

# [***US and Iraqi governments expected to start talks on future of US military presence in the country***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B5T-1WS1-JBSS-S00R-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; The US and Iraq are expected to soon begin talks on the future of the US military presence in the country, according to sources familiar with the matter, amid public calls from the Iraqi government for the US to withdraw its troops.

The US and Iraq agreed to form a higher military commission last summer, [*according to the Pentagon*](https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3487344/us-iraq-joint-security-cooperation-dialogue-joint-statement/), as a vehicle for the talks. The discussions between US and Iraqi officials, akin to a working group, will focus on the next phase of the US-led anti-ISIS coalition, with the terror group now reduced to a shadow of its former self. US military officials and diplomats will be involved in the discussions, officials said.

The talks about the future of the US' military presence have now taken on a greater urgency amid the wider regional instability, and amid growing public calls by the Iraqi government for the US to withdraw its troops from the country. Those calls have come in response to the [*US launching airstrikes inside Iraq*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/23/politics/us-strikes-iran-backed-militia-iraq/index.html) targeting Iran-backed militants who have been attacking US personnel there.

Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin confirmed on Thursday that the military commission will launch "in the coming days."

Military and defense officials will advise the commission "on the most effective evolution of the D-ISIS Coalition mission, ensuring that ISIS can never resurge, in consultation with Coalition partners at all stages of the process," Austin said in a statement.

The US has roughly 2,500 troops currently in Iraq who have been operating there in an advise and assist capacity since December 2021, when the US military [*announced*](https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/2867285/combat-role-in-iraq-complete-invitation-from-iraq-reaffirmed-to-advise-assist-e/) the end of its combat role in the country.

A senior military official told reporters on Thursday that the remaining contingency of ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria is assessed to be "around the 1,000 or so," including fighters, financiers, facilitators, and the "network that would support the Daesh fighters."

"They're disrupted, they're suppressed ... Daesh is not capable beyond small attacks, currently, in Iraq and Syria," the military official said.

Part of the discussions will focus on whether and when it will be feasible to end the US military presence in Iraq. The US prefers a schedule that would be based on conditions in Iraq, including the ongoing defeat of ISIS and the stability of the government and the Iraqi security forces, US officials said.

But some elements within the Iraqi government prefer a schedule based on a timeline, setting the date for an American withdrawal regardless of the stability or the security situation within the country. On January 10th, the office of Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani said they would soon begin the process "to end the presence of the international coalition forces in Iraq permanently."

A US official told CNN that "the US and Iraq are close to agreement on starting the Higher Military Commission dialogue that was announced back in August."

"The HMC will be an opportunity to jointly evaluate the conditions required for the future of the D-ISIS fight in Iraq and shape the nature of the bilateral security relationship," the official said. "We have been discussing this for months. The timing is not related to recent attacks. The US will maintain full right of self-defense during the talks."

Jonathan Lord, the director of the Middle East security program at the Center for New American Security, told CNN that the US needs to transition its support for Iraq toward building "a lasting and sustainable military capacity in the [Iraqi Security Forces], to avoid another 2014. That hasn't happened."

"If we leave now, with no plan in place, we're sending the patient back out on the street, with no plan to stay healthy," he added, comparing the initial anti-ISIS intervention to an emergency room hospital stay. "Chances are, if things go bad, they'll end up right back there. And it's the most expensive, least efficient way to help them."

On Tuesday, following the latest round of US strikes in Iraq, a spokesperson for the prime minister said in a statement that the strikes are "undermining agreements and various sectors of joint security cooperation" as the two countries are working to "reshape the future relationship."

"There will be some cosmetic changes, but I don't think the Iraqis want us to leave," said a former senior US military official.

The former official pointed to a vote in the Iraqi parliament to remove US forces from the country shortly after the US assassinated a senior Iranian commander in Baghdad. Four years after that vote, the US military remains in Iraq at the invitation of the government.

"I think they recognize it will be difficult for them to survive without significant US assistance," the former official said.

The US and Iraq agreed to start talks on the future of the US' military presence last year, before the October 7 terror attack by Hamas on Israel sparked wider regional tensions and emboldened the Iran-backed groups, particularly Kataib Hezbollah, in Iraq and across the Middle East.

The Pentagon has maintained that the Iraqi government has not formally asked the US military to withdraw, emphasizing that the troops are still there at the invitation of the Iraqi government. And there is no set deadline for a conclusion to the higher military commission discussions, or their ultimate outcome.

Jon Alterman, the director of the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the ***politics*** of the US military presence in Iraq have been "treacherous" for more than a decade, but it's not a binary choice of staying or leaving. Nor is this a process that needs to move quickly, he said.

"This is a choice of where you want to be on a spectrum," said Alterman. "Diplomats can manipulate both the timing and the direction of the talks and arrive at a wide variety of potential outcomes."

Still, rumblings of a potential US change in its force posture in Iraq would be a victory for Iran, Alterman said. "Any sign that this is the beginning of the end would be widely celebrated in Iranian corridors."

On Wednesday, Iraq's foreign minister hinted at the coming discussions, saying in a statement that he met with the US Ambassador to Baghdad, Elena Romanowski, and "received from her an important message from the American government to the Iraqi government, which will be studied by the Prime Minister and the relevant concerned authorities. Next steps will be taken regarding it soon."

The US also has a presence in Syria to fight ISIS, but administration officials told CNN that a withdrawal from that country is not under consideration.

"The Biden administration is not considering a withdrawal of forces from Syria," a senior US official told CNN.

CNN's Haley Britzky contributed reporting.

This story has been updated with additional details.

By Natasha Bertrand and Oren Liebermann, CNN

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