

Research Briefing

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Countering Islamic State/Daesh in Africa, Syria and Iraq 2025

Summary

- 1 How strong is Islamic State (ISIS)/Daesh?
- 2 Countering Islamic State in Syria and Iraq
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Summary

In October 2024 the head of the UK security service, MI5, Sir Ken McCallum, said that the “terrorist threat that concern[ed]” him most [was “the worsening threat from al-Qaeda and in particular Islamic State”](#).

Islamic State, also known as Daesh or ISIS, is a proscribed terrorist group that from 2014 to 2019 seized and controlled large amounts of territory in Syria and Iraq. An international group, the 88-strong [Global Coalition against Daesh](#), was formed in 2014 to defeat the group and ensure it did not recover. The UK has [participated in military operations in Iraq and Syria](#) against it.

While Islamic State no longer controls significant territory or claims the same level of attacks as when it was at its peak, [UN reports in 2024](#) (PDF) note “heighted” concerns about threats emanating from Afghanistan, improved coordination in west Africa, and an uptick of activity in Syria and Iraq.

This research briefing describes the position of Islamic State and counter-ISIS forces in Sahel, West Africa, Syria and Iraq. Recent years have seen a withdrawal of French forces from parts of West Africa, and by September 2025, the military mission of the coalition is due to end in Iraq. The US said the decision does not represent troop withdrawal, however.

How strong is Islamic State/Daesh?

Islamic State [no longer claims the level of attacks](#) it carried out in the first years of its establishment after 2014. It also [does not hold any substantial amount of territory](#), having once controlled areas of Syria and Iraq with a population of 10 million people.

In 2024 the [group was estimated to retain](#) (PDF) up to 6,000 fighters in Afghanistan, up to 3,000 across Iraq and Syria, and to be mobilising and expanding its activities in West Africa, where it constitutes 2,000 to 3,000 fighters in Mali, Burkina Faso and the Niger.

With the fall of the Assad government in Syria in 2024, there has been [renewed focus on its position in Syria](#), and, in particular, [the large numbers of Islamic State fighters and families held](#) by the US-backed Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Islamic State is considered to be [stronger in Syria than in Iraq](#), and the threat of instability and government weakness in the country [create a risk for its recovery](#). The SDF has continued to be in armed conflict with other Syrian opposition groups since the fall of Assad.

How strong is Islamic State in Africa?

Since 2020, France has withdrawn troops from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger after military leaders [severed long-standing defence agreements](#). In 2025, France also plans to withdraw troops from Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and Chad.

2024 analysis by the Armed Conflict and Location Event Data (ACLED) argues that Islamic State in the Sahel has [exploited the vacuum left by the withdrawal of French forces](#) in the tri-state border region between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, and is now one of the region's "most violent and active armed actors".

In Somalia, Islamic State's presence remains smaller than its [jihadist](#) rival and [proscribed terrorist group Al-Shabaab](#), but in 2024 the [Crisis Group think tank](#) warned it is becoming an "important part of the jihadist group's worldwide network". This is because its chief, Abdulqadir Mumin, has [become a key figure in the Islamic State's global leadership](#), and the affiliate has become an important logistical and financial hub for Islamic State's African and global network.

What was agreed in 2024 for Iraq, and why?

In September 2024 the Iraqi and US Governments announced [the Coalition against Islamic State would end its military mission in Iraq](#) by September 2025. Initial negotiations had been launched following [armed conflict](#) between Iran-backed Shia militias in Iraq, known as the [Islamic Resistance of Iraq](#), and the United States, and also reflective of [long-standing domestic pressure for US forces to leave](#). The Biden administration, who negotiated the agreement, said [the decision will not mean the withdrawal of US forces](#).

US Government monitors report that [the local capacity of Iraqi security forces to contain and combat Islamic State has greatly increased](#), though raised concerns for the capacity of Kurdish groups in both Syria and Iraq.

Following the September 2024 announcement, the UK Government has announced its own [new bilateral defence agreement with Iraq](#). The NATO training mission is also expected to [continue to support Iraqi security forces](#).

What is the status of US forces in Syria?

There are around [2,000 US forces in Syria](#), primarily based in the northeast, supporting the SDF. Under the [September 2024 agreement](#), some coalition capacity will remain in Iraq for a further year to facilitate the US role in Syria.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the dominant Syrian armed group following the [fall of the Assad government in Syria](#) in December 2024, has [called the presence of foreign forces in the country “illegal”](#). It has also said all armed groups in Syria, including the SDF, should disarm. The Biden administration said US forces would remain [until the SDF is able to contain Islamic State](#).

Turkey and Turkish-backed armed groups have been in conflict with the SDF in 2024/25, citing its [links with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK](#) (the UK, among others, considers the PKK a terrorist group). Turkey says [it can counter Islamic State](#) and says this would allow the US to cut its ties with the SDF.

In February 2025 there were unconfirmed media reports that the Trump administration [may be considering the withdrawal of US forces from Syria](#) over a 30-, 60- or 90-day period. In January Secretary of State Marco Rubio had said there would be “implications to abandoning partners” and [it was “in the national interest” to ensure Islamic State does not recover in Syria](#).

During his first administration, in 2018 President Trump announced he would [withdraw all US forces from Syria](#), citing the military defeat of Islamic State. This did not take place, but a withdrawal from some areas did occur a year later, which was followed by a [Turkish-led offensive](#) against the SDF. The SDF [criticised the withdrawal](#) and has called for [US forces to remain in 2025](#).

How strong is Islamic State in Afghanistan?

The Taliban has [close ties with other proscribed terrorist groups](#), including Al-Qaeda. Both the US-led coalition and Afghanistan’s neighbours fear the country will attract terrorists. Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-K), the regional affiliate of Islamic State, continues in the country. In 2021, the UN had warned that [IS-K was present in “nearly all provinces and increasingly active”](#) and in 2025 that it [“represented the most serious threat to the de facto authorities, ethnic and religious minorities”](#) (PDF) and others in the country.

Section 3 of the Commons Library research briefing [Recent developments in Afghanistan](#), March 2025, summarises Islamic State activity in the country under the Taliban.

1 How strong is Islamic State (ISIS)/Daesh?

1.1 Global overview

Soon after emerging in 2014, Islamic State/Daesh was able to seize large amounts of territory in Syria and Iraq. Since 2019, Islamic State has held no territory but remains active across Afghanistan, the Middle East, and Africa.¹ In 2023 the UK Government acknowledged the Islamic State attack against the Yazidi group in Iraq in 2014 to constitute genocide.²

Data collected by the Washington Institute of claimed attacks by Islamic State estimates that the total number of such attacks has fallen from 3,300 in 2019/20 to 1,200 in 2023/24 (the number of claimed attacks may be underestimating the true number, however). West Africa, Central Africa and the Sahel saw rises in the same period, however.³

In October 2024 the Director General of the UK security service, MI5, Ken McCallum, said that the terrorist trend “that concerns me most” is the “worsening threat” from Al-Qaeda and Islamic State. While stating Islamic State was “not the force it was a decade ago”, he warned that “we and many European partners are detecting [Islamic State]-connected activity in our homelands”.⁴

Regional overview

In February 2025 the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team published its annual report on terrorist groups Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and related groups and individuals.⁵ It reported that Islamic State had a “greater focus on Africa” where it was continuing to expand and “remained resilient and adaptable to external counter-terrorism pressure”.⁶

