



Iraqi Army Staff Brigadier General Qais Saim Jaber Abood Al 'Khafaji, 55th Brigade, 17 Division, reviews and signs documentation for an Organizational Clothing and Individual Equipment package. Source: [US Army](#).

WHAT'S AT ISSUE

With international focus elsewhere, U.S. security assistance to Iraq and Syria has mostly escaped media attention, even as some [900 U.S. troops](#) remain stationed in Syria and 2,500 remain in Iraq. The U.S. continues to provide approximately \$500 million in annual security assistance to Syria and Iraq via the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF), which seeks to combat ISIS fighters through [building partner capacity](#) and training and equipping security forces in Iraq and Syria. This brief examines CTEF, its costs, its structure, as well as some of the most pressing concerns about the fund's effectiveness, sustainability, and oversight.

BACKGROUND ON CTEF AND ITS COSTS

The Counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) is one of multiple U.S. train and equip authorities that have grown over the years. The Defense Department's global train and equip authorities have been consolidated under Title 10 Section 333 since FY 2017. But other country- and region-specific authorities remain, including CTEF, the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI), The Indo-Pacific Maritime

Security Initiative (MSI), and the Counterterrorism Partnership Fund (CTPF), among others. As the Security Assistance Monitor [reported in 2021](#), total annual U.S. security assistance has grown steadily over the past few decades, from a low of \$8.28 billion in fiscal year 2001, to more than \$30 billion in fiscal year 2007, and closer to \$16 to 20 billion annually in recent years. 2022 will exceed previous peaks, with almost \$32 billion already allocated for Ukraine alone. CTEF, established in 2017, is a key piece of that wider security assistance.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as IS, ISIL, or the Arabic acronym Da'esh, is a militant Salafi jihadist organization that in 2015 controlled large parts of Iraq and Syria, but by 2017 had lost [nearly all](#) the territory it previously held. The Syrian Democratic Forces captured the group's [last territorial holding](#) in 2019, signaling the defeat of ISIS as a state entity. Nevertheless, ISIS [maintains an insurgency](#), carrying out attacks and seeking to reform through recruiting, training, and gathering supplies.

The U.S. government strategy to counter ISIS relies on a campaign to [“degrade, dismantle, and ultimately defeat”](#) ISIS, by working with the Syrian opposition in Syria and multiple security forces in Iraq. In both Iraq and Syria, CTEF supports projects in five categories: 1) stipends, 2) logistical support, supplies and services, 3) training and equipping, 4) infrastructure repair and renovation and 5) sustainment.

The administration's fiscal year 2023 defense request seeks \$541 million for CTEF, including \$358 million for Iraq and \$183 million for Syria. This reflects an increase from prior years.

Table 1: Year-Over-Year Budget Summary Table

Budget Summary (\$ in Millions)	FY 2021 Enacted	FY 2022 Enacted	FY 2023 Request
Iraq Train and Equip Requirements	\$335.0	\$345.0	\$358.0
Syria Train and Equip Requirements	\$125.0	\$155.0	\$183.7
Total	\$460.0	\$500.0	\$541.7

Source: Department of Defense

Although the relative cost of security assistance efforts in Iraq and Syria is small compared to security assistance to Ukraine, their continuation is notable, particularly given their relatively low profile and longevity. CTEF funding is also significant because it raises questions, as described further below, over outcome, sustainability, and oversight that also reflect the broader and growing endeavor of U.S. security assistance worldwide.

PROGRAMMING IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

Country-Specific Programming

Despite the fact that both the Iraq and Syria programs have the same overarching goal (degrading, dismantling, and defeating ISIS), they are implemented in different ways. The following section is a summary of the particular goals in Iraq and Syria in regard to the CTEF, plus a detailed breakdown of how the funds are intended to be used, based on the most recent Defense Department budget documents available.

Iraq Programming

In Iraq, CTEF, together with U.S. and coalition air support and intelligence, support Iraqi Security Force (ISF) efforts to counter ISIS. ISIS continues to carry out attacks in Iraq, despite having lost most of the territory it formerly controlled. Because the U.S. now primarily advises and assists in Iraq, rather than carrying out operations directly, CTEF [focuses on capacity building](#) for the ISF and other units.

