

# A New Era in Iraq's Relations with the West?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**Amid growing pressure to dissolve the coalition and withdraw troops, the United States and its partners should continue pursuing good relations with Baghdad—but this time with a lighter footprint and increased regional cooperation.**

At Baghdad's request, the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) has been ordered to cease operations in December 2025, following a previous decision to shut down the UN team charged with investigating the Islamic State's crimes in Iraq (UNITAD). Meanwhile, Baghdad plans to close the country's remaining camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), first opened at the height of the war against IS. More broadly, it seeks to normalize its diplomatic activism in the region, which recently included mediating rapprochement talks between Turkey and the Syrian regime.

Despite the international support and military cooperation that have defined Western relations with Iraq in the post-Saddam era, Baghdad has begun to reevaluate longstanding arrangements. Washington and its partners should follow suit, scrutinizing the current basis of relations with Iraq amid changes in the local and regional environment, while simultaneously preserving the relationship's most beneficial aspects.

## U.S. Military Presence Then and Now

Since 2014, the U.S.-led military presence in Iraq and Syria has hinged on an invitation to support the fight against IS. Following the coalition's success in ending IS control of Iraqi territory in 2017 and Syrian territory in 2019,

discussions emerged about adapting its presence to fit Washington's evolving priorities and Baghdad's increased security capacity and financial situation.

Last year's outbreak of the Gaza war has lent further energy and tension to this issue, with U.S. support for Israel spurring renewed Iraqi militia attacks at a time of [ongoing debate in Washington](#)

(<https://apnews.com/article/senate-repeal-iraq-war-authorization-85be03d5aedc8a28459195160bfaad3c>)

over the terms, duration, and legal authorization of regional military deployments. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq, a facade brand used by Iran-backed armed groups, has claimed at least 184 attacks on U.S. forces and interests since it emerged on October 18, including a January 28 drone strike that killed three service members (for comprehensive data on such incidents, see The Washington Institute's [militia attack tracker](#)

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis>). The uptick in violence puts Baghdad in a precarious situation, as it seeks to remain allied with both the United States and Iran.

In January, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani stated that the coalition is [no longer needed](#)

(<https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/iraq-prime-minister-says-u-s-led-military-coalition-in-iraq-is-no-longer-needed-39a78082>) to ensure the country's security. That same month, the United States and Iraq began

formal talks via the Higher Military Commission (HMC) to transition the coalition mission into an "enduring bilateral security partnership." These actions are not surprising—downsizing or ending the U.S. military presence has been regularly debated in both countries, and the Iraqi parliament was voting on bills to expel foreign troops as [early as 2020](#) (<https://www.cnbc.com/2020/01/05/iraq-prime-minister-says-parliament-must-end-foreign-troop-presence-as-soon-as-possible.html>).

## Is Iraq's Fight Against IS Really Over?

**A**lthough IS no longer poses an existential threat to Iraq, the country's security forces have [limited capacity](#) ([https://media.defense.gov/2024/Feb/09/2003392203/-1/-1/1/OIR\\_Q1\\_DEC2023\\_GOLD\\_508.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2024/Feb/09/2003392203/-1/-1/1/OIR_Q1_DEC2023_GOLD_508.PDF)) to

operate against the terrorist group's remnants without coalition support for mission planning, airstrikes, intelligence operations, and other key tasks. Ongoing [disagreements](#)

(<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100100/3/DIBsReport.pdf>) between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region have left disputed areas such as Kirkuk and Diyala particularly [vulnerable](#)

(<https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/74418/QM-AX-22-017-EN-N.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>) to IS, since the group aims to leverage governance gaps and sectarian divides to stoke violence and assert influence.

On the humanitarian front, the number of IDPs in Iraq fell from 6 million in 2014 to 1.1 million as of [June 2023](#)

(<https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/humanitarian-implementation-plan-hip-iraq-echoirqbud202491000-year-2024-version-1-18122023>), but this steep decrease is largely a result of the government's decision to close many

IDP camps. These areas have now become [informal settlements](#) (<https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-humanitarian-snapshot-september-2021>) where IDPs remain without access to government assistance, creating potential hotspots for terrorist recruitment. The ideological legacy of IS persists in Iraq, and the group continues to exploit security gaps to wage attacks and intimidate locals.

## Rocky Transition Already Underway

**T**he coalition has been quietly pruning its active role in Iraq's security sector for years. In December 2021, it transitioned ([https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-](https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/2867285/combat-role-in-iraq-complete-invitation-from-iraq-reaffirmed-to-advise-assist-e)

[View/Article/2867285/combat-role-in-iraq-complete-invitation-from-iraq-reaffirmed-to-advise-assist-e](#)) from a combat mission to "advise, assist, and enable," though the United States, France, and certain other members [continue to participate](#) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/french-soldier-killed-iraq-battle-with-islamic-state->

**militants-2023-08-29/**) in counter-IS raids with Iraq's Counter Terrorism Service—a crucial task given that the IS presence in neighboring Syria often threatens to **spill over**

**(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#home>)** the porous border.

International humanitarian efforts have likewise **scaled down** (**<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2023/03/20/un-uk-aid-shift-away-emergency-iraq>**). According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), foreign funding met 95 percent of Iraqi aid requirements from 2017 to 2020 but **dropped to** (**<https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-humanitarian-transition-overview-2023-february-2023-enarku>**) 67 percent in 2022. Meanwhile, the Security Council voted unanimously to end UNAMI in 2025—closing one of the longest and largest missions in the organization's history—and UNITAD will close down **this September** (**<https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15514.doc.htm>**).