¹ Wilson Center, [Timeline: the rise, spread and fall of Islamic State](#), October 2019; Congressional Research Service, [Islamic State: background, current status and US policy](#) (PDF), May 2024

² Commons library, [UK acknowledges Yazidi genocide by Daesh/Islamic State](#), August 2023

³ Washington Institute, [One year of Islamic State worldwide activity map](#), March 2024

⁴ MI5, [Director General Ken McCallum gives latest threat update](#), 8 October 2024

⁵ For past reports, see UN Security Council, [Monitoring team reports](#). For a summary of the July 2024 report, see Just Security, [UN Security Council report on ISIS and al-Qaeda](#), 5 August 2024

⁶ UN, [Letter dated 6 February 2025 from the President of the Security Council \[...\] S/2025/71/Rev.1](#), 6 February 2025, pp1-2

The August 2024 and February 2025 UN reports provides the following overview of Islamic State across world regions:

- Sahel and West Africa: Islamic State has 5,000 to 6,000 fighters in the Sahel, where it “continues to expand” and there is a risk of a “complete destabilisation” in some countries “in the medium term”.⁷
- East Africa: 300 to 500 Islamic State fighters in Somalia, where it is “aggressively bolstering the physical strength of the group”.⁸ In 2024, there was a “rapid growth in foreign fighters”, including from other African states and Yemen.⁹
- North Africa: remained “significantly weakened”.¹⁰
- Iraq and Syria: In 2024 Islamic State “increased its operational pace” in Syria, with up to 400 operations, with operations occurring at a “slower pace” in Iraq. Its combined strength is estimated at 1,500 to 3,000 fighters. Activity was “largely contained” in Iraq, where it lost 9 of its 17 leaders for Iraqi provinces and administration in 2024.¹¹
- Arabian Peninsula: Islamic State is estimated at between 100 and 150 fighters, and its activity was “significantly restricted”.¹²
- Europe: European States assess Islamic State, particularly the Afghanistan branch, Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) as “present[ing] the greatest external terrorist threat to Europe”.¹³
- Asia and Afghanistan: Islamic State was estimated at 2,000 to 6,000 fighters. It has avoided significant battles with the ruling Taliban and focused instead on external operations.¹⁴

Significant attacks by Islamic State in 2024 included in Tehran, where at least 90 people were killed in an attack in January, and in Moscow, where over 140 people were killed in March.¹⁵

⁷ UN, [Letter dated 19 July 2024 from the chair of the Security Council Committee \[...\] concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant \[...\]](#), (PDF), August 2024, paras 8-10

⁸ As above, paras 34, 57

⁹ UN, [Letter dated 6 February 2025 from the President of the Security Council \[...\]. S/2025/71/Rev.1](#), 6 February 2025, p9

¹⁰ As above, p10

¹¹ UN, [Letter dated 19 July 2024 from the chair of the Security Council Committee \[...\] concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant \[...\]](#), (PDF), August 2024, para 46; UN, [Letter dated 6 February 2025 from the President of the Security Council \[...\]. S/2025/71/Rev.1](#), 6 February 2025, p13

¹² UN, [Letter dated 19 July 2024 from the chair of the Security Council Committee \[...\] concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant \[...\]](#), (PDF), August 2024, para 65

¹³ As above, para 67

¹⁴ As above, para 73-77

¹⁵ [Russia says Islamic State behind deadly Moscow concert hall attack](#), France 24, 24 May 2024

Further reading on the status of Islamic State/Daesh

- Commons Library, [Afghanistan: Recent developments](#), March 2025, section 3 on internal security issues including Islamic State.
- Africa Report, [Defeated in Middle East, Islamic State is rising again in Africa](#), January 2025
- Institute for the Study of War, [The Islamic State's global long game](#), January 2025
- BBC Monitoring, [Snapshot—Islamic state global activity](#), January 2025
- Counter Extremism Project, [ISIS redux: The central Syria insurgency](#), January 2025
- US State Department, [Country reports on terrorism 2023](#), December 2024
- Crisis Group, [The Islamic State in Somalia: responding to an evolving threat](#), September 2024
- Armed Conflict and Location Event Data, [The Islamic State in the Sahel aims for regional expansion](#), September 2024
- Just Security, [Wake up call: UN Security Council's report on ISIS and al-Qaeda](#), August 2024
- Combating Terrorism Center, [Mapping the local and transnational threat of Islamic State Khorasan](#), May 2024
- Center for Strategic and International Studies, [The Islamic State in Khorasan Province: exploiting a counter terrorism gap](#), April 2024

1.2

Islamic State in Africa

The Sahel region

Since 2020, military coups have forcibly removed the elected presidents of Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger from office. All four are part of the Sahel region, which stretches across Africa.

In March 2025, the [Global Terrorism Index](#) named the Sahel the epicentre of global terrorism, accounting for over half of all terrorism-related deaths in 2024. Terrorism deaths in the Sahel are now ten times higher than in 2019. Burkina Faso is the most affected country, although Niger recorded the largest increase in terrorism deaths globally in 2024. However, the Index also

states that Islamic State activity in sub-Saharan Africa declined considerably in 2024, with deaths dropping from 1,185 in 2023 to 664 in 2024.¹⁶

The two predominant Islamist groups in the region are:

- Islamic State in the Sahel (IS Sahel)
- JNIM (Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam wal Muslimeen), which incorporated Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2018.¹⁷

Long the target of French-led counter-terrorism operations, the withdrawal of French and UN forces in the last two years (section 3) has seen Islamic State Sahel and JNIM expand and consolidate their presence across the Sahel. Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso are all grappling with an “entrenched jihadist insurgency”, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Organisation (ACLED).¹⁸ In 2024, ACLED said that JNIM and Islamic State Sahel “launched a spate of high-impact or mass-casualty attacks that targeted state forces, militias, and civilians with increasing lethality”.¹⁹

Both groups have established local affiliates in the region by “leveraging existing ethnic tensions and resource conflicts” and using their ideology as a tool to mobilise support “overlaying it onto pre-existing divisions and disputes”, according to the Global Terrorism Index.²⁰ ACLED similarly states that these groups are seeking to consolidate their influence over the civilian population by “presenting themselves as protectors” against state forces, Russian mercenaries and pro-government militias.²¹

Héni Nsaibia, analyst at ACLED, has described Islamic State in the Sahel as one of the region’s “most violent and active armed actors”, exploiting the vacuum left by the withdrawal of French forces in the tri-state border region since 2022.²² Nsaibia reported that since 2023, Islamic State Sahel has moved to a more “structured governance”, with clear chains of command and zones of control that deliberately sit across Mali’s borders with Burkina Faso and Niger. Nsaibia also described a shift away from mass violence to “more structured forms of territorial control”, explaining:

[Islamic State] Sahel has aimed to establish a self-styled system of jihadist governance that stabilizes the areas under its control and regulates relations with communities through coercive and reconciliatory measures.²³

¹⁶ Institute for Economics and Peace, [Global Terrorism Index 2025](#), March 2025

¹⁷ Institute for Economics and Peace, [Global Terrorism Index 2025](#), March 2025

¹⁸ ACLED, [Conflict intensifies and instability spreads beyond Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger](#), 12 December 2024

¹⁹ As above

²⁰ Institute for Economics and Peace, [Global Terrorism Index 2025](#), March 2025