CTEF assistance in Iraq primarily focuses on supporting the following entities:

1. Iraqi Ministry of Defense, including the Iraqi Army and Qwat al-Khasah (a special operation, light infantry force);
2. Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, including support for Peshmerga forces in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, as well as support for joint ISF-Peshmerga forces;
3. Iraqi Ministry of Interior, including the Federal Intelligence and Investigation Agency (a tactical unit that gathers intelligence to support targeting operations), Emergency Response Battalions (a quick reaction force to augment local police during emergencies), and the Border Guard Force (which protects Iraq's international and inter-provincial border crossings); and
4. The Iraq Counter Terrorism Service (CTS), which was created by the U.S. government and includes CTS headquarters, the Counter Terrorism Command, and Iraqi Special Operations Forces.

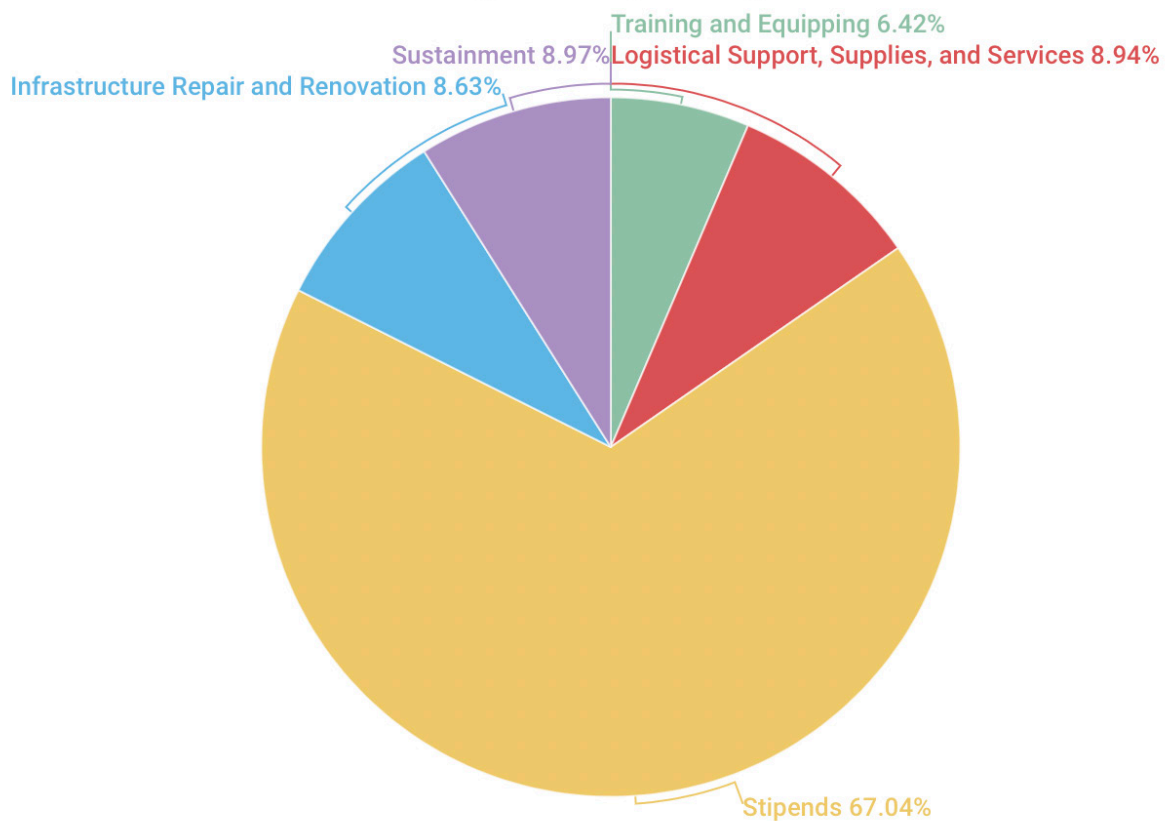
The funding for Iraq programming, according to fiscal year 2023 projections, can be broken down as follows, from the largest to smallest funding category, with stipends being the largest by far:

Table 2: Iraq Year-Over-Year Financial Activity Plan Summary Table

Category (\$ in Millions)	FY 2021 Enacted	FY 2022 Enacted	FY 2023 Request
Training and Equipping	\$41.0	\$30.0	\$23.0
Logistical Support, Supplies, and Services	\$24.0	\$26.0	\$32.0
Stipends	\$232.0	\$240.0	\$240.0
Infrastructure Repair and Renovation	\$4.0	\$30.0	\$30.9
Sustainment	\$34.0	\$19.0	\$32.1
Total	\$335.0	\$345.0	\$358.0

Source: Department of Defense

CTEF Categories, Iraq, FY2023



Stipends: (67%)

- Maintenance of monthly stipends to units under the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. These stipends are designed to support the Peshmerga's role in countering ISIS in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and preventing ISIS infiltration.

Sustainment: (9%)

- Includes subsistence, military clothing, petroleum products, construction material, and other supplies.

Logistical Support, Supplies and Services Objectives: (8.9%)

- Transportation and storage of equipment from the U.S. to Iraq via Kuwait. Includes transport of CTEF equipment and vehicles. In 2023, this will also include support to conduct "humane detention and repatriation" of Iraqi ISIS fighters repatriated from Syria at the request of the Iraqi government.

Infrastructure Repair and Renovation Objectives: (8.6%)

- Includes funding for detention facilities to improve security and conditions for ISIS detainees, as well as an expansion of Counter-Terrorism Network infrastructure to conduct information management.

Training and Equipping Objectives: (6.4%)

- Resources to continue divestment of small arms, ammunition, vehicles, and other military equipment to the ISF, and maintaining previously procured equipment.

Syria Programming

The Biden administration has [described its goals](#) in Syria as promoting a commitment to ceasefires, expanding humanitarian access, and ensuring the defeat of ISIS, while supporting a United Nations-led political process. The CTEF mission contributes by seeking to ensure the defeat of ISIS. U.S. security assistance in Syria works through "[vetted Syrian groups and individuals](#)", including the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Maghawir al-Thawra (MaT) in southeast Syria. In 2023, the Defense Department plans to increase the number of "vetted Syrian groups and individuals" by 3,500 personnel, to include detention center guard forces, and to expand efforts to recruit, train, and equip Syrians who represent the broader population and a variety of religious and ethnic groups in Syria.

CTEF assistance in Syria primarily focuses on support to the [following actors](#):

1. Finish Forces, who conduct clearance operations and target and attack ISIS networks;
2. Internal Security Forces, who provide civil protection and security by manning road checkpoints and conducting city patrols;
3. Provincial Internal Security Forces, who provide detention facility security for ISIS detainees, as well as security for many uninhabited areas. According to the [CTEF justifications](#), “the detainee population represents the largest concentration of ISIS fighters globally, and the protection and management of these detainees remains critical to preventing an ISIS resurgence;” and
4. Maghawir al-Thawra, which serves as the only significant force countering ISIS in southeast Syria.

