

# U.S. Support for Iraqi Security Forces: Challenges and Future Prospects under Trump

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Brief Analysis

## With U.S. security aid for Iraq under review, Baghdad is attempting to assess the potential impact of an extended freeze on its national security.

American support for Iraqi security forces remains an important factor in enhancing security and stability in Iraq—not due to the inability of Iraqi forces to perform their duties, but because of the support Washington provides in military training, weapons provision and equipment, and intelligence for fighting armed groups such as ISIS. Generally, the Iraqi government views U.S. security support as necessary to improve the capabilities of the Iraqi army—yet this support has been in tension with Iraq's sovereignty and the presence of foreign forces on its territory, including concern that continued support could lead to increased American intervention in Iraq's internal affairs.

Political positions calling for the withdrawal of American forces—including those of the U.S.-led international coalition—have often been framed as a desire to fully restore national sovereignty, although these calls are also linked to an Iranian rejection of this presence. However, Donald Trump's return to the U.S. presidency in 2025 and his administration's own review of funding priorities, including the [suspension \(https://www.newarab.com/news/us-aid-freeze-endangers-dozens-iraqi-projects-sources-warn\)](https://www.newarab.com/news/us-aid-freeze-endangers-dozens-iraqi-projects-sources-warn) of much of the U.S. security aid to Iraq, is redefining the conversation in Baghdad about the future of the U.S.-Iraq security relationship and its impact on Iraqi national security.

### Forms of Direct Security Support

The United States is one of the main partners of the Iraqi security forces via a [series of programs and assistance \(https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-iraq/#:~:text=The%2520United%2520States%2520works%2520with,conventional%2520weapons%2520destruction%2520C%2520and%2520counterterrorism.\)](https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-iraq/#:~:text=The%2520United%2520States%2520works%2520with,conventional%2520weapons%2520destruction%2520C%2520and%2520counterterrorism.) that include training, equipment, funding, and intelligence information. Most recent aid falls under the provisions of a bilateral security agreement—signed in 2009 during Nouri al-Maliki's premiership—that regulates the nature of the presence and activities of U.S. and international coalition forces in Iraq.

According to official reports, the United States has provided approximately [13.8 billion \(https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/iraq/2023/obligations/0?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com\)](https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/iraq/2023/obligations/0?utm_source=chatgpt.com) in funding from 2015 to 2023. This aid was estimated at about [430 million in 2023 \(https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/iraq/2023/obligations/0?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com\)](https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/iraq/2023/obligations/0?utm_source=chatgpt.com) (the latest year full data is available), and support includes a range of programs to strengthen the Iraqi military. For instance, the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program for purchasing military equipment and weapons such as aircraft, artillery, tanks, and armored vehicles [included \\$250 million for training and developing Iraqi military capabilities \(https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/iraq/2023/obligations/0?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com\)](https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/iraq/2023/obligations/0?utm_source=chatgpt.com) in 2023, enabling Iraq to purchase key military equipment such as F-16 fighter aircraft and M1 Abrams armored vehicles. In addition, Iraq received \$21.93 million through the Conventional Weapons Destruction program, further supported by \$7.515 million to train Iraqi forces in reconnaissance and mine and explosives removal efforts. Much of this previous aid is [currently on hold \(https://breakingdefense.com/2025/01/with-foreign-military-financing-paused-lebanese-forces-wait-on-promised-funds/\)](https://breakingdefense.com/2025/01/with-foreign-military-financing-paused-lebanese-forces-wait-on-promised-funds/) pending the review of the current administration.

This aid is not only financial; the United States has also developed extensive programs to train tens of thousands of [Iraqi soldiers \(https://www.csis.org/analysis/creeping-incrementalism-us-forces-and-strategy-iraq-and-syria-2011-2016-update\)](https://www.csis.org/analysis/creeping-incrementalism-us-forces-and-strategy-iraq-and-syria-2011-2016-update) and security personnel in various security and military fields, such as counterterrorism tactics, intelligence techniques, and surveillance and reconnaissance operations. These soldiers were trained both inside American bases in-country and at the American training center in Jordan. Likewise, the United States also conducts individual and joint operations with Iraqi forces, supplying Iraq with updated intelligence information regarding the movements of terrorist cells and carrying out precise strikes using drones. Technological support is provided through advanced surveillance equipment such as drones, which have helped security forces track enemy movements in rough geographical terrain and desert areas. Logistical support includes providing vital supplies to the Iraqi army, including fuel, spare parts for military equipment, and medical supplies. The United States also provides support in building military facilities, such as air bases and military facilities.

