

Iraqi Visit Can Help Shape the Future Fight Against the Islamic State

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Brief Analysis

Despite other pressing priorities and the imminent end of the coalition mission, Zaidi's trip is a vital opportunity to make sure Baghdad has the targeted assistance it needs to keep IS from resurging at a time of great domestic and regional turbulence.

On the eve of Prime Minister Ali al-Zaidi's visit to Washington next week, Iraqi forces backed by the U.S.-led coalition carried out a [series of operations \(https://rudaw.net/english/categories/iraq/1078221\)](https://rudaw.net/english/categories/iraq/1078221) against Islamic State (IS) targets. Since the group's territorial defeat in Iraq a decade ago, its local presence has diminished, and it no longer poses an existential threat to the country. Yet its remnants thrive in chaos and could seek to rebuild their ranks and capabilities by exploiting new dynamics—including the recent transfer of [5,700 IS-affiliated detainees \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/collapse-indefinite-detention-northeast-syria-implications-seven-years-later-syria\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/collapse-indefinite-detention-northeast-syria-implications-seven-years-later-syria) to Iraq, the regional instability stirred by conflicts involving [Iran and its militia proxies \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraq-another-crossroads-iran-backed-militias-and-washington\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraq-another-crossroads-iran-backed-militias-and-washington), and the ticking clock on Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), the U.S.-led counter-IS mission that is set to expire in September after years of negotiations.

To be sure, the future fight against IS will not be the top discussion point at Zaidi's upcoming meeting with President Trump, since both leaders have a long list of other priorities, such as pursuing new investment opportunities (particularly in the energy sector), finding a way forward on Iran-backed militias and broader Iranian influence in Iraq, and smoothing internal relations between Baghdad and Iraq's Kurdistan Region. Nevertheless, considering the hard-won victories against IS and the need to prevent this progress from eroding, officials should use the visit as an

opportunity to address this persistent threat and shape the next phase of the counter-IS fight.

Evolution of the IS Threat in Iraq

The 2003 Iraq war had the inadvertent effect of giving jihadist groups—including IS predecessor al-Qaeda in Iraq—room to exploit security vacuums and turn local sectarian grievances into a transnational cause. The movement’s propaganda machine used these [divides \(https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/dec/20/iraq-sectarian-divide-threatens-split\)](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/dec/20/iraq-sectarian-divide-threatens-split) to target dissatisfied Sunnis and [build \(https://www.cbsnews.com/news/iraqis-flee-fighting-but-support-insurgents/\)](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/iraqis-flee-fighting-but-support-insurgents/) support that grew exponentially after the outbreak of war next door in Syria in 2011. As the fighting escalated, the Iraqi government maintained a network of prisons to hold detained jihadists, who in turn targeted these facilities. In 2012-13, IS launched a “[breaking the walls \(https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/13/world/middleeast/escaped-inmates-from-iraq-fuel-syria-insurgency.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/13/world/middleeast/escaped-inmates-from-iraq-fuel-syria-insurgency.html)” campaign that freed several hundred fighters and ultimately helped the group rebuild its leadership, resurge, and spread to Syria.

Following its 2017 territorial defeat in Iraq, IS was substantially weakened and remains so today—it has [claimed \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#home\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#home) just two attacks in Iraq so far in 2026, compared to more than a thousand in 2021. Yet by transitioning to a sleeper-cell model, IS has been able to continue operating there for years despite increased pressure, projecting an image of influence that helps it intimidate local populations, exploit security gaps, and support its activities across the border in Syria.

Another ongoing challenge for Baghdad is the daunting task of [repatriating \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/collapse-indefinite-detention-northeast-syria-implications-seven-years-later-syria\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/collapse-indefinite-detention-northeast-syria-implications-seven-years-later-syria) the 23,000-plus Iraqi citizens who had been held in IS-affiliated detention sites in northeast Syria since 2021. Iraq has faced funding, support, and security issues related to this challenge, while IS continues to focus extensive propaganda attention on these populations.