²¹ ACLED, [Conflict intensifies and instability spreads beyond Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger](#), 12 December 2024

²² Héni Nsaibia, [Newly restructured, the Islamic State in the Sahel aims for regional expansion](#), 30 September 2024

²³ As above

However, Nsaibia added that the group faces significant challenges in its expansion plans, including effective resistance of rival forces, particularly JNIM. Nsaibia says it is likely that Islamic State Sahel will consolidate and possibly expand its presence in Mali and Niger, focusing on strengthening its bases in areas it has established a degree of control, rather than overextending into regions where its presence could be countered.²⁴

Dr David Doukhan, with the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, has suggested that the creation of an Islamic legal state in West Africa is a “reasonable possibility” given the weakness of the affected countries.²⁵

In a further development, in February 2025, Héni Nsaibia reported several high-profile kidnapping operations by Islamic State Sahel, particularly targeting foreigners. He notes that until 2025, the last confirmed kidnapping of a foreign national was in German national in 2018. However, in January 2025 Islamic State Sahel kidnapped six foreign nationals (an Austrian woman, a Spanish man and four Moroccan nationals). He also observed that the kidnappings had taken place in unusual locations across vast territories which, Nsaibia said, shows Islamic State Sahel’s increased reach.²⁶

Somalia

Whilst Al-Shabaab, aligned to Al-Qaeda, and also a proscribed terrorist group in the UK, is the dominant Islamist group in Somalia, Islamic State has been increasingly active in parts of Somalia, notably in the autonomous region of Puntland, according to ACLED.²⁷ The group numbers an estimated 100 to 400 fighters, as of 2024.²⁸

In September 2024, Crisis Group said Islamic State in Somalia, which it described as having a “long-standing if low-profile security threat” in the country, is becoming an “important part of the jihadist group’s worldwide network”.²⁹ Crisis Group notes that its chief, Abdulqadir Mumin, has become a key figure in the Islamic State’s global leadership, and the affiliate has become an important logistical and financial hub for Islamic State’s African and worldwide network. Crisis Group says these links could also embolden the group’s presence in Somalia, though notes that at present it poses little by way of a direct threat to security in Somalia, especially when compared to rival Al-Shabaab.³⁰

²⁴ Héni Nsaibia, [Newly restructured, the Islamic State in the Sahel aims for regional expansion](#), 30 September 2024

²⁵ David Doukhan, [The birth of a Jihadist State is closer than ever in West Africa](#), 22 January 2025

²⁶ Héni Nsaibia, [Is the Islamic State Sahel Province kidnapping more foreigners?](#), 11 February 2025

²⁷ ACLED, [A resurgence of Islamic State and inter-clan fighting in Somalia](#), 31 July 2024

²⁸ AS above

²⁹ Crisis Group, [The Islamic State in Somalia: Responding to an evolving threat](#), 12 September 2024

³⁰ As above

1.3

Islamic State in Syria and Iraq

In July 2024, the United States Central Command (US CENTCOM) reported that Islamic State in Syria and Iraq was “on pace to more than double the number of attacks they claimed in 2023”. It said that the increase indicated that the group “is attempting to reconstitute following several years of decreased capability”.³¹

[US Major General Joel Vowell](#), then commander of the mission against Islamic State, had also warned in January 2024 that:

- Turkish attacks on the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF—see below, section 5) was “causing a significant challenge to our ability to be part of operations”; and
- Islamic State “cells [were] start[ing] doing more things” in Syria and Iraq as attention and military efforts were concentrated on the 2023-25 conflict between Israel, Iran and Iranian-backed groups.³²

In 2024 analysts noted a particular rise in Islamic State attacks in Syria, arguing that actions by Iran-backed groups targeting US forces in 2023/24 limited their capacity to launch counter-Islamic State operations. They also reported a rebuilding of the group in desert and low-population areas in Syria where supervision is difficult.³³

The US-based Soufan Center estimates that Islamic State attacks “tripled” in Syria during 2024, rising to 700 and which “improved in sophistication, increased in lethality, and become more dispersed geographically”.³⁴

Analysis by the Hudson Institute also noted continuing attempts by Islamic State to tax and raise funds locally in eastern Syria, the smuggling of arms and other material into detention facilities and camps, and capitalising on divisions within Syria to strengthen its local capacity.³⁵

³¹ Centcom, [Defeat ISIS mission in Iraq and Syria for January—June 2024](#), 16 July 2024

³² [Iran’s proxy war makes Islamic State a bigger threat, US General warns](#), Times, 29 January 2024

³³ Middle East Institute, [Centcom says ISIS is reconstituting in Syria and Iraq](#), 17 July 2024

³⁴ The Soufan Center, [The Islamic State will exploit the situation in Syria \[...\]](#), 18 December 2024

³⁵ Hudson Institute, [Remaining, waiting for expansion \(again\) \[...\]](#), December 2024

2

Countering Islamic State in Syria and Iraq

What is the Global Coalition against Daesh?

The [Global Coalition against Daesh](#) was formed in 2014. It has 82 member countries and five organisations ([NATO](#), the [Arab League](#), the European Union, [Interpol](#) and [Community of Sahel-Saharan states](#)).

The coalition includes 13 Middle Eastern members, including Iraq, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. In Africa, it has 18 members, including Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia and Cameroon.³⁶

The coalition conducts military campaigns in Iraq and Syria. More widely, it seeks to address the financing of Islamic State, the movement of foreign terrorist fighters, counter its propaganda, and support the restoration of public services in areas it once controlled.³⁷

In an October 2024 communiqué, the coalition recommitted to “counter the continued spread of Daesh/ISIS globally, including across parts of Africa and Central and South Asia” and adopt “whole of government” approaches to disrupt the group.³⁸

2.1

US, UK and NATO in the Middle East

Participation of the United States

US Operation Inherent Resolve

[Operation Inherent Resolve](#) (OIR) is the name for US operations against Islamic State in the Middle East since 2014. The mission objective is to “advise, assist and enable” partner forces, such as [Iraqi Security Forces](#), the Kurdish-led [Syrian Democratic Forces](#) (SDF), and the [Kurdish Security forces \(“Peshmerga”\) in Iraq](#), until they can independently contain and defeat Islamic State.

³⁶ Global Coalition against Daesh, [Partners](#)

³⁷ Global Coalition against Daesh, [Our mission](#)

³⁸ Global Coalition against Daesh, [Joint communiqué by ministers \[...\]](#), October 2024

What is the US troop presence in Iraq and Syria?

As of late 2024, the US has around:

- 2,500 troops in Iraq as part of Operation Inherent Resolve.³⁹ The coalition has a presence at Erbil air base, in Iraqi Kurdistan, and in Baghdad and the Al-Asad air base.⁴⁰
- 2,000 troops in Syria. Around 1,100 of these are on “temporary rotation”, meaning they remain the theatre for 30 to 90 days. The remainder are considered “core assets” who deploy for 9 to 12 months. They are primarily based in northeastern Syria, alongside the Kurdish-led SDF.⁴¹

US troops are in Iraq under an invitation from the Iraqi Government and under the terms of the 2008 US-Iraq strategic framework. The framework states the US presence is “temporary”, and the US will not use Iraq as a launching or transit point for attacks on other countries.⁴²

US forces first entered northeastern Syria in 2015, to assist Kurdish forces combat Islamic State (though there were some advisors based there before this). Syrian President Bashar al-Assad opposed their presence.⁴³

US troops in the Middle East

- Council on Foreign Relations, [US troops in the Middle East: mapping the military presence](#), 1 October 2024. Overview of regional presence
- Chatham House, [US military policy in the Middle East](#), 2020. Overview and analysis on US military and related engagement with the region.