### Motives for Support and Reasons for its Suspension

The United States has provided this continuous support to Iraqi security forces for several strategic and political reasons. The first aspect is an ongoing relationship developed in response to the June 2014 request submitted by the Iraqi government—led by then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki—for the international coalition to provide military assistance in confronting ISIS after it took control of major Iraqi cities. Security assistance, including weapons and ammunition provisions as well as

logistical support, was combined with kinetic support, such as airstrikes on ISIS positions.

Despite the defeat of ISIS, its cells still carry out operations (<https://www.stimson.org/2024/is-isis-reviving-in-iraq/>) against Iraqi security forces, especially in remote areas and some locations adjacent to major cities including the Baghdad belt, Diyala and Anbar governorates, and eastern Iraq's Hamrin Mountains. Moreover, U.S. security support has expanded beyond the initial focus on ISIS to include training and equipping Iraqi forces to face a variety of potential security threats.

For its part, the United States has characterized this assistance as part of its broader strategy in the Middle East; strong and stable Iraqi security forces contribute to protecting U.S. interests and preventing the spread of Iranian influence or terrorist groups in the region. U.S. support is also intended to insulate Iraqi security forces from the influences of Iranian politics (<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-popular-mobilization-force-is-turning-iraq-into-an-iranian-client-state/>) in the region or from becoming a tool in the hands of domestic armed groups outside of the state framework, as well as prevent the Iraqi army from turning into a parallel force in favor of Iran-aligned factions.

It is as yet unclear which aspects of this calculus will be maintained by the current administration, especially since the suspension of Iraqi security aid along with that provided by USAID (<https://protectionofcivilians.org/report/iraq-partners-reflect-on-usaid-decision/>) is both part of the American President's attempts to reassess his country's military strategy in the Middle East and overall U.S. spending on foreign aid (<https://channel8.com/english/33854>).

A continued suspension of security aid may also be seen as part and parcel of the agreed-upon withdrawal of international coalition forces (<https://www.reuters.com/world/us-iraq-deal-would-see-hundreds-troops-withdraw-first-year-sources-say-2024-09-06/>) scheduled for 2026, based on an Iraqi request. Calls for such a move increased inside Iraq after the American operation that targeted both the commander of the Iranian Qods Force, Qassem Soleimani, and the deputy head of the Popular Mobilization Committee, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, in early 2020. At that time, members of the Iraqi government began to characterize American forces on Iraqi territory as a challenge to Iraqi national sovereignty (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/leaving-iraq-may-be-washingtons-wisest-choice>), while pro-Tehran parties viewed the continued presence of these forces as an attempt by Washington to expand control over the region.

Yet Baghdad generally views the current suspension as a response to Iraqi domestic political tensions and their impact on the country's security forces. Specifically, it is understood that American policymakers may now point to the failure of previous support programs to neutralize the Iranian influence on Iraqi security and military forces, especially when it comes to cutting off their existing relationships with Iraq's armed factions close to Tehran. In the past, Washington has highlighted the Popular Mobilization Forces' ongoing inclusion of Brigades 45, 46, and 47, which are affiliated with Kataib Hezbollah Brigades (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/kataib-hezbollah-part-iraqs-pmf>), despite their involvement in operations against American forces in the country. If the Trump administration determines that American military support should be linked to achieving tangible results in this regard, this decoupling has not yet been achieved—and whether Baghdad can accomplish this is an open question.

### **Baghdad Weighs its Options**

The Iraqi government and prominent political forces generally tend to take a balanced position between their domestic interests and their need for external support. However, the pressures imposed on them at the moment due to ongoing regional changes have put them in a critical position in terms of ensuring security stability, and Iraq's political arena may find itself in the midst of a new political storm if it seeks continued security assistance and as it weighs its potential price.

