Roundtable: Who Holds the Guns? Armed Groups and State Power in Syria and Iraq

The question of who exercises effective control over the armed forces remains crucial to the consolidation of the state in Syria and Iraq. Despite significant political and security changes, both countries continue to face challenges related to the integration of armed groups, overlapping command structures and external influences. These dynamics complicate efforts to build responsible security institutions and to prevent a return to instability.

In Syria, the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024 led to a reorganization of the country's military and security institutions. One of the most controversial issues is **the role of foreign fighters within the newly emerging security structure**. Foreign fighters who previously belonged to Islamist opposition factions have been integrated into the newly created military structure, raising questions about their loyalty, accountability and influence within the armed forces. Their presence is attracting international attention, particularly regarding the appointment of individuals with alleged extremist links to senior military positions. **Growing external pressure on Damascus to regulate foreign fighters and establish effective control** highlights the tension between military integration and the government's efforts to gain international legitimacy.

At the same time, **Islamic State (ISIS) continues to pose a persistent security threat in both Syria and Iraq**, despite the loss of its territorial caliphate. The organization continues to operate through decentralized networks and exploits political uncertainty, security vacuums, and weaknesses in local governance. In Syria, the restructuring of security institutions and changes in territorial control have raised concerns regarding the handling of ISIS prisoners and the possibility of a resurgence in their militant activities.

In Iraq, ISIS cells continue to pose a threat through insurgent operations, particularly in areas where security coordination remains limited. **The risk of an ISIS resurgence** therefore remains closely tied to both governments' ability to maintain effective security measures.

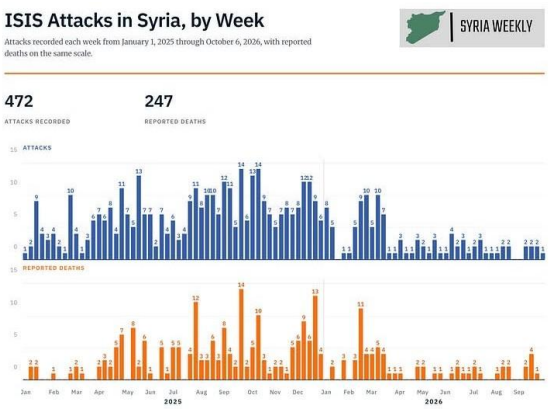


Fig 1: Lister, C. (2026, October 7). Syria Weekly data update – September 2026. Syria Weekly. Substack.

In Iraq, **the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)** remain a central component of the country's security architecture, while also raising questions about institutional autonomy and political influence. The PMF, which were formed during the fight against ISIS in 2014 and formally recognized in 2016, brings together factions with differing political allegiances and varying degrees of operational independence. **Several groups linked to Iran retain considerable military and political**



Fig 2: Map of Iraq
Source: India Map

influence, complicating Baghdad's efforts to establish unified command and accountability. External pressure, particularly from the United States, aimed at strengthening government oversight, restructuring the armed formations and reducing independent military activities, has further intensified the debate over the future of the PMF.

Despite their different trajectories, Syria and Iraq face the same fundamental dilemma: legal integration does not necessarily translate into effective government control. In Syria, the priority is rebuilding a unified security apparatus from competing armed factions; in Iraq, it is establishing authority over groups already embedded within state institutions. In both cases, external influence and competing loyalties continue to challenge the state's monopoly over the use of force, raising questions about sovereignty, accountability, and long-term regional stability.

TIMELINE

June 2014 – Iraq: The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) emerge in response to the territorial expansion of ISIS.

November 2016 – Iraq: Parliament passes legislation formally incorporating the PMF into Iraq's security apparatus.

March 2019 – Syria: ISIS loses its last territorial stronghold in Baghouz, but continues operating through clandestine networks.

December 2024 – Syria: The Assad regime collapses, initiating the restructuring of Syria's military and security institutions.

January 2025 – Syria: The new authorities announce the dissolution of former armed factions and their integration into state institutions, raising questions about the role of foreign fighters.

May 2025 – Syria: The United States announces the lifting of sanctions on Syria, increasing international engagement with the transitional government and scrutiny of its security arrangements.

January 2026 – Syria: Clashes between government forces and the SDF raise concerns about security coordination, ISIS detainees, and the risk of renewed militant activity.