

# International Engagement in Iraq Is Tied to Military Presence

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Feb 21, 2019

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**The U.S.-led coalition to defeat the Islamic State is the strongest alliance Iraq has ever enjoyed, but much of the resultant international attention and support could dissipate if forces are removed.**

Iraq's parliament may soon debate draft legislation concerning the regulation of foreign military forces within its territory. This is an Iraqi affair, fully within Baghdad's sovereign rights, so the United States and other coalition members must respect its views, whatever they are. What is of paramount importance is that Iraq clearly understands how its words and actions may affect the coalition, and what non-military benefits it may lose alongside the collapse of its military partnerships.

## AN ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, AND MILITARY COALITION

Iraq had never previously enjoyed the level of international attention and support it has received since the Islamic State's June 2014 breakout, with a wide array of contributions from the following:

- **The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.** The U.S.-convened coalition is a seventy-nine-member bloc that includes Iraq, seventy-three foreign nations, and five international organizations: the Arab League, the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), the European Union, Interpol, and NATO. A majority (twelve) of the G-20 states are members: Australia, Britain, Canada, the EU, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Turkey, and the United States. Geographically speaking, the coalition boasts thirty-eight states from Europe, thirteen from Africa, ten from Asia, and nine Arab-majority countries (including Saudi Arabia and all the other Gulf states).
- **CJTF-OIR.** Iraq's primary military partner in the war against the Islamic State has been the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, a U.S.-led group that includes fifteen other countries: Australia, Britain, Canada,

Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Morocco, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Turkey.

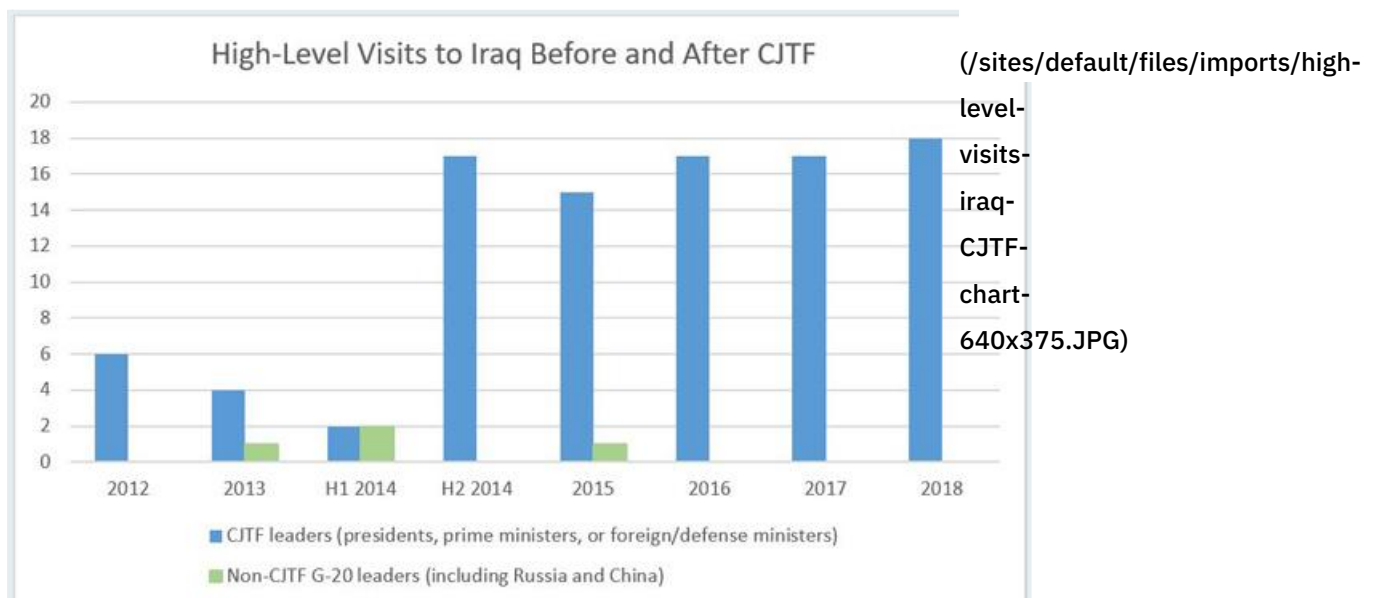
In short, Iraq has seen the most powerful nations, militaries, and economies in the world mobilize to ensure its survival for nearly five years now. On the back of this effort, with powerful support from the coalition's G-20 members, Iraq secured a \$5.38 billion stand-by arrangement from the IMF. It also saw \$30 billion pledged at a February 2018 reconstruction conference organized in Kuwait by coalition members.