What role do UK forces play?

The UK has participated in the coalition against Islamic State under Operation Shader. From 2016 to September 2024 the UK provided support and training to 111,000 members of the Iraqi security forces and the RAF conducted more

³⁹ US Department of Defense (DoD), [US-Iraq higher military commission continues talks on security cooperation](#), 9 September 2024

⁴⁰ DoD Office of the Inspector General, [Operation Inherent Resolve for 1 July 2024 to 30 September 2024](#), 29 October 2024, p15

⁴¹ DoD, [DoD announces 2,000 troops in Syria \[...\]](#), 1 December 2024

⁴² US State Department (DoS), [Strategic Framework for a relationship \[...\] between US and the Republic of Iraq](#), 2008, section 1

⁴³ [A timeline of the US involvement in Syria's conflict](#), AP, 11 January 2019; [Assad: US military forces in Syria are “invaders”](#), CNN, 12 March 2017

than 10,000 sorties striking more than 1,400 targets.⁴⁴ Strikes continue in 2025.⁴⁵

In the past, British forces have been based at Al Assad Air Base in Anbar province, Erbil in the Kurdistan Regional Government area, and Al-Taji and Al-Bismayah near Baghdad.⁴⁶ The army is not operating in a combat role and is instead involved in training and supporting Iraqi and Kurdish security forces. As of January 2024, there were 200 UK Service personnel deployed on operations in Iraq.⁴⁷

The Ministry of Defence says UK training is focused on “enhancing the capabilities of the Iraqi Security Forces in order to ensure the enduring defeat of Daesh”. This includes “training on policy and strategy, planning, cyber security, human rights and women's empowerment”.⁴⁸

UK troops in the Middle East

- Commons Library, [UK military forces in the Middle East region](#)
- Commons Library, [UK and international response to the Houthis in the Red Sea 2024/25](#)
- Commons Library introductory country profiles on [Bahrain](#), [Egypt](#), [Kuwait](#), [Lebanon](#), [Oman](#), [Qatar](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#), and the [UAE](#) provide more on UK security and defence relationship with each country.

What role does NATO play?

The [North Atlantic Treaty Organization \(NATO\)](#) has 32 members, from Europe and North America.

It established the NATO Mission in Iraq (NMI) in 2018, following a request from the Iraqi Government. It is a non-combat advisory and capacity-building mission that supports local instructors, teachers and leaders, including from police and Ministry of Interior, to prevent the return of Islamic State and support stability.⁴⁹ It is separate to the NATO training mission that ran in Iraq from 2004 to 2011.

⁴⁴ Ministry of Defence, [UK response to the conclusion of the global coalition's military mission](#), 29 September 2024

⁴⁵ Ministry of Defence, [Update air strikes on Daesh](#), updated 6 March 2025

⁴⁶ UK battalion arrives in Iraq, *Janes Defence Weekly*, 14 October 2016

⁴⁷ PQ 11880 [[Iraq: armed forces](#)], 6 February 2024

⁴⁸ PQ 11881 [[Iraq: military aid](#)], 6 February 2024

⁴⁹ [NATO Mission Iraq](#) and [NMI factsheet](#), May 2024

As of 2024, “several hundred” military, civilian and support personnel were present. Its forward operating base is in Baghdad.⁵⁰

2.2

What capacity do Syrian and Iraqi forces have?

US assessment of capacity of local forces

The US mission against Islamic State says that the capacity of local forces to operate against Islamic State varies across Iraq and Syria:

- In Iraq: Iraqi security forces have “has shown [they are] capable of preventing a Daesh resurgence by conducting operations alone and delivering training” and have “full responsibility for training facilities and training programs”.
- In Syria: the coalition continues to advise “through partnered patrols” with the SDF and to train the force. It says the SDF has “improved capability”.⁵¹

The US Inspector General on Operation Inherent Resolve said in 2024 that the US presence in Iraq “maintains a ‘critical role’ in the intelligence fusion, public affairs and information operations, and deliberate targeting processes that culminate in air-to-ground strikes [...]”.⁵²

For the Iraqi Kurdish forces (based in the Kurdish autonomous region in northern Iraq), the Inspector General said that “key milestones of security reform” had not been achieved but were “on track”. These include reorganising its forces under a single command and ensuring the financial sustainability of the forces. It was reported these milestones were “heavily dependent” on coalition efforts. Coalition support is expected to continue after 2026 under a memorandum of understanding.⁵³

In Syria, the Inspector General noted pressure on the SDF from Iran-backed groups and local militia that led to partner forces “shift[ing] their attention self-defence”.⁵⁴ Since Assad fled Syria in December 2024, armed conflict between the SDF and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army has continued (Turkey links the SDF with terrorist groups in the country). The Commons Library research briefing [Syria after Assad: consequences and interim authorities 2025](#), provides more on the situation and background.

⁵⁰ [NATO Mission Iraq](#) and [NMI factsheet](#), May 2024

⁵¹ Operation Inherent Resolve, [Our mission](#), accessed 5 February 2025

⁵² DoD Office of the Inspector General, [Operation Inherent Resolve for 1 July 2024 to 30 September 2024](#), 29 October 2024, p21

⁵³ As above, pp21-24

⁵⁴ As above, p30

3 Countering Islamic State in Africa

3.1 France, Russia and the UN

Between 2013 and 2024 the activities of Islamic State and Al-Qaeda affiliated Islamist groups had drawn the focus of international efforts to stabilise the Sahel.⁵⁵ However, in Mali in 2022 a decade-long French counter-terrorism operation and a UN peacekeeping mission ended at the request of the military leadership who took power in a coup.

For background on the Sahel, see the below:

- Council on Foreign Relations, [Violent extremism in the Sahel](#), October 2024
- Commons Library, [Coups and political stability in West Africa](#), September 2023
- Commons Library, [UK military in the Sahel: Developments in 2022](#), November 2022

France ends military presence from 2022

In early 2022 France ended its near decade-long counter-terrorism operation in Mali after a breakdown in relations with Mali's new military leadership, the arrival of Russian forces from the Wagner Group and rising anti-French sentiment across the region.⁵⁶

France ended both operation Barkhane, which focused on counter-terrorism and supporting regional forces, and the French-led Takuba task force of predominantly European forces.

