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Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response

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Summary

Fighting continues across Syria, pitting government forces and their foreign allies against a range of anti-government insurgents, some of whom also are fighting amongst themselves. Since March 2011, the conflict has driven more than 2.6 million Syrians into neighboring countries as refugees (out of a total population of more than 22 million). Millions more Syrians are internally displaced and in need of humanitarian assistance, of which the United States remains the largest bilateral provider, with more than \$1.7 billion in funding identified to date. U.S. nonlethal assistance to opposition forces was placed on hold in December 2013, as fighting in northern Syria disrupted mechanisms put in place to monitor and secure U.S. supplies. Administration officials have since resumed some assistance to select opposition groups.

Neither pro-Asad forces nor their opponents appear capable of consolidating their battlefield gains in Syria or achieving outright victory there in the short term. Improved coordination among some anti-government forces and attrition in government ranks make a swift reassertion of state control over all of Syria unlikely. Conflict between the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, a.k.a. ISIS) and other anti-Asad forces has intensified. The war in Syria is exacerbating local sectarian and political conflicts within Lebanon and Iraq, threatening national stability.

In spite of an apparent shared antipathy toward ISIL's brutality among opposition groups, many anti-Asad armed forces and their activist counterparts remain divided over tactics, strategy, and their long-term political goals for Syria. As of March 2014, the most powerful and numerous anti-Asad armed forces seek outcomes that are contrary in significant ways to stated U.S. preferences for Syria's political future. Islamist militias seeking to impose varying degrees of Sunni Islamic law on Syrian society, including members of the Islamic Front, ISIL, and Jabhat al Nusra, have marginalized others who had received U.S. assistance.

The United States and other members of the United Nations Security Council seek continued Syrian government cooperation with efforts to remove chemical weapons from Syria and provide relief. The Security Council also has endorsed principles for a negotiated settlement of the conflict that could leave members of the current Syrian government in power as members of a transitional governing body, an outcome that some opposition groups reject. The FY2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act (H.R. 3547, P.L. 113-76) authorizes the Administration to provide nonlethal assistance in Syria for certain purposes notwithstanding other provisions of law that had restricted such assistance previously. The Administration is seeking \$1.25 billion in State Department administered funding for the Syria crisis in FY2015, including \$1.1 billion for humanitarian programs.

The humanitarian and regional security crises emanating from Syria now appear to be beyond the power of any single actor, including the United States, to contain or fully address. Large numbers of Syrian refugees, the growth of powerful armed extremist groups in Syria, and the assertive involvement of Iran, Turkey, and Sunni Arab governments in Syria's civil war are all negatively affecting the regional security environment in the Middle East. In light of these conditions and trends, Congress is likely to face choices about the investment of U.S. relief and security assistance funding in relation to the crisis in Syria and its effects on the region for years to come. For more analysis and information, see CRS Report R42848, *Syria's Chemical Weapons: Issues for Congress*, coordinated by Mary Beth D. Nikitin, and CRS Report R43119, *Syria: Overview of the Humanitarian Response*, by Rhoda Margesson and Susan G. Chesser.

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Overview

Fighting continues across Syria, pitting government forces and their foreign allies against a range of anti-government insurgents, some of whom also are fighting amongst themselves. Government forces are fighting on multiple fronts and have lost or ceded control of large areas of the country since 2011, but hold most major cities. The Asad government continues to receive support from Russia and Iran, and, contrary to some observers' predictions, has shown no indication of an imminent collapse. Opposition forces are formidable but lack unity of purpose, unity of command, and unified international support. Various opposition groups have, depending on the circumstances, cooperated and competed. At present, significant elements of the opposition are engaged in outright conflict against one another. Some observers suggest that more than 75% of the armed opposition may seek to replace the Asad government with a state ruled according to some form of Sunni Islamic law,¹ which non-Sunni minority groups oppose. Kurdish groups control areas of northeastern Syria and may seek autonomy or independence in the future.

Meanwhile, chemical weapons inspectors work to oversee and implement the terms of the September 2013 chemical disarmament agreement endorsed by the United Nations (U.N.) Security Council in Resolution 2118. Some rebel groups and regional governments have criticized the U.S. decision to forego a threatened military strike against Syrian government forces in response to the Syrian military's alleged use of chemical weapons in August. Members of Congress expressed a broad range of views regarding the potential use of force in Syria during intense debate in September, and Obama Administration officials have stated that they believe that the threat of the use of force by the United States was instrumental in convincing Syrian President Bashar al Asad to commit to the disarmament plan.

