

The Ineffectiveness of the U.S. Strategy for Countering
Terrorism in Iraq and Syria

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According to *Brookings*, six out of every ten Americans believed the U.S. weakened its global influence and economy in its response to the attacks of 9/11 and the U.S. mission in Iraq.¹ There are growing amounts of evidence revealing the counterproductivity of the strategy the U.S. has formed to respond to the instability of the Middle East, specifically Iraq and Syria. This research paper will explore the strategies of the U.S. with an emphasis on counterterrorism measures in the Middle East, as well as the aspects of it that have been ineffective. The current U.S. counterterrorism strategy in Iraq and Syria is counterproductive to its defined objectives in light of several fundamental elements: the significant U.S. military presence in the region, ineffectual U.S. security programs, and robust financial backing of ISIS by state sponsors of terrorism.

The U.S. has had a defined strategy for counterterrorism prevention methods in Iraq and Syria for decades, yet many point to significant evidence that the U.S. strategy has not been effective. In April of this year, Secretary of Defense Austin reaffirmed the commitment the U.S. has for “maintaining U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria in an advise-and-assist capacity to support partner forces in their fight against ISIS.”² The Department of Defense remains committed to abolishing the existence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. However, opposition to the U.S. defense strategy has arisen. According to the *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, they stated the following, “the United States has never defined workable grand strategic objectives, made effective efforts to create a stable post-conflict Iraq, or shown the Iraq people its presence actually serves their interests.”³ Specific examples of where the U.S. strategy fell short of its objectives would be the incapacity to handle the thousands of ISIS prisoners after U.S. victories in Syria. *Task and Purpose* reported the risk this poses to the U.S. and every nation that is a part of the Defeat ISIS Coalition, about “10,000 ISIS fighters currently imprisoned in Syria by the U.S. military’s allies in the country are on the brink of a mass breakout according to Defense Department.”⁴ This poses a significant national security threat to the U.S. and its allies. The Syrian prison system housing these ISIS fighters cannot properly maintain them, nor can it guarantee an escape-proof system. Most of the prisoners are under the watch of the Syrian Democratic Forces, and this raises the concern of whether the U.S. can fully rely on the SDF to ensure that the prisoners are properly maintained in the prison system. In recent years, the SDF has reduced its guard presence in prisons, and this elevates the concern of a mass breakout.

The U.S. has also exemplified its inability to stabilize the Iraqi government and economy. Policy experts point to this drastic instability within the region as evidence of how the U.S. and its strategy towards the Middle East have been ineffective. Policymakers have an increasing fear of Iraq evolving into a failed state, which would have detrimental effects on any U.S. interests in the region. The fear of Iraq evolving into a failed state stems from its failure to stabilize itself politically and to create a functioning government system. According to *Britannica*, a failed state is “a state that is unable to perform the two fundamental functions of the sovereign nation-state in the modern world system: it cannot project authority over its territory and peoples, and it

¹ Kull, S. a., & Telhami, S. (2011). *The American Public on the 9/11 Decade: A Study of American Public Opinion*. Brookings.

² Cronk, T. (2022). *DOD Continues Mission to Stabilize the Middle East*. Department of Defense.

³ Cordesman, A. (2020a). *America’s Failed Strategy in the Middle East: Losing Iraq and the Gulf*. Center for Strategic and International Studies

⁴ Keller, J. (2020). *Pentagon warns of potential ‘mass breakout’ of thousands of ISIS fighters in Syria*. Task and Purpose.

cannot protect its national boundaries.”⁵ After the U.S. withdrew from Iraq in 2011, ISIS was able to claim the power vacuum the U.S. had left behind, along with the instability of the country and leaving behind the problems of the Syrian civil war.⁶ The U.S. has failed to evaluate strategies to stimulate growth in Iraq’s economy. According to the *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, “Iraq has been steadily rising in the rankings among the most corrupt countries in the world by Transparency International. As of 2019, it was ranked 162 out of 190, thus in the top 10% of most corrupt countries in the world.”⁷ The U.S. cannot be the savior of the world, and many policymakers have had the misconception that the U.S. can do whatever it wants, however, the opposite is true. The U.S. should use its influence and aid in situations of dire need, not when being pressured into pursuing action.