Factors That Could Work in the Islamic State’s Favor

Despite their residual capabilities and desire to resurge, IS cells are not operating in the same context they did before the group’s 2014 rise. Successive Iraqi governments have fought IS alongside international partners; Syria’s new government appears willing to fight the group; and civilians who have lived under IS rule are not eager to do so again. Yet three timely dynamics could work in the group’s favor:

Regional instability related to Iran and its proxies could set the stage for IS to resurge. In response to the IS seizure of large parts of the country a decade ago, several Iraqi militias were [created \(https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/07/iraqs-prime-minister-establishes-popular-mobilization-front-as-a-permanent-independent-military-formation.php\)](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/07/iraqs-prime-minister-establishes-popular-mobilization-front-as-a-permanent-independent-military-formation.php) to push the offensive back, many of them with [support from Iran \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraq-another-crossroads-iran-backed-militias-and-washington\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraq-another-crossroads-iran-backed-militias-and-washington). After the Gaza war broke out in 2023, some of these Iran-backed Shia militias—who have since been designated as terrorist groups by the United States—launched a string of attacks against Israel and U.S. interests. Some militias did the same after Israel and the United States attacked Iran this February.

Washington has responded to such attacks in multiple ways, from [launching \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/two-iraqs-shiite-popular-mobilization-forces-fighters-killed-airstrikes-western-2026-03-23/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/two-iraqs-shiite-popular-mobilization-forces-fighters-killed-airstrikes-western-2026-03-23/) airstrikes to [suspending \(https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/u-s-blocks-iraqs-dollar-shipments-to-squeeze-its-iran-backed-militias-3270d5af\)](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/u-s-blocks-iraqs-dollar-shipments-to-squeeze-its-iran-backed-militias-3270d5af) U.S. dollar shipments to Iraq and freezing security cooperation programs. Yet some of the latter programs were aimed at fighting IS, and their suspension has contributed to the emergence of undergoverned spaces that the group readily exploits. In addition, the near-term

activities and long-term fate of Iraq's militias will be affected by the fractious formation of a new government headed by Zaidi, who has garnered [approval \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tempering-us-expectations-about-iraqs-new-government\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tempering-us-expectations-about-iraqs-new-government) from both Washington and Tehran as each country seeks to steer Baghdad in their preferred direction.

Iraq's track record of rapid trials and high conviction rates has overburdened its prison system, which has a history of serving as an incubator for IS. In 2025, Iraq's justice minister noted that prisons were [operating at double their capacity \(https://apnews.com/article/iraq-prisons-amnesty-overcrowding-security-terrorism-577236f4f20125610c078e1625dcb33f\)](https://apnews.com/article/iraq-prisons-amnesty-overcrowding-security-terrorism-577236f4f20125610c078e1625dcb33f), with the government subsequently granting [amnesty \(https://apnews.com/article/iraq-amnesty-law-prisoners-released-7026cee25f7acc9b5f63fc2e7119d5d4\)](https://apnews.com/article/iraq-amnesty-law-prisoners-released-7026cee25f7acc9b5f63fc2e7119d5d4) to more than 35,000 prisoners, including some convicted of terrorism offenses. Yet many facilities remain overcrowded, and the previously mentioned transfer of around 5,700 IS-affiliated detainees from Syria has raised more security questions. These transfers followed [breaches \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/collapse-indefinite-detention-northeast-syria-implications-seven-years-later-syria\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/collapse-indefinite-detention-northeast-syria-implications-seven-years-later-syria) at Syrian facilities during the turbulent takeover of the northeast by the new government in Damascus, reflecting genuine security concerns regarding these populations. These concerns persist despite the transfer, since breakouts could occur in Iraq as well if security conditions deteriorate. In the April edition of its *al-Naba* newsletter, IS condemned ongoing Iraqi imprisonment, claiming it is sectarian and blaming Iran-backed militias for facilitating it. Moreover, rockets fired by these Iran-backed militias have fallen close to some of these prisons at times, setting off fears of escapes.

OIR is set to expire this September, along with the U.S. military presence (https://www.dw.com/en/less-un-fewer-us-soldiers-a-new-era-for-iraq/a-75038415) in federal Iraq. Since the United States ended its unilateral combat mission in Iraq in 2021, its military presence has significantly diminished. By the start of 2025, only [2,500 \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/pentagon-says-iraq-mission-being-scaled-back-2025-10-01/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/pentagon-says-iraq-mission-being-scaled-back-2025-10-01/) U.S. troops remained to "advise, assist, and enable" Iraq, down from [5,000 \(https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/12/01/566798632/under-trump-u-s-troops-in-war-zones-are-on-the-rise\)](https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/12/01/566798632/under-trump-u-s-troops-in-war-zones-are-on-the-rise) in 2017. Despite this, Iraq has continued to target IS with U.S. support. This year alone, it dismantled an IS cell and captured a commander in [February \(https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iraq-dismantles-terrorist-cell-arrests-isis-commander/3826168\)](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iraq-dismantles-terrorist-cell-arrests-isis-commander/3826168), arrested nine IS members in Sulaymaniyah in [May \(https://shafaq.com/en/Middle-East/Kurdistan-Asayish-arrest-nine-ISIS-suspects-in-Al-Sulaymaniyah\)](https://shafaq.com/en/Middle-East/Kurdistan-Asayish-arrest-nine-ISIS-suspects-in-Al-Sulaymaniyah), and carried out airstrikes on IS hideouts in Anbar in [June \(https://www.rudaw.net/english/categories/iraq/1078044\)](https://www.rudaw.net/english/categories/iraq/1078044).