An ongoing suspension of American support for Iraqi security forces has many implications that will affect the performance of these forces and increase subsequent security risks (<https://www.newarab.com/news/us-lawmakers-call-sanctions-iran-backed-militias-iraq>), especially in light of the continued threats posed by ISIS and armed factions. Despite the ability of Iraqi forces in their current state to face some challenges, the long duration of U.S. support has meant that Iraqi forces have become heavily dependent on it. If this support is no longer accessible, their capabilities will likely degrade, opening new security gaps for sleeper cells to take advantage of. This is particularly the case if the military attempts to operate without access to satellite imagery and air support long provided by American drones, especially in remote desert and mountainous areas that are difficult to monitor through other means.

If ISIS becomes more active operationally, armed forces may return to the strategy deployed during the first fight against ISIS, where the severity of the threat pushed the armed forces to cooperate with some factions supported by Tehran ([https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field\\_publication\\_docs/INTA91\\_1\\_01\\_Esfandiary\\_Tabatabai.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_publication_docs/INTA91_1_01_Esfandiary_Tabatabai.pdf)) in order to unify their efforts to address the major security risks ISIS posed. Effectively, an uptick in ISIS operations without corresponding U.S. assistance to address it will undoubtedly contribute to enhancing the capabilities and influence of armed factions and the possibility of imposing their wider influence within the Iraqi political institution. The Iraqi army will likewise struggle to finance its purchase of American military equipment, leading to an inability to update, maintain, or develop its existing arsenal, while officers will likewise lack training in advanced weapons and modern combat tactics.

Given the potential impact of this sustained suspension, Baghdad may seek to incentivize Washington to view past security aid as a 'good investment.' Baghdad expects Washington's asks to include some or all of the following:

- New U.S. bases in addition to its current bases in Anbar and Erbil provinces
- Visibly reducing Iran's influence in the country by dissolving the Popular Mobilization Forces or restructuring them to ensure the organization's neutrality from Iranian influence.
- Launching joint operations against Tehran's active arms inside Iraq
- More significant oversight on U.S. support programs to ensure they are not used or leaked to factions that the United States includes on its blacklist, addressing reports leaked last year (<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/corruption-is-the-forgotten-legacy-of-the-iraq-invasion/>).
- Iraqi armed forces participation in a broader regional defense structure along the lines of reinvigorated "Middle East Strategic Alliance," which the first Trump administration sought to launch to enhance cooperation between Arab countries as well as Israel against regional threats.

Yet regardless of Baghdad's willingness to offer some or all of these incentives, it is unclear whether it can adequately respond to the core American critique of Iranian influence in Iraqi armed forces in a way that would satisfy Washington. Moreover, if Washington decides to use security aid to exert pressure in Baghdad, there is unlikely to be a unified Iraqi political response. Some forces and figures may accept the conditions of American support, while others—especially those loyal to Iran or those calling for Iraq's complete sovereignty—may reject these conditions and lean more decisively into strengthening relations with Iran or other

countries in the region.

Political forces close to Tehran have developed this relationship due to ideological reasons; most of their leaders and members follow the authority of the *velayat-e faqih* in Tehran and are not likely to abandon it, even given Iran's current regional decline. Additionally, even were the leadership of these groups to prove interested in decoupling from Iran, they would be unable to at a speed acceptable to Washington due to the Iranian influence within their group members and the communities that support them.

Other Shia groups under the political umbrella of the central government, as well as some Sunni and Kurdish forces, often find themselves trapped between the hammer of American pressure and the anvil of internal challenges. Since these groups want to maintain relations with both Washington and Tehran, it is unclear how they will respond to any pressure to make a quick and decisive choice.

Nevertheless, there is growing criticism in Iraq for the Iraqi government's reluctance to negotiate with Washington to reach a bilateral agreement with the United States or the Global Coalition in general for the sake of Iraq's national security. It seems that the pressures imposed or the internal weakness in approaching this decision led to a preference to invite foreign forces to leave rather than secure Iraqi national interests in the context of the security challenges the country faces. Consequently, there is a prevailing belief that Iraq will witness a real test period during 2025, and there is an open question about how its political elite will deal with what may prove to be an impossible choice. At minimum, Baghdad will have to understand the price of either choice—to fight for continued security funding at the expense of its relationship with Iran or to allow U.S. security assistance to lapse without significant protest and face the national security repercussions. ❖

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