Throughout the years of U.S. military presence in Iraq and Syria, hostility towards U.S. troops has become a growing risk factor. The country of Iran is a prime example of this, as they have been sponsoring attacks carried out by Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, on U.S. troops, as well as attacks and demonstrations in front of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.⁸ This growing hostility towards U.S. troops materialized into parliamentary actions taken by the Iraqi government. “After encouragement from Iraq’s caretaker Prime Minister Adil Abul Mahdi, Iraq’s parliament-with strong pro-Iran political factions underpinned by street militias- voted that U.S. military forces must leave Iraqi territory. The United States has dismissed the resolution as non-binding and has refused to honor it.”⁹ As of August 2022, about 2,500 U.S. troops remain in Iraq according to *Task and Purpose*. In 2020 millions in Iraq marched in opposition to U.S. military presence with the Shia cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, calling for “U.S. troops to leave the country in a bid to steer clear of another war.”¹⁰ The commonly held conception is that the presence of U.S. military forces offers stability and regional peace within the Middle East, however, this conception does not follow the evidence the opposite is true in this case. In Iraq, America’s “disengagement from political and military clashes may be a positive force for peace and stability.”¹¹

A U.S. military presence is not always necessary to keep regions of instability together, and in the case of Iraq, “a U.S. withdrawal would leave a ‘power vacuum,’ which will only heighten tensions and lead to war.”¹² However, this argument of the U.S. leaving a power vacuum behind if withdrawing from the region is not sufficient to justify the U.S. staying. In many cases, U.S. troops are put in severe danger by ISIS, as it has been found that support for terrorist groups has been directly connected to the purpose of fighting U.S. military forces.¹³ A report from the *Washington Institute* in 2003 found harrowing evidence that Syria’s mufti had

⁵ Britannica. (n.d.). *Failed State*. Britannica.

⁶ Cordesman, A. (2020b). *Iraq is the Prize: A Warning About Iraq’s Future Stability, Iran, and the Role of the United States*. Center for Strategic and International Studies.

⁷ Cordesman, A. (2020b). *Iraq is the Prize: A Warning About Iraq’s Future Stability, Iran, and the Role of the United States*. Center for Strategic and International Studies.

⁸ Cordesman, A. (2020a). *America’s Failed Strategy in the Middle East: Losing Iraq and the Gulf*. Center for Strategic and International Studies.

⁹ Felbab-Brown, V. (2020). *Stuck in the middle: Iraq and the enduring conflict between United States and Iran*. Brookings.

¹⁰ Tawfeeq, M. (2020, January 24,). Hundreds of thousands protest US troop presence in Iraq.

¹¹ Kaplan, F. (2021). *The Benefits of Butting Out*. Slate.

¹² Ibid

¹³ U.S. Department of State. (2019). *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Syria*. U.S. Department of State.

repeatedly called for “suicide attacks on American soldiers in Iraq.”¹⁴ In years past Syria has worked alongside Iraq in resisting American forces and causing destruction. The *Washington Institute* report also found that “US military forces captured a large group of Syrians and confiscated seventy suicide jackets -- each filled with twenty-two pounds of military-grade C4 explosives, and mercury detonators. In another case, soldiers found ‘several hundred thousand dollars on a bus that came from Syria, together with leaflets suggesting that Iraqis would be rewarded if they killed Americans.’”¹⁵ Hatred towards the presence of U.S. military forces in Iraq and Syria was exemplified in the attitude of the nation’s leaders as well as the execution of deadly attacks targeting U.S. forces, and this hatred has been present within the region since 2003 with the initial arrival of American forces.

The U.S. and its allies have collectively, sent billions of dollars to the aid of Syria and Iraq for humanitarian needs, and economic gains to offer support to the government. One estimate from *Foreign Policy* stated that the Biden administration has pledged over \$600 million, which is part of a directive led by the United Nations to raise \$10 billion for Syria.¹⁶ However, a growing amount of evidence points to the issue of this aid being redirected and instead, flowing into the pockets of corrupt regimes. In Syria, the issue of corruption lies in the Assad government. A report from the *Center for Strategic and International Studies* found the following, “the Syrian government has grown increasingly skilled at turning humanitarian assistance into a political instrument. Consequently, global efforts to support the Syrian people increasingly have the effect of politically and financially strengthening the Syrian government—the same government that is responsible for the suffering of millions of Syrians and the exile of millions more.”¹⁷ The Syrian government has also been able to successfully direct any ounce of aid given by the UN or NGOs to its pocket. “The Syrian government established the rules of the game at the outset, insisting that international aid agencies implement through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). This effectively allowed the government-affiliated organization to deliver aid out of sight from the UN agencies providing the assistance.”¹⁸ The billions of dollars the U.S. has sent in aid to Syria create the problem of entrenching the government and aiding nefarious actors while allowing millions of desperate Syrians to suffer without assistance.