## WHO CARES—AND CARED—ABOUT IRAQ?

This unprecedented focus on Iraq's survival, stability, and prosperity was not due to some widespread revelation that Iraq is an indispensable partner. Almost none of today's CJTF partners cared about Iraq at all between 2003 and 2011, when the country faced an equally terrible ordeal. Rather, the steep increase in nonmilitary engagement was driven by the deployment of ground forces from a range of European and NATO states under CJTF-OIR, each of whom still has significant skin in the game precisely because of their boots on the ground.

Indeed, sending servicemen and women abroad is a powerful symbol for industrial powerhouses such as Germany, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. Before CJTF, hardly any of the world's biggest economies demonstrated significant concern about Iraq. After CJTF was established, the majority of G-20 and European economies firmly committed to the country's survival. This is not a coincidence.

Since 2014, coalition members have expended a great deal of effort to train twenty-eight Iraqi brigades, launch thousands of airstrikes, and contribute billions of dollars in security assistance, suffering sixty-nine fatalities and many more casualties in the process. If further proof were needed of the link between their military and nonmilitary commitment, however, one need only compare the number of visits to Iraq conducted by presidents, prime ministers, foreign ministers, and defense ministers before and after CJTF deployed. For Western leaders, a visit to Iraq represents a major investment of time, effort, expense, and security planning, so such trips are a powerful sign of commitment to the country's future. The graph below traces the correlation between international interest in Iraq and the CJTF presence.



The trend is clear: most European and NATO nations did not give Iraq much diplomatic attention until they put their own troops in harm's way. Conversely, since CJTF was formed, they have been highly committed. In contrast, the nations that did not join CJTF and did not send troops—including eight G-20 members—have consistently treated Iraq as a low priority. In the fifty-four months since the fall of Mosul, non-CJTF G-20 members conducted just three high-level visits to Iraq—compared to an astounding eighty-four by CJTF nations. Iraq's friends have voted not just

with the boots of their soldiers, but with the feet of their leaders.

## HOW TO SUSTAIN CJTF COOPERATION

To ensure this trend continues, the U.S. government needs to rally the CJTF partners and the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, asking them to convey three important truths to the Iraqi government:

- **Iraq needs ongoing CJTF support.** The country's military is now much better led than it was when Mosul fell in June 2014, with a depoliticized leadership cadre. Even so, both the military and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) remain woefully unprepared and inadequately manned, trained, and equipped to kill off the Islamic State's new insurgency in Nineveh, Kirkuk, and Diyala.
- **CJTF will stick together—or leave together.** Some anti-American factions will no doubt seek to splinter the United States and Britain away from other CJTF partners, hoping to reduce U.S. involvement in the operation without losing European support. But in reality, there are very good reasons why the coalition is U.S.-led: the vast majority of logistical support, intelligence assets, air assets, and money is provided by Washington, and neither the CJTF mission nor the NATO Training Mission-Iraq would be politically or logistically possible without the United States. That means the entire CJTF structure—not just the U.S. presence—could collapse like a house of cards if a fractious debate over American involvement triggers a withdrawal decision in the Oval Office. The latter move is exactly what some militias are seeking, but the end result could strip Iraq of all international support.
- **Without CJTF, Iraq will see its global relations downgraded.** As the above data indicates, Iraq was a diplomatic and economic backwater before CJTF, and it would revert to this neglected status if coalition governments no longer have boots on the ground. The CJTF military partnership is the wellspring of many new—but fragile—diplomatic relationships for Baghdad.

The U.S. government should ensure that every coalition partner—and particularly every CJTF contributor—communicates these points to the Iraqi government clearly and immediately. This gentle form of demarche may help Iraq's leaders grasp the gravity of the moment, underlining how the future of their international political, economic, and military support is intricately linked to continuation of the CJTF mission.

*Michael Knights, a senior fellow with The Washington Institute, has worked in all of Iraq's provinces since 2003.* ❖

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