## Policy Recommendations

**A**lthough criticizing the Iraqi government on some of these issues is certainly warranted, Western cooperation with Baghdad on military and humanitarian issues is a major asset for both parties—one that coalition members should strive to maintain as they formulate new partnership arrangements. Iraq understandably wants to emphasize its autonomy, so foreign officials should focus more on bilateral security arrangements and development aid rather than the past model of multinational humanitarian and military assistance. These conversations must also factor in Iraq's current political context—one torn between factions who seek good relations with the West and those who serve the Iran-backed militia agenda of rejecting the Western presence entirely.

Despite such challenges and contradictions, it is possible to plan and organize this new phase in a manner that benefits both sides, so long as they keep several key principles in mind:

- **Ensure that the U.S.-Iraq HMC discussions outline an orderly transition toward a bilateral security partnership in close coordination with coalition partners.** To preserve Iraq's military ties with the West, Washington should rely on allies less exposed to the militia threat, and on multilateral frameworks other than the coalition. For example, France is still deeply engaged in the fight against IS, has begun developing a bilateral defense relationship with Baghdad, and has **signaled** (**<https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/actualites/cooperation-bilaterale-franceirak-entrainement-conjoint-partner-nation-integration-larmee>**) its willingness to sell more weapons to the Iraqi military, including Rafale fighter jets. Additionally, while NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) has developed a complementary partnership with the country's Defense Ministry, the EU's Advisory Mission in Iraq has been less convincing—partly because of **internal problems** (**<https://www.bruxelles2.eu/en/2020/11/in-a-slipper-in-front-of-the-tv-a-new-way-to-manage-crises/>**), but also because Iraq's Interior Ministry is more deeply embedded with pro-Iran networks.
- **Continue cooperating on post-IS stabilization efforts.** Iraq's IDPs are heterogeneous—they include individuals displaced by the IS conflict, Yazidi communities directly targeted by IS, and even IS-affiliated families. Addressing their needs is a huge challenge given the **legal and social barriers** (**[https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:9040/RoadFromAlHol\\_FINAL.pdf](https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:9040/RoadFromAlHol_FINAL.pdf)**) at play. Additionally, Iraq has repatriated **nearly 10,000 of its citizens** (**<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/five-years-after-caliphate-too-much-remains-same-northeast-syria>**) from al-Hol detention camp in northeast Syria since May 2021, moving them to the Jeddah 1 transit camp in Nineveh province before reintegrating them into society. To avoid creating an “Iraqi al-Hol” ripe for IS recruitment and exploitation, Baghdad should carefully consider the effects of expanding Jeddah 1 or opening new transit camps especially for repatriated individuals affiliated with IS. For their part, Washington and its partners should ensure that Iraq is prepared to manage the repatriation and reintegration file through a human rights lens that aligns with international law. UNITAD's decision this week to send Baghdad terabytes of **data related to IS crimes** (**<https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/06/1150701>**) is a good first step, but just one part of a broader process.

- **Work more closely with regional partners.** Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have played a growing economic and political role in Iraq of late. Last year, Riyadh announced (<https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSS8N374037/>) a \$3 billion partnership in various sectors to help diversify Iraq's oil-dependent economy, while Doha has signed (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/qatars-emir-arrives-baghdad-official-visit-statement-2023-06-15/>) several energy memorandums with Baghdad. Qatar and Turkey are also participating in the Development Road (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraq-turkey-reset>), a rail and road project aimed at linking Asia with Europe. Ankara's intention to resume military operations (<https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4906476-t%C3%BCrkiye-plans-40-kilometer-security-corridor-inside-iraq-summer>) against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and its affiliates in Iraq and northeast Syria will complicate any rapprochement with Washington, but ultimately, the West may have to choose between Iranian and Turkish prominence (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkeys-anti-pkk-operation-and-development-road-iraq-are-two-sides-same-coin>) in Iraq.
- **Carefully monitor Iraq's political arena—but keep expectations realistic.** The West may be able to play a greater role in mediating Baghdad's disputes with the Kurdistan Region now that the UN Security Council recently adopted a resolution that removed reference to UNAMI, whose mandate previously included such mediation. Moreover, the Kurds may become closer partners (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/leaving-iraq-may-be-washingtons-wisest-choice>) with Washington if U.S. forces withdraw from federal Iraq, since Baghdad will remain divided between pro-Iranian and pro-Western spheres of influence. U.S. partners will therefore need to exercise a deft mix of targeted pressure and strategic patience with Iraq, wielding both sanctions and incentives as they try to facilitate the long-term goal of addressing corruption, federalism, lawless militias, and other structural challenges.

In short, the West should continue pursuing good relations with Iraq—but this time focused on a lighter footprint and increased regional cooperation.

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