In his June 2022 report on the situation in Mali, the UN Secretary General warned “the withdrawal and discontinuation of operations by French forces is likely to create a vacuum in some areas that risks being exploited by terrorist armed groups”.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ For further background see Commons Library briefing [Coups and political stability in West Africa](#), Commons Library, 18 September 2023, and [UK military in the Sahel: Developments in 2022](#), 24 November 2022

⁵⁶ For further background and sources see Commons Library briefings in footnote above

⁵⁷ UN, [Situation in Mali, Report of the Secretary General S/2022/446](#) (PDF), 2 June 2022

Since then, France has largely ended, or is in the process of ending, its military presence in countries across the Sahel and West Africa at the request of leaders in Burkina Faso ([2023](#)), Niger ([2023](#)), Côte d'Ivoire ([2025](#)), Senegal ([2025](#)) and Chad ([2025](#)).⁵⁸

UN mission

In 2023 the UN ended MINUSMA, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, at the request of the Malian transitional forces. The decade-long mission, which the UK contributed to between 2020 and 2022, was one of the deadliest of UN peacekeeping missions with 300 fatalities; peacekeepers were repeatedly targeted by a wide range of groups seeking the removal of international forces from Mali.⁵⁹

Increasing Russian presence

Anti-French sentiment has been rising in the region, and Russia has sought to fill the gap in the Sahel and West Africa, with mixed results.⁶⁰

Initially this was via the private military company the [Wagner group](#), used by Russia as a “low-cost strategy to increase its foothold in Africa”, according to Nicodemus Minde, of the South African based Institute for Security Studies.⁶¹

Following the death of the group’s leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, in 2023 Russia’s presence is now more visible via the Africa Corps under the control of Russia’s Ministry of Defence.⁶²

However, Will Brown, with the European Council on Foreign Relations, argues “Russian forces in the Sahel are in some regards profoundly overstretched and exposed militarily; Moscow is losing credibility as a reliable partner for African governments”. He says Russian forces have been targeted by JNIM.⁶³

3.2

What capacity do African forces have?

African forces have limited capacity to address terrorist groups.

⁵⁸ [A weakened France bids Africa adieu](#), Euractiv, 5 February 2025; [France faces decline of influence in Africa](#), France 24, 1 January 2025

⁵⁹ UN, [Situation in Mali: report of the Secretary-General](#) SC/2019/983, 30 December 2019; UN, [Last UN peacekeepers poised for complete withdrawal from Mali](#), 31 December 2023

⁶⁰ [Frexit: why Ivory Coast is joining African campaign to expel French troops](#), Al Jazeera, 3 January 2025; European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), [Why Russia’s influence in Africa is under threat](#), 9 October 2024

⁶¹ Institute for Security Studies, [Russia’s Africa corps-more than old wine in a new bottle](#), 7 March 2024

⁶² As above; ECFR, [Why Russia’s influence in Africa is under threat](#), 9 October 2024; ACLED, [The Wagner Group’s new life after the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin](#), 21 August 2024

⁶³ ECFR, [Why Russia’s influence in Africa is under threat](#), , 9 October 2024

In 2025 Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso left the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to form their own group, the Alliance of Sahel States, a defence and security cooperation body. It is reportedly modelled on NATO, with a non-aggression pact and mutual assistance in the event of attack on a member state.⁶⁴ The latter condition may have been motivated by early but unrealised threats from ECOWAS to intervene militarily if Nigerien president Mohamed Bazoum was not reinstated.⁶⁵

The change in leadership also led to the collapse of the G5, the [Group of Five for the Sahel](#), set up in 2014 by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. This formed a joint force to counter terrorism, organised crime and human trafficking in the tri-border area.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Crisis Group, [A splinter in the Sahel: Can the divorce with ECOWAS be averted?](#), 5 December 2024

⁶⁵ Crisis Group, [A splinter in the Sahel: Can the divorce with ECOWAS be averted?](#), 5 December 2024; Commons Library briefing [Coups and political stability in West Africa](#), Commons Library, 18 September 2023

⁶⁶ David Doukhan, [The G5 Sahel: The end of the road](#), International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 13 February 2024

4 2024 US-Iraq announcement

4.1 Background: Conflict in Iraq in 2023/24

After the [Hamas-led assault on Israel on 7 October 2023](#), Iran-backed groups in the region began to launch attacks against Israel and some US military bases. The Washington Institute think-tank records that the “[Islamic Resistance of Iraq](#)” (the name for a collection of Iraqi militias, some backed by Iran) claimed some 220 attacks from October 2023 to December 2024.⁶⁷

To February 2024, there were 160 attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria. The then UK Defence Secretary, Grant Shapps, said that “about a third” of these attacks involved UK troops too.⁶⁸ In response to the attacks, President Joe Biden ordered US air strikes in Iraq and Syria against the militias.⁶⁹

In January 2024, the Iraqi government criticised a US strike in Baghdad that [killed Abu Taqwa](#), a senior commander of the Harakat al-Nujaba militia, part of the Iran-backed [Popular Mobilization Forces](#) (PMF).⁷⁰ Following the strike, the Iraqi Prime Minister, Mohammed Shia al Sudani, said that his government “is setting the date for the start of the bilateral committee to put arrangements to end the presence of the international coalition forces in Iraq permanently”.⁷¹

In late January 2024 the US Department of Defence said it would begin meetings with the US-Iraq higher military commission, which had first been established in 2023. The department said the group:

will enable the transition to an enduring bilateral security partnership between the United States and Iraq, building on the successes of Iraq's Defeat-Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.⁷²

This was not the first time the negotiation of the presence of US troops has been taken place: since 2003 Iraq has had to balance its relationship with Iran and the United States., The presence of US and Iran-backed forces has meant that Iraq has not had a monopoly on the use of force inside the country

⁶⁷ Washington Institute, [Tracking anti-US and anti-Israel strikes from Iraq and Syria during the Gaza crisis](#), updated 14 October 2024

⁶⁸ HC Deb, [5 February 2024](#), c28

⁶⁹ DoD, [US strikes targets in Iraq and Syria \[...\]](#), 2 February 2024

⁷⁰ [Iraq condemns “irresponsible” air strikes on Iran-backed groups](#), BBC News, 24 January 2024; [Iraq blames US-led coalition for drone strike in Baghdad](#), Al-Jazeera, 4 January 2024

⁷¹ [Iraq prepares to close down US-led coalition’s mission—PM](#), Reuters, 5 January 2024

⁷² DoD, [Statement by the Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin](#), 25 January 2024

and it desires to avoid a conflict between Iran-backed groups and the US on its own territory.⁷³

In 2020 the Iraqi parliament had voted to expel foreign forces following the [US killing in Iraq of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps \(IRGC\) commander Qasem Soleiman](#). The Iraqi government did not enforce the vote, but did engage with talks which resulted in an end to US combat operations and a transition to training and advisory support in 2021.⁷⁴

How influential is Iran in Iraq?

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran-backed Shia militias and political groups have been able to assume a greater role in the country's political system and form armed groups. These include the [Popular Mobilization Forces](#) (PMF), which were legalised by the Iraqi parliament in 2016 to combat Islamic State and number up to 60 groups and 240,000 personnel.⁷⁵

Not all Shia political groupings support Iran, however. [Muqtada Al-Sadr](#), a Shia cleric and an opponent of both US and Iranian influence in the country (he led a militia against US coalition forces in the early 2000s), is one influential political figure. His grouping won the largest number of seats in the 2021 Iraqi elections but later withdrew from the parliament.⁷⁶

In 2024, some members of the Iraqi parliament proposed a defence security pact with Iran-backed groups.⁷⁷ Other Iran-supported groups, including the [Houthis in Yemen](#) and [Hamas in Gaza](#), also established offices in Iraq in 2024, with the potential for greater coordination in their actions.⁷⁸

In 2023 some analysts argued that Iranian influence was strong enough to constitute “capturing” the Iraqi state following the withdrawal of Al-Sadr from the parliament and the ongoing maintenance of a “parallel” military force through the PMF.⁷⁹ Others argue continuous coalition governments, Iraq's own oil production, and the ability of Iraq to operate independently from Iran internationally means it is not a “proxy state”.⁸⁰

⁷³ [Iran's delicate balancing act with Iran and the US](#), Wall Street Journal, 19 November 2023; E Laipson and D Ollivant, [A delicate balance: Iraq's security culture between Iran and the US](#), Global Politics and Strategy, 2024, vol 66

⁷⁴ [US-led coalition against US ends combat mission in Iraq](#), BBC News, 9 December 2021

⁷⁵ [Iraq parliament passes a law legalising PME](#), Asharq Al Awsat, 27 November 2016. See BBC Monitoring, [What are Iraq's PME?](#), February 2025, for an overview.