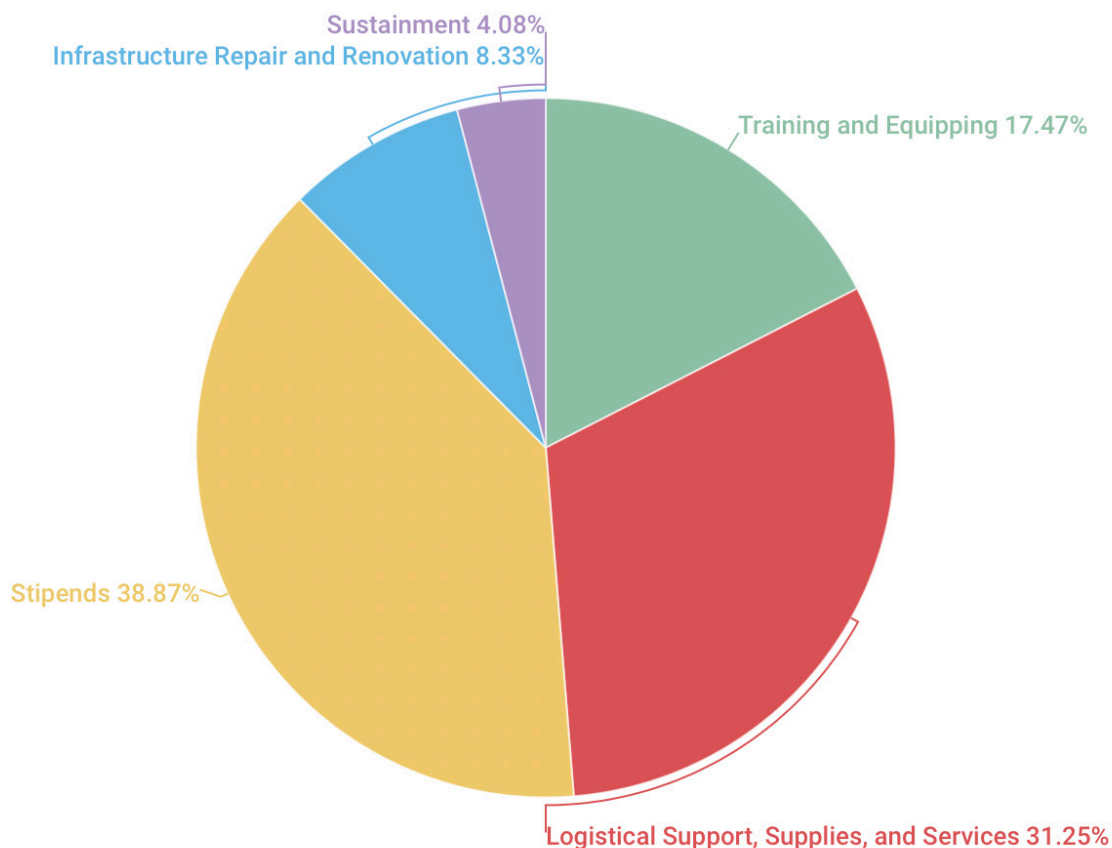
The funding for Syria programming, according to fiscal year 2023 projections, can be broken down as follows, from the largest to smallest funding category, with stipends again being the largest:

Table 3: Syria Year-Over-Year Financial Activity Plan Summary

Category (\$ in Millions)	FY 2021 Enacted	FY 2022 Enacted	FY 2023 Request
Training and Equipping	\$37.0	\$35.0	\$32.1
Logistical Support, Supplies, and Services	\$22.2	\$20.0	\$57.4
Stipends	\$57.2	\$70.0	\$71.4
Infrastructure Repair and Renovation	\$6.3	\$20.0	\$15.3
Sustainment	\$2.3	\$10.0	\$7.5
Total	\$125.0	\$155.0	\$183.7

Source: Department of Defense

CTEF Categories, Syria, FY2023



Stipends: (38.87%)

- Monthly payments to “vetted Syrian groups and individuals,” including detention facility guard forces. Although the fiscal year 2023 request reflects a decrease in average monthly stipends compared to 2022, they still make up the largest portion of the CTEF budget for both Iraq and Syria. CTEF [justifications](#) note that stipends are contingent on recipients’ respect for human rights, among other factors, although no additional detail is provided.

Logistical Support, Supplies, and Services: (31.25%)

- Subsistence, sanitation, power generation for “vetted Syrian groups and individuals,” and support to detention facilities. Air and ground transportation. Basic life support services at operating bases and detention facility sites.

Training and Equipping: (17.47%)

- Weapons, ammunition, equipment, and combat vehicles for security operations.

Weapons in fiscal year 2023 will support approximately 20,000 personnel, including detention facility guard forces. Projected ammunition will support a transition from major offensive operations to wide area security operations. Combat vehicles are used to support partner forces in wide area security operations. Armored vehicles help protect against improvised explosive devices.

Infrastructure, Repair, and Renovation: (8.33%)

- Facility sustainment, repair, and renovations. Assists in mitigating risk of detention facility breakouts.

