

## IRAQ AFTER RUSSIAN INTERVENTION IN SYRIA

*The Russian formation of a coordination cell in Baghdad is an inflection point aimed at undercutting U.S. influence over the direction of the anti-ISIS efforts in Iraq and Syria. However, the Russian footprint in Iraq is much smaller than in Syria, while U.S. influence over the ISF and Iraqi state are much greater than U.S. influence in Syria. The U.S. and the U.S.-led Coalition can maintain its position as Iraq's essential ally in the anti-ISIS fight by increasing advisory, materiel, and aerial support to the Iraqi state, without substantially increasing its ground presence. Such changes must prepare Iraq to recapture territory from ISIS quickly in order to demonstrate the value of cooperation with the U.S.*

### WHERE WE HAVE BEEN AND WHY

ISF operations against ISIS have been stalled since the fall of Ramadi to ISIS on May 18, 2015. Operations to clear ISIS from terrain in Ramadi and Baiji, the two primary counter-offensive efforts, have not achieved their objectives. Meanwhile, security forces have struggled to maintain security in other areas, particularly in southern Salah al-Din and Diyala provinces and Baghdad, where ISIS has been increasing lethal attacks against civilians. The ISF's security challenges coincide with political competition between Iraq Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's government and opponents within the State of Law Alliance (SLA) working in conjunction with Iranian proxy militias. PM Abadi introduced an initial flurry of reforms in early August following large popular demonstrations in July. The momentum of the reform movement has slowed dramatically, and PM Abadi's opponents have successfully obstructed his primary efforts to reform the judiciary and eliminate the Vice Presidencies.

Pro-Iranian elements successfully restricted PM Abadi's efforts to overhaul the government that threatened to diminish the influence of key anti-PM Abadi figures such as Vice President Nouri al-Maliki. In addition, the escalation of [Russian military presence and operations](#) in the Middle East points to a calculated Russian effort to undermine U.S. anti-

ISIS policy and an attempt to force the U.S. to accept Russia, the Syrian regime, and Iran as part of the anti-ISIS coalition. The initial offloading of Russian equipment, airframes, and personnel in Bassel al-Assad airbase in Latakia indicated that Russia's initial focus was on [Syria](#) and defending the Assad regime; however, Russia has now formed a joint coordination cell in Baghdad to compete with the U.S.-led coalition directly in both theaters.

### STEP-CHANGE

The formation of a "[coordination cell](#)" between Russian, Syrian, Iranian, and Iraqi military officials in Baghdad was first reported on September 25. The cell's physical footprint is far more limited than the Russia's presence in Syria, currently consisting of only an unclear number of [military experts](#) and "[low-level Russian generals](#)." Russian officials have stated that the cell is for coordinating airstrikes in Syria and "[exchanging information](#)" about anti-terrorism efforts, in line with statements by PM Haidar al-Abadi and the Iraqi Defense Ministry (MoD)'s [Joint Operations Command](#) for an intelligence sharing body. The Baghdad cell's full purpose is yet unclear, but a Russian official arrived at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad shortly before Russian operations in Syria commenced, to relay a request to the U.S. defense attache to [avoid Syrian airspace](#). The door remains open for Russia to increase its military footprint in

Iraq. Iraqi officials affiliated with the Prime Minister's political rivals have stated that they believe that [Iraq will ask Russia for airstrikes](#), whereas the premier himself has [denied such talks](#) were transpiring, insisted that airstrikes would require state approval, and focused instead on the sale of Russian arms for the Iraqi Army. Russia's partnership with Iran and talk of a combined air-ground offensive in Syria also implies that increased Russian military support to Iraq, particularly airstrikes, may be coupled with Iranian-directed operations on the ground in Iraq. Reports of "[hundreds](#)" of Iranian personnel arriving in Syria along with members of Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a militias support this hypothesis.