⁷⁶ See Commons Library, [Iraq in 2022: forming a government](#), November 2022

⁷⁷ [Iran parl. Discusses defense pact with resistance groups](#), Mehr News, 8 October 2024

⁷⁸ [Once considered foes, Iranian-backed groups get a warm welcome from Iraq](#), New York Times, 15 September 2024

⁷⁹ M Knight and others, [Iraq's new regime change](#), CTC Sentinel, vol 16, 2023,

⁸⁰ European Council on Foreign Relations, [Proxy battles: Iraq, Iran \[...\]](#), 16 April 2024

In 2024/25, there was reported request from the Biden administration for the PMF to be disbanded or be incorporated into the official armed forces. The Iraqi Government denies foreign pressure but confirms it wants the PMF disarmed.⁸¹ Sayyed al-Sistani, the leading Shia cleric in Iraq, has also said that arms should be limited to the state. The PMF was formed in 2014 following a Fatwa (Islamic law ruling) issued by Sistani.⁸²

Brookings Institute analysis notes that winding down the PMF may be a “lengthy process”, citing the “experience of the Kurdish paramilitaries in Iraq, which continue to struggle to unify under one Peshmerga chain of command”.⁸³ Legislation has been in place since 2019 for the PMF to dissolve or become part of the state armed forces.⁸⁴ In 2025, legislation to introduce a mandatory retirement age has also been proposed, which would cause a change in PMF leadership. In March, the Iraqi Government withdrew the legislation from parliament.⁸⁵

Analysis for the Emirates Policy Center also noted that PMF groups have expressed hostility towards the [new dominant group in Syria](#), Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a Sunni group, and may wish to retain their own capacity to deploy armed force in the future.⁸⁶

4.2

What was announced for Iraq in 2025?

In September 2024 the American and Iraqi Governments announced that:

- The military mission of the global coalition to defeat Islamic State in Iraq would be concluded, no later than the end of September 2025
- Participating states would transition to bilateral security partnerships with Iraq, to support Iraqi government forces and maintain pressure on Islamic State

⁸¹ [Iraq wants Iran-backed factions to lay down weapons \[...\]](#), Reuters, 16 January 2025; [Blinken makes unannounced trip to Iraq \[...\]](#), CNN, 13 December 2024

⁸² [Can Baghdad disband pro-Iran militias amid US pressure?](#), BBC Monitoring, 16 January 2025

⁸³ Brookings Institute, [Iraq's search for security and sovereignty \[...\]](#), 21 January 2025

⁸⁴ [Iraqi PM decree curbs powers of Iranian-backed militias](#), Al Jazeera, 1 July 2019

⁸⁵ [Contentious retirement clause puts future of Iraq's PMU in question](#), Amwaj Media, 4 March 2025; [Iraqi PM suspends PMF retirement law](#), Asharq Al-Awsat, 12 March 2025

⁸⁶ Emirates Policy Center, [Future of armed factions in Iraq after the fall of Assad's regime](#), 9 January 2025. See also Fikra Forum, [The Iraqi stance on events in Syria](#), 14 January 2025

- The military mission in northeast Syria would continue to operate until September 2026, using bases in Iraq in consultation with Iraqi and US leaders and the anti-Islamic State coalition (see section 6 for Syria).⁸⁷

US officials stress this does not represent a withdrawal of US forces from Iraq and that the Global Coalition is still required, as Islamic State seeks to reestablish itself in the region, in Afghanistan, and in Africa.⁸⁸ It will continue to work with the Iraqi government:

We intend to stay connected in an advise-and-assist capacity with the counterterrorism services, the joint operations command, the air force, and the Kurdish Peshmerga, all of whom play a very important role in conducting counter-ISIS missions.⁸⁹

In September 2024 then Secretary of State Antony Blinken also said the US would “maintain our counterterrorism efforts from outside of Iraq – including in Syria – for as long as needed”.⁹⁰

The Biden administration said there would be “some changes to our footprint” but would not comment on troop numbers or their locations.⁹¹

Iraqi officials said this would shift Iraq “toward complete sovereignty for its armed forces” and will “elevate Iraq-American relations”.⁹²

Kurdish groups in northern Iraq have warned against the withdrawal of US and coalition forces, arguing they remain required to combat Islamic State.⁹³

4.3

What factors may affect implementation?

Announcing the decision in 2024, US officials said that the transition would be “subject to conditions on the ground and [...] consultations among the political leaders”.⁹⁴ In September 2024 the then Chair of the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, Michael McCaul (Republican), also warned against a “time bound withdrawal [...] as we see an uptick in [Islamic State] attacks”.⁹⁵

Other events that may affect the pace of implementation include the below.

⁸⁷ US DoS, [Joint statement announcing the timeline for the end \[...\]](#), 27 September 2024

⁸⁸ US DoD, [QIR mission in Iraq and Syria transitioning](#), 27 September 2024

⁸⁹ US DoS, [Senior administration official and senior defence official \[...\]](#), 27 September 2024

⁹⁰ US Embassy in Syria, [Secretary Antony Blinken at the opening \[...\]](#), 30 September 2024

⁹¹ US DoS, [Senior administration official and senior defence official \[...\]](#), 27 September 2024

⁹² [Government advisor: Prime Minister guides Iraq \[...\]](#), Iraqi News Agency, 28 September 2024

⁹³ “[Iraq and entire region too volatile for coalition exit](#)”, Kurdistan 24, 28 September 2024

⁹⁴ US DoS, [Senior administration official and senior defence official \[...\]](#), 27 September 2024

⁹⁵ Foreign Affairs Committee, [Chairman McCaul on potential withdrawal \[...\]](#), 23 September 2024

Iraqi capacity and US security cooperation

The Atlantic Council think tank notes that while there is an ongoing risk of armed escalation in Iraq, several factors may aid a sustainable shift:

- a lack of armed conflict between militias, Israel and the United States (In August 2024, the announcement on the end to the US-led coalition had been postponed due to missile attacks on a US base).⁹⁶
- sufficient security reforms in Iraq
- economic assistance to Iraq, particularly for non-oil sectors.⁹⁷

In March 2024 US General Michael Kurilla, Commander of the United States Central Command, told the US Congress that there were risks from a “premature” departure from Syria and Iraq before local security forces were ready to address Islamic State:

We must also prevent a premature Coalition departure from Iraq and Syria. If Iran and Russia were to succeed in their goal of pushing us out before our partner forces can operate independently, it is my assessment that ISIS would reconstitute the ability to seize territory within two years. The Global Coalition’s sustained presence not only helps our partners in their fight against ISIS, it also prevents the reemergence of territorial control and ensures the group does not have a safe haven in Iraq or Syria to plan global attacks. The eventual transition to a traditional security cooperation framework must be predicated on Partner Force Development and Security Sector Reform in Iraq, and continued repatriations, secure detention facilities, and a political pathway for the SDF in Syria.⁹⁸