Sustainment: (4.08%)

- Management of previously transferred vehicles and equipment, including repair parts.

CONTROVERSY OVER CTEF PROGRAM

Although the CTEF is a relatively new program, there are concerns about the efficacy of the partnerships and programs under the fund. The main concern is that despite hundreds of millions of dollars being funneled to security forces in Iraq and Syria, ISIS maintains significant capabilities to carry out attacks, such as the one carried out in January 2022 against a prison in the city of Hasakah in far northeast Syria. The [attack](#) triggered a 10-day battle that also drew in American and British ground and air forces into combat.

Although the U.S. government often describes security assistance as a means of supporting partner capabilities to avoid U.S. involvement, such instances demonstrate the ways in which U.S. security assistance, including the training, advising, and equipping of other security forces, can actually draw U.S. troops into combat.

Additionally, as experts have pointed out, with the territorial defeat of ISIS, CTEF funds have shifted to preventing its resurgence by strengthening security forces in Iraq and Syria. However, these funds do not ensure a lasting defeat of ISIS. Some have called for CTEF funding to be able to be used for other stability operations, such as [equipping local police](#) to provide election security that might contribute to long-term security and stability.

Questions About Sustainability

An enormous portion of the budget goes toward stipends, particularly in Iraq, raising important questions about the U.S. exit strategy, how much of the assistance is building

true sustainability, and how much is maintaining forces that would not be able to sustain themselves in the event of a U.S. departure.

The case of security assistance in Afghanistan raised similar questions, particularly as it became clear that U.S. and international assistance had been unable to build up security forces that could function independently in the event of a U.S. withdrawal, but instead had created security forces [highly dependent](#) on international funding, assistance, and contracting.

Logistical support, sustainment, and equipment also feature prominently among the types of assistance provided through CTEF, raising further questions about the ultimate ability of security forces in Iraq and Syria to function in the event of the end of the CTEF program. Some of the most sustainable forms of assistance are knowledge-based, but as of yet, CTEF continues to rely heavily on financial assistance, as well as equipment, weapons, and vehicles.

Questions About Safety, Waste, and Accountability

A [2020 Department of Defense Inspector General report](#) found the U.S. government failed to account for \$715.8 million in weapons and equipment for Syrian partners.

As the [report found](#), U.S. personnel “left thousands of CTEF-S weapons and sensitive equipment items vulnerable to loss or theft. Without conducting consistent inventories and ensuring proper security for CTEF-S equipment, [personnel from the 1st Theater Sustainment Command] could not determine whether items were lost or stolen...”

In addition to the troubling findings that weapons and equipment could end up in the wrong hands, this report also illustrated how the loss of weapons and equipment could result in waste, through double purchases.

The report goes on to say, “For FY 2020, the DoD budget requested \$173.2 million for weapons, ammunition, vehicles, and other CTEF-S equipment. Without accurate accountability records, such as inventory records and hand receipts, [U.S.] personnel could order equipment that [they] already [have] in stock, risking unnecessary spending of CTEF-S funds and further overcrowding the [Building Partner Capacity] Kuwait warehouse resulting in equipment being stored outside.”

It also detailed [nearly 4,100 weapons](#), including machine guns and grenade launchers, that were improperly stored outside in metal shipping containers, exposing them to harsh environments and potentially rust.

GOING FORWARD

Lawmakers are increasingly concerned over what the political exit might be for the United States from Iraq and Syria. In the FY2022 NDAA, HFAC Chair Gregory Meeks [inserted a measure](#) requiring the Secretary of State to submit a report on the administration's vision for an end to U.S. involvement in the Syrian conflict.

Members of Congress have also recently sought to prioritize security at ISIS detention facilities, following the January 2022 attempted prison break in northeast Syria, and legislation has reflected that concern by shoring up construction and security at prisons.

Ultimately, as the U.S. government faces other new challenges, many in Congress are signaling that CTEF funding [is not a forever measure](#) and that policymakers will need to build sustainability so security forces can continue their work without the same level of U.S. security assistance.