iraq, such as NATO Mission-Iraq and the EU Mission-Iraq, should begin assessing how their operations will be affected by a U.S. drawdown. Without the security umbrella and localized air superiority that the U.S. has provided, partners remaining in Iraq will face both tactical and operational risks – particularly if regional escalation continues and initiates crossfire in Iraq. To complement recent discussions between Spain, Italy, France, the U.K., and Germany with the Iraqi government, NATO and the EU should initiate multilateral discussions with the U.S., the Iraqi Federal Government, and the KRG to strategize their own footprint for helping Iraq to grow stronger, reduce dependency on external powers like Iran and the U.S., and fill capacity gaps as Iraqi and Kurdish forces adjust to the new post-withdrawal security landscape.

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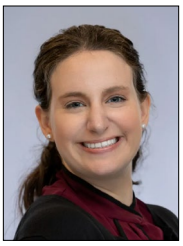

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