New authorities in Syria

In December 2024, [President Bashar al-Assad fled Syria for Russia](#). A range of armed and terrorist groups now control Syria, with some ongoing fighting. Islamic State also retains a presence in the country and several thousand of its fighters remain held in detention, primarily in northeastern Syria.⁹⁹

In January 2025, the Iraqi Government said it was concerned about “several terrorist” groups in Syria.¹⁰⁰

Instability in Syria may allow Islamic State to strengthen, with implications for neighbouring Iraq. Analysts have cited threats to minority Shia Muslim groups in Syria or strengthening of Iranian control over the PMF as potential sources of such instability. HTS has pledged to protect the rights of all minorities in Syria, including Shia Muslims.¹⁰¹ During the HTS advance towards Damascus in

⁹⁶ [Two missiles delay international coalition withdrawal \[...\]](#), Asharq Al-Awsat, 17 August 2024

⁹⁷ Atlantic Council, [After Operation Inherent Resolve \[...\]](#), 2 October 2024

⁹⁸ Centcom, [Statement of General Michael Kurilla on the posture \[...\]](#), 7 March 2024

⁹⁹ Commons Library research briefing, [Syria after Assad 2024/25](#), section 5

¹⁰⁰ [Iraq President \[...\]: Iran’s influence is exaggerated](#), Asharq Al-Awsat, 24 January 2025

¹⁰¹ [Syria: HTS Islamists pledge to show tolerance for minorities](#), DW, 4 December 2024; Washington Institute, [Alawites under threat in Syria?](#), 31 December 2024

2024, some Iran-backed groups in Iraq had called on Iraq to intervene militarily against the group. None were deployed.¹⁰²

In January 2025 it was reported that some members of Iraqi militias and government have been reconsidering the demand for US troop withdrawal, citing a potential for Islamic State to exploit instability in Syria. No public statements have been made to this effect.¹⁰³

Iraqi parliamentary elections in 2025

Iraq is expected to hold parliamentary elections in 2025 (the current parliament's term ends in January 2026).

The government that negotiated the new agreement is led by Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al Sudani, the nominee of the Shia political coalition, the [Coordination Framework](#). The government involves pro-Iran elements. The government was only formed after the resignation of pro-Sadrists (supporters of Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr) elements from the Iraqi parliament, who had won the largest single block of seats in the [2021 elections](#) (though not a majority).¹⁰⁴

If Sadrists decide to participate in the elections, the next government may seek to exclude pro-Iran elements and also take further steps against the US. In October 2023, for example, Sadr had called for the closure of the US embassy in Baghdad because of US support for Israel. In 2020 he had also backed the cancellation of the security agreement with the US.¹⁰⁵

Further reading on Iraq in 2025

- Brookings Institute, [Iraq's search for stability and sovereignty after Assad's collapse](#), January 2025
- Amwaj Media, [Parliamentary 'horse trading' over divisive laws sparks backlash in Iraq](#), January 2025. In February, Iraq's Supreme Court allowed the implementation of all three laws.¹⁰⁶
- French Research Centre on Iraq, [The implosion of the Coordination Framework in Iraq ahead of the 2025 elections](#), October 2024

¹⁰² US Institute for Peace, [How Assad's fall could impact Iraq](#), 17 December 2024; [Iraq armed group urges government to deploy into Syria](#), Al Arabiya, 3 December 2024; [Will Iraq heed HTS leader's call for Shiite militias to stay out of Syria?](#), Amwaj Media, 6 December 2024

¹⁰³ [Regime change in Syria has Iraqi factions backtracking \[...\]](#), AP, 31 January 2025

¹⁰⁴ Commons Library, [Iraq in 2022: forming a government](#), November 2022

¹⁰⁵ [Iraqi cleric al-Sadr demands closure of US embassy](#), Reuters, 27 October 2023; [Sadr calls for "humiliating US exit"—letter](#), Reuters, 5 January 2020; Soufan Center, [Sadrists return might upend Iraqi politics \[...\]](#), 24 May 2024

¹⁰⁶ [Iraq's top court suspends new legislation that activists say undermines women's rights](#), AP, 5 February 2025; [Iraq's personal status laws to be enacted](#), The National, 11 February 2025

- Washington Institute, [A new era in Iraq's relations with the West?](#), June 2024
- International Monetary Fund, [Iraq: economy](#)

4.4 What has been the UK and NATO response?

Following the September 2024 announcement, the UK Ministry of Defence said it would continue to support the security of Iraq and “work closely” with it to “develop an enduring bilateral relationship”.¹⁰⁷

In January 2025 the UK and Iraqi governments signed a joint statement on a strategic bilateral defence relationship. The UK Government said this would deepen defence cooperation, including:

the provision of UK-Iraq military education exchange, UK advisory support on capability and institutional reform, and the development of defence industrial partnerships.¹⁰⁸

In a meeting with his Iraqi counterpart in January 2024, Prime Minister Keir Starmer said the two countries were “committed to continuing strong cooperation on counterterrorism”.¹⁰⁹

The NATO Mission in Iraq launched a political dialogue with the Iraqi Government in August 2024. NATO and Iraqi Government officials reaffirmed their ties.¹¹⁰

In February 2025 the NATO Secretary General, Mark Rutte, in a visit to Iraq, said that “we are evolving the scope of our activities, in support to Iraq’s ongoing efforts towards lasting security and stability for all of its citizens”.¹¹¹ Prime Minister Sudani “emphasised the importance of continued engagement” with NATO and cooperation on training, planning, expertise and collaboration on defence equipment.¹¹²

In September 2024 US officials in an official briefing said that Iraqi “officials say they appreciate the added value that NMI – NATO Mission Iraq – brings”.¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ Ministry of Defence, [UK response to the conclusion of the global coalition’s military mission](#), 29 September 2024

¹⁰⁸ Prime Minister’s Office, [Statement between the Prime Ministers of the UK and Iraq](#), 25 January 2025

¹⁰⁹ Prime Minister’s Office, [Meeting with Prime Minister of Iraq](#), 14 January 2025

¹¹⁰ NATO, [NATO and Iraq launched high-level political dialogue](#), 27 August 2024

¹¹¹ NATO, [NATO Secretary General hails strong cooperation with Iraq](#), 5 February 2025

¹¹² [Sudani, NATO SG discuss cooperation and security](#), Shafaq, 5 February 2025

¹¹³ US Department of State, [Senior administration official and senior defence official \[...\]](#), 27 September 2024

5 The SDF and future of US troops in Syria

Foreign fighters and Islamic State detainees in Syria

Many foreign fighters and Islamic State fighters and families are in camps and detention facilities in Syria, predominantly in areas controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the northeast, where most US forces are based. See section 5.2 of the Commons Library research briefings, [The Syrian civil war: timeline, UK and statistics](#) and section 5 of [Syria after Assad](#) for more information on their position.