Of course, the IS threat is not limited to insurgent or terrorist operations, and other types of vital U.S. assistance reflect that fact. This year, for example, the State Department funded international organizations that support Iraqi detention facilities as well as camp management and services provision at al-Amal reintegration facility (formerly Jeddah-1), which has been a key tool for reassimilating former IS-affiliated families. The department also identified potential assistance to help Baghdad "detain, investigate, and prosecute" IS detainees. Elsewhere, the Pentagon's Counter-IS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) was used to assist with the recent transfer of detainees from Syria, despite not being used for Iraqi detention facilities for some time. Amid these initiatives, OIR's [Lead Inspector General Report \(https://oig.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2026-06/Lead_IG_OIR_Q2_Final_Report_Revised%205.28.pdf\)](https://oig.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2026-06/Lead_IG_OIR_Q2_Final_Report_Revised%205.28.pdf) acknowledged that due to oil disruptions from the Iran war, the Iraqi government is under severe financial stress and may not be able to handle this portfolio on its own.

Policy Considerations

When Prime Minister Zaidi arrives in Washington, officials in both governments should set aside time to push past regional distractions and focus on concrete steps to help Iraq become self-sustaining, particularly as it faces the new

challenges presented by IS:

- The two countries should develop a plan to support Iraqi facilities holding IS-affiliated detainees, including non-Iraqis transferred from Syria. CTEF funds have been used for this purpose in 2026, but OIR's imminent expiration means that Washington and Baghdad should explore using State Department funds instead, as identified in this year's [Lead Inspector General Report \(https://oig.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2026-06/Lead_IG_OIR_Q2_Final_Report_Revised%205.28.pdf\)](https://oig.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2026-06/Lead_IG_OIR_Q2_Final_Report_Revised%205.28.pdf). This important work should include helping Iraq investigate, prosecute, and repatriate detainees. Assistance with processing these individuals would help Iraq not only become more self-sufficient, but also decrease its overcrowded prison populations.
- As Iraq works to reintegrate the thousands of repatriated families exiting the Amal reintegration facility and the thousands of former detainees granted amnesty from prisons, Washington and Baghdad should discuss realistic funding and support—with a set timeline—to help address this large population's needs. While the State Department has continued to fund camp management at al-Amal, other grants—including the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), which provided families with reintegration support after leaving the camp—ended in early 2026. Many of these individuals have no allegiance to IS, but others will likely seek to rejoin the group, especially if the Iraqi government does not offer support and they are left with no alternatives. While the Islamic State is no longer part of daily life for most Iraqis, the post-conflict reality is. To diminish the group's ability to take advantage of ongoing security and governance gaps, U.S. and Iraqi officials should focus on vital programs that offer community support in undergoverned spaces.
- Both governments must keep in mind that even a diluted Islamic State is still dangerous, as evident from continued operations against the group carried out with U.S. support. As the Pentagon's 2027 [budget request \(https://comptroller.war.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2027/FY2027_CTEF_J-Book.pdf\)](https://comptroller.war.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2027/FY2027_CTEF_J-Book.pdf) made clear, "Failure to fund [Iraq's Counter Terrorism Service] requirements would leave a significant security gap that ISIS is very likely to exploit." Washington and Baghdad should discuss continued bilateral intelligence sharing to combat sleeper cells and keep working together to design counterterrorism operations when needed. The U.S. forces needed for effective cooperation are not large, and they can operate either through the U.S. embassy in Baghdad (via the State Department) or through the limited U.S. Central Command contingent still based in the Kurdistan Region. In either case, the relationship should emphasize knowledge sharing and technical support.
- Zaidi and Trump should recognize the synergy between Syria's growing relationship with Washington and its budding [cooperative work \(https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-887600\)](https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-887600) with Baghdad, both of which can and should be leveraged to facilitate joint Iraqi-Syrian counter-IS missions.

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