The U.S. must recognize the fact that any counterterrorism strategy directed towards ISIS’s presence within Iraq and Syria, includes the entire Iraqi and Syrian governments. Both the Iraqi and Syrian governments financially support ISIS in the region. Syria was designated to be a State Sponsor of Terrorism by the U.S. Department of State in 1979. Several characteristics of a State Sponsor of Terrorism appear as providing weapons as well as political support to the terrorist organizations within the specific country. Another characteristic would appear as financing and offering military support to terrorist organizations, according to the U.S. State Department. Oftentimes government speeches and press releases from the Syrian government, include statements that support terrorist groups, including Hezbollah.¹⁹ The Department of the Treasury formed the Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence specifically for the issue of

¹⁴ Levitt, M. (2003). *Confronting Syrian Support for Terrorist Groups*. The Washington Institute.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Detsch, J. (2021). *Assad Regime Continues Stonewalling U.S. Aid to Syria*. Foreign Policy.

¹⁷ Hall, N. (2022). *Rescuing Aid in Syria*. Center for Strategic and International Studies.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ U.S. Department of State. (2019). *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Syria*. U.S. Department of State

terrorist financing in Iraq. The Office was formed as “a financial investigative unit to gather, analyze and distribute intelligence on terrorist financial networks in Iraq.”²⁰

ISIS relies heavily on financial partners throughout Syria and Iraq according to the Department of Treasury. Several of the methods and sources of how ISIS exploits the financial system and generates its own revenue is “through extortion of local businesses, kidnapping for ransom, and looting. The group has transferred funds internationally through money services businesses, including hawalas, couriers, and financial facilitation networks.”²¹ In 2018 the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control placed sanctions on an Iraq-based money services business that had been known to be moving money for ISIS.²² ISIS utilizes these money services businesses throughout the Middle East to launder money and provide for ISIS families. In early 2019, the U.S. Department of the Treasury dismantled one of ISIS’s most successful underground financial rings, the Rawi Network. The financial facilitation network was headquartered in Iraq and the individuals involved helped transfer funds across the Middle East, Africa, and Europe.²³ The U.S. in previous years has taken preventative methods of stopping ISIS from exploiting Iraq’s financial systems, however, it is recommended to the U.S. that this strategy is adapted to instead consider the corrupt government regime that is the largest financial provider for ISIS.

For there to be any sort of change within Iraq and Syria, the U.S. must reformulate its strategy of counterterrorism within the region. Growing evidence points to the issue of instability within Iraq and Syria as a fault of the U.S. military presence as well as inefficient programs. The U.S. counterterrorism strategy in Iraq and Syria is counterproductive to its defined objectives considering several fundamental elements: the significant U.S. military presence in the region, ineffectual U.S. security programs, and robust financial backing of ISIS by state sponsors of terrorism. The U.S. must consider the corrupt regimes financially supporting ISIS, as well as evaluate whether a military presence in the region creates more harm than good. Throughout the decades of the U.S. being actively involved in Iraq and Syria, the outlook on any strategy is that the U.S. has the willpower, influence, and ability to fix all problems of the Middle East. However, developing strategies that aren’t short-term solutions, but rather ones that develop over time and consider long-term solutions is a recommended route for the U.S. to take.

²⁰ White, J. (2017). *Terrorism and Homeland Security* (9th ed.). Cengage Learning.

²¹ U.S. Department of the Treasury. (2021). *Treasury Targets ISIS Financial Facilitators in Syria and Turkey*. U.S. Department of the Treasury.

²² U.S. Department of the Treasury. (2018). *Treasury Targets Iraq-based Money Services Business Supporting ISIS*. U.S. Department of the Treasury.

²³ U.S. Department of the Treasury. (2019). *Treasury Designates Key Nodes of ISIS’s Financial Network Stretching Across the Middle East, Europe, and East Africa*. U.S. Department of the Treasury.

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