5.1 Position of HTS authorities in Syria

Since Assad fled Syria in December 2024, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has attained a dominant role in the country, with its members assuming the presidency, suspending the constitution, and establishing ministries. It is not the only armed group in the country, however, and there has been some fighting into 2025.¹¹⁴

One major source of continued armed conflict is between the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Turkey says it is targeting the SDF because of its [links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK](#), which is considered a terrorist organisation by the EU and UK, among others. Turkey has launched a series of campaigns against the SDF since intervening militarily in Syria in 2016. In 2025, the PKK leader in Turkey called upon its members to lay down their arms. The SDF says the call does not apply to them.¹¹⁵

Among the SDF's objectives are seeking greater autonomy for Kurds in Syria, in a similar way to those in Iraq. Kurds [form a minority in both states](#).

Most Iranian-backed forces are believed to have withdrawn from Syria, while there are ongoing negotiations about the position of Russian naval and air

¹¹⁴ Commons Library, [Syria after Assad 2025](#), section 2

¹¹⁵ Commons Library, [Syria after Assad 2025](#), sections 2.4, 2.5, 3.3

bases. Israel also occupies some of southern Syria, centred on the Golan Heights. US forces also remain.¹¹⁶

Ahmed al-Sharaa, the leader of HTS, who was appointed as transitional Syrian president by the group in January 2025, says he wants all armed groups in the country to dissolve and become part of a single Syrian army.¹¹⁷

In March 2025 the SDF and Ahmed al-Sharaa agreed, in principle, for the SDF to dissolve and all its facilities be transferred to the responsibility of the interim authorities. The agreement aims for this to be completed in 2025.¹¹⁸

In February 2025 the Syrian interim President also said that “illegal military presence” of foreign forces should end:

I believe any illegal military presence should not continue. Any military presence in a sovereign state should take place under a certain agreement, and there has been no such agreement between us and the United States of America.¹¹⁹

There has reportedly been no direct contact with the Trump administration on the issue.¹²⁰

In February 2025 Turkey said it would be willing to work with Jordan, Syria and Iraq to counter Islamic State. Its Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan, said this would allow the US to cut its ties with the SDF.¹²¹ Jordan and Iraq have not publicly commented on the proposal.¹²²

5.2

Statements of the United States

Position of Biden administration

In December 2024 the Biden administration said that the US would remain in eastern Syria to support the SDF and combat Islamic State.

Then National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan said there were “huge risk factors” in Syria, including Islamic State “taking advantage of this current moment” after the fall of Assad.¹²³ He also cited the large numbers of Islamic

¹¹⁶ Commons Library, [Syria after Assad 2024/25](#), section 3

¹¹⁷ Commons Library, [Syria after Assad 2024/25](#), section 4.1

¹¹⁸ [Agreement signed to integrate SDF into institutions of \[...\] Syria](#), SANA, 10 March 2025

¹¹⁹ [Syria's Sharra aims to restore US ties, no contact yet with Trump administration](#), Reuters, 4 February 2025; [An interview with Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria's president](#), The Economist, 3 February 2025

¹²⁰ As above

¹²¹ [Turkey says it will join with neighbours to fight the Islamic State group](#), ABC News, 2 February 2025

¹²² [Turkey escalates push to replace Kurds \[...\]](#), Al Monitor, 12 February 2025

¹²³ White House, [Remarks by APNSA Jake Sullivan in a conversation \[...\]](#), 18 December 2024; [US will remain in eastern Syria and seek to prevent IS resurgence \[...\]](#), Reuters, 8 December 2024

State fighters held by the SDF in detention facilities as a further reason the US needed to ensure the SDF was secure:

We need to stand up for them [the SDF] and ensure that they are secure enough in their position that they can continue to be the good partners they've been, including with respect to the administration of these very large prisons and prison camps where you have thousands of ISIS fighters and tens of thousands of family members, wives and children of ISIS fighters, who, if they were all to get out, would represent a really quite considerable threat to the region and ultimately to the United States.¹²⁴

Then Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin also said in January 2025 that the SDF:

have been good partners. At some point, the SDF may very well be absorbed into the Syrian military and then Syria would own all the (IS detention) camps and hopefully keep control of them [...] But for now I think we have to protect our interests there.¹²⁵

Position and analysis of Trump administration

In February 2025 NBC News reported that that Trump administration is drafting plans to withdraw US forces from Syria. No confirmation by the Department of Defence has been published. Options for withdrawal reportedly being considered include over a 30-, 60- or 90-day period.¹²⁶

In response to a question on whether the US had informed Israel on plans to withdraw troops from Syria on 30 January, President Trump said:

I don't know who said that. I mean, I don't know who said that, but we'll make a determination on that. We're not getting, we're not involved in Syria [...] Syria is its own mess. They got enough messes over there. They don't need us involved in everyone.¹²⁷

During his [confirmation hearing](#) before the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee in January, Secretary of State Marco Rubio had said there would be "implications to abandoning partners" and it was "in the national interest" to ensure Islamic State does not recover in Syria.¹²⁸

The Trump administration has also paused US foreign aid and assistance for 90 days from January 2025, pending reviews. Some exemptions have been introduced. Analysts have raised concerns that the pause may weaken the ability of the SDF to contain Islamic State and maintain detention facilities.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ White House, [Remarks by APNSA Jake Sullivan in a conversation \[...\]](#), 18 December 2024

¹²⁵ [US troops need to stay in Syria \[...\]](#), AP, 8 January 2025

¹²⁶ [Defense department drafting plans to withdraw troops from Syria \[...\]](#), NBC News, 5 February 2025

¹²⁷ As above

¹²⁸ [Incoming Secretary of State Rubio hints at US role \[...\]](#), New Arab, 16 January 2025

¹²⁹ [Despite waivers, US funding freeze sows doubt \[...\]](#), New York Times, 6 February 2025; Human Rights Watch, [Northeast Syria: camp detainees face uncertain future](#), 7 February 2025; [How the collapse of USAID could unleash "an ISIS army in waiting"](#), Devex, 7 February 2025

In January 2025 the Commander in Chief of the SDF, General Mazloum Abdi, said that the “key factor of stabilisation” in the region is the “US presence on the ground” and there would be a “resurgence” of “many factions, including Islamic State”, if they were to leave.¹³⁰

US withdrawals announced in 2018 and 2019

The first Trump administration announced intentions to withdraw US forces from all, or parts of, Syria:

- 2018: President Trump ordered the withdrawal of US troops from Syria, citing the defeat of Islamic State and a transition to the “next phase” of the anti-Islamic State campaign.¹³¹ The announcement caused the resignation of the then Defence Secretary General James Mattis. General Mattis had previously described a potential withdraw of forces before a political settlement had been reached in Syria as “premature”.¹³²
- 2019: President Trump announced US forces would be withdrawn from parts of the northeast. Shortly after the announcement, the Turkish military launched an offensive, capturing territory once held by the SDF.¹³³ President Trump said Turkey taking “off-limit” actions would result in the US acting to “destroy” the Turkish economy.¹³⁴ Kurdish-led forces criticised the withdrawal.¹³⁵

Further reading on potential Trump actions and Syria

- Institute for Study of War, [A US withdrawal from Syria will reinvigorate the ISIS terror threat](#), February 2025
- Foreign Policy, [Why Trump can't ignore Syria](#), February 2025
- War on the Rocks, [In Syria, America should be ruthlessly focused on Islamic State](#), January 2025
- Hudson Institute, [The Islamic State's operations in Iraq and Syria](#), December 2024
- Washington Institute, [Syria crisis leaves Islamic State prisoners and detention camps vulnerable](#), December 2024
- Middle East Institute, [Don't leave Syria. The mission is far from over](#), 22 November 2024

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