## RUSSIAN AND IRANIAN OBJECTIVES

Russia aims to prevent the Syrian Assad regime from falling in Syria. Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime aim to cast themselves as the pre-eminent anti-ISIS Coalition which the U.S. and its allies must join, obstructing U.S. anti-ISIS policy and its ability to direct international anti-ISIS efforts. The formation of the Baghdad coordination cell advances these objectives. Russia gains a hub from which to improve its airstrike capabilities and ground operations in Syria and, should Russia ultimately choose to do so, in Iraq. In addition, the cell obstructs U.S. policy in the region by increasing the level of influence Russia and Iran have in the anti-ISIS fight in Iraq. It constrains U.S. cooperation with Iraq; the U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense has already [expressed concern](#) about the sorts of intelligence that Iraq's MoD might share with Russian and Iranian military officials. A spokesperson for PM Abadi insisted that the cell's efforts "[do not intersect or contradict](#)" the Coalition's work but instead complements it, downplaying the issue. From Iran's standpoint, the Baghdad hub may formalize a state-to-state military connection with the ISF, while Iran had previously relied largely on proxy militias in official Iraqi positions to influence the course of military affairs. The Russian actions also support Iran's stated objective of ousting the United States from Iraq and the Middle East.

## IRAQI REASONING

Iraq's Prime Minister has little choice in the matter of accepting Russian presence. Iraq lacks the capacity to defend its own airspace and the resources with which to eject Iranian and Russian military presence. The coordination cell provides Russia and Iran an additional lever through which to exert pressure and represent their interests to PM Abadi. Greater Russian leverage could translate to increased Iranian influence over the Iraqi government, a condition that PM Abadi had been attempting to reverse. It is therefore likely that Iraq accepted the presence of the coordination cell under duress, particularly since the Iraqi government did not give forewarning to the U.S. about its formation. Pro-Iranian elements within the government have been resisting PM Abadi's reform initiatives and seeking to undermine his actions to increase his independence from Iran, while proxy militias have denounced the popular demonstrations calling for reforms as being under foreign influence. Nevertheless, PM Abadi has [downplayed](#) the coordination cell's importance and stated in an interview that he would welcome Russian airstrikes in Iraq if Russia joined the international Coalition, in attempt to maintain the upper hand for the United States. The Iraqi government may judge that Russia could be a partner that could intensify airstrikes in Iraq, but the Prime Minister would ideally like to maintain conditions for U.S.-led coalition airstrikes.

The Iraqi government is thus portraying the Baghdad coordination cell as a way to accept help from any anti-ISIS actor. The assistance needs to fall within certain parameters; pro-Iranian Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari insisted that Iraq would not accept [ground troops or bases](#) from any country in Iraq, though it is important to note that Jaafari's constraint, as well as a [similar constraint](#) regarding foreign troops and bases made by a spokesperson for the Iranian-backed Badr Organization, could apply to the U.S. as well as Russia.

From the standpoint of the Iraqi government, including the Prime Minister, Russian presence offers

leverage with the U.S. government. Iraq has been asking for broad military support for some time, and both PM Abadi and an official MoD spokesperson [expressed frustration](#) with the level of Coalition support received so far. PM Abadi could therefore decide to push for Russian airstrikes in Iraq if he is convinced that Russian and Coalition support together could be more effective than relying on the Coalition alone to fight ISIS. PM Abadi also discussed the anti-ISIS fight during the UN General Assembly with a wide number of leaders, including [President](#) Barack Obama and Russian [President](#) Vladimir Putin, but he also discussed similar issues with Egyptian [President](#) Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, the Czech [Prime Minister](#), the Saudi Arabian [Foreign Minister](#), and the Danish [Prime Minister](#). Iraq has received large amounts of armaments from the U.S., including [F-16 fighter jets](#) delivered in July 2015, and from Russia, including a September 30 proposal to purchase 500 BMP-3 [infantry fighting vehicles](#). Iraq has also accepted arms and equipment from countries as variant as the [UAE](#), [Bulgaria](#), and [Estonia](#). In addition, a MoD spokesperson stated that if Russia submitted a formal request for reconnaissance flights over Iraq, there would be [“no objection in my opinion.”](#)

## KEY DECISIONS AHEAD FOR THE U.S. POLICYMAKER

The coordination cell increases Russian and Iranian influence with the ISF while diminishing that of the U.S. and the anti-ISIS Coalition, from which Iraqi officials have frequently requested increased support and [airstrikes](#).

The U.S. maintains strong influence within the ISF leadership and the Iraqi government, giving the U.S. several avenues by which to sustain its influence over the direction of anti-ISIS efforts in Iraq while simultaneously diminishing the impact Iranian and Russian military officials have over ISF affairs.

The U.S. must demonstrate its support for Iraqi state and its essential position in anti-ISIS fight. The U.S. can achieve this by helping the ISF succeed against ISIS. Increasing assistance to achieve a major

campaign objective can most effectively counter the influence of Russia, just as U.S.-ISF coordination during the Tikrit operation helped counter Iranian influence. The most direct form of assistance can come in the form of increased, effective airstrikes, [discussions](#) for which Secretary of State John Kerry stated were underway. The Tikrit operation in March demonstrated the effectiveness of Coalition airstrikes in supporting the reclamation of a major city; while ongoing Coalition airstrikes supporting a Peshmerga offensive in Kirkuk province show that airstrikes can also assist in clearing a larger area that had been an ISIS stronghold.

The United States can deter Russian access to Iraqi airspace by increasing its overflights and sorties, a concept that can be extended to Syria. This is a resource intensive effort that likely requires increasing the availability of airframes in Iraq and Syria, but it is the most direct way of curbing Russian air capabilities short of declaring a no-fly zone. CENTCOM Commander General Lloyd Austin in his [most recent testimony](#) stated that the U.S. conducted “about 24 airstrikes” per day across Iraq and Syria, though he did not list the number of other sorties. However, the factor limiting the success of U.S. airstrikes is not simply the volume of airstrikes but their effectiveness in assisting the ISF in recapturing territory.

Increasing the effectiveness of airstrikes may therefore require the use of Joint Terminal Air Controllers (JTACs) embedded with the ISF at forward locations to direct close air support, a move that also requires a change in the rules of engagement. This is the most direct way to improve the effectiveness of Coalition airstrikes, and serves several purposes. First, airstrikes would dramatically improve the progress of ISF operations, reducing the rationale for entertaining Russian airstrikes as opposed to Coalition ones, while limiting the possibility of striking civilians. In addition, it dissuades the possibility of Russian airstrikes in a wider area, as Russian airstrikes are unlikely in areas where U.S. personnel operate. Finally, the use of JTACs will increase the effectiveness of ISF operations and assist it in recapturing territory, which

is both necessary to improve the security situation in Iraq while convincing the Iraqi government that the U.S. is a more effective partner in the anti-ISIS fight than Iran and Russia. This possibility, however, would require U.S. personnel to leave their bases and expose them to greater risk, particularly from a wide range of militias, Iranian proxy and otherwise, who oppose the U.S. presence in Iraq. The potential use of JTACs would dramatically increase the effectiveness of airstrikes and could be welcomed by pro-Coalition elements of the ISF, particularly those operating in Anbar province. The deployment of JTACs also requires infrastructure to support them, including quick reaction forces and medevac, as former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs [General Martin Dempsey](#) has noted. However, it is important to note that while the ISF will undoubtedly welcome an increase in airstrike volume, it is not guaranteed to approve of JTACs if the ISF and PM Abadi view the political risks of such an invitation to be too great.

Short of increasing kinetic action against ISIS, few options exist to counter quickly the risks Russia's presence in Iraq. Ideally, the U.S. can expedite arms deliveries, particularly for some of the 28 remaining F16 fighter planes promised to the Iraqi air force, but these Foreign Military Sales (FMS) programs move slowly because of Congressional policies. The U.S. may also need to adjust the kind of intelligence shared with the Iraqi MoD, based on the existence of the Russian coordination cell, though it is likely that some intelligence was already reaching Iran from the ISF. It is important to continue sharing intelligence with Iraq in some capacity in order to reduce the likelihood of the ISF relying increasingly on Iran and Russia. Adjusting training processes will be necessary, given the shortcomings revealed by the [Defense Department Inspector General's report](#), but such changes will take too long to have any impact on limiting Russian and Iranian influence over the Iraqi government in the short term.

In addition, the U.S. should request moving the Iraq and Syria operations headquarters from Kuwait into Baghdad and positioning the three-star commander

in Baghdad. Such a move would signal to the ISF the commitment the U.S. has to the anti-ISIS fight and establish a stronger and more direct working relationship between senior military commanders from both the U.S. and Iraq that extends beyond the U.S. advisory presence within the ISF's Joint Operations Command (JOC). Positioning a senior commander in Baghdad would also signal to Russia and Iran that the U.S. remains committed to the ISF and could diminish Iranian and Russian influence over future discussions and operations. Ultimately, the U.S. must gear its approach towards supporting the ISF and signaling the Iraqi government that the U.S. and the international Coalition are the most reliable and effective partners in fighting ISIS, which will require an immediate increase in support to the ISF's ground operations in ways that produce meaningful effects.

*Patrick Martin is a Research Assistant at ISW.*