With internationally supervised disarmament proceeding, U.S. diplomatic efforts seek to shape the terms and conditions for negotiation to end the fighting and establish a transitional governing body as called for by a communiqué agreed to in Geneva in June 2012. That communiqué was further endorsed in Resolutions 2118 and 2139, and served as the basis for the January-February 2014 "Geneva II" talks in Switzerland involving some members of the Syrian opposition, representatives of the Syrian government, and delegates from dozens of countries. Those talks failed to address the establishment of a transitional body, based largely on Syrian government insistence that terrorism concerns be resolved first. Several unarmed and armed groups rejected the Geneva II talks outright, and opposition forces remain divided over questions of whether and under what conditions to participate in negotiations with the Asad government.

Inside Syria, neither pro-Asad forces nor their opponents appear capable of consolidating their battlefield gains or achieving outright victory in the short term. In February 2014, the U.S. intelligence community reported to Congress that a stalemate prevails in Syria, and that "decisively altering the course of the conflict in the next six months will prove difficult for either side." According to Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, the Syrian government and its allies have gained some ground in recent months. However, improved coordination among some anti-government forces and attrition in government ranks makes a swift reassertion of state control across all of Syria improbable.

¹ See for example, Charles Lister, "Syria's insurgency beyond Good Guys and Bad Guys," *ForeignPolicy.com*, Middle East Channel (blog), September 20, 2013, and, Aron Lund, "The Politics of the Islamic Front 1: Structure and Support," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Syria in Crisis* (blog), January 14, 2014.

The Geneva II Talks

The January-February 2014 Geneva II talks brought many of the internal and external fault lines in the conflict into sharp relief. Divergent perspectives among Syrian parties to the conflict were reflected among their respective international backers. The negotiations failed to make progress toward the establishment of a transitional governing body (TGB), but provided an opportunity for some members of the U.S.-recognized National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (or Syrian Opposition Coalition, SOC) to demonstrate their capability to represent the interests of Syrians and potentially improve their standing with some of the disparate opposition forces engaged in fighting inside Syria. Nevertheless, other opposition groups, including several powerful Islamist militias, rejected the negotiations and stated their intention to keep fighting until their demands are met.

According to U.N. officials, the Syrian government delegation refused to engage in discussions aimed at establishing a TGB and sought to focus on the question of combatting terrorism. Syrian military operations, including attacks on rebel held areas of Aleppo using barrel bombs and other indiscriminate means, continued during the talks and killed hundreds of civilians. Prior to the talks, President Asad stated that the government had already laid out its peace initiative in January 2013.² Under the first stage of this plan, the Syrian armed forces would halt military operations as soon as regional countries stopped funding and arming the opposition and when the opposition itself ceased attacks against the government.³

The United States and other members of the Core Group have reiterated their support for negotiations on the terms of the Geneva communiqué, while criticizing the Asad government for “obstruction” and praising the SOC delegation for its participation in the talks.⁴ Syrian government representatives criticized what they viewed as the opposition delegation’s unwillingness to fully discuss terrorism and its inability to make firm commitments on the actions of armed groups.⁵ The Asad government appears unwilling to open discussions regarding any transitional arrangements until its concerns with regard to terrorism and anti-state violence are addressed. Opposition representatives acknowledge the threats posed by extremist groups, but view the establishment of transitional arrangements as necessary for undermining the legitimacy of violent extremist groups.

The potential for future talks is uncertain, although participants and international supporters on both sides characterized the end of the January-February round of discussions as a recess and agreed to a four point agenda to guide talks if they resume. The four agenda items, as described by Joint Special Representative for Syria (JSRS) Lakhdar Brahimi, are (1) violence and terrorism; (2) the TGB; (3) national institutions; and (4) national reconciliation and debate.⁶ On February 16, Brahimi said, “it’s not good for Syria that we come back for another round and fall in the same trap that we have been struggling with this week and most of the first round. So I think it is better that every side goes back and reflect and take their responsibility: do they want this process to take place or not?”

Obama Administration officials have reiterated their shared view that once a Transitional Governing Body [TGB] called for by the Geneva communiqué is established by mutual consent and has full control over state security services, “Asad and his close associates with blood on their hands will have no role in Syria.” Speaking in Montreux, Switzerland on January 22, Secretary of State Kerry said that an emphasis on mutual consent would necessarily preclude Asad from participation in a transitional government, along with “those who have supported him” and “thousands of violent extremists” currently fighting the Asad government.⁷ Russian officials have called on the United States and others not to prejudge the outcome of talks to establish transitional governing arrangements, which many outside observers view as an indication that Russia does not view Asad’s departure as a necessary condition for ending the conflict.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2139 reiterated the Council’s endorsement of the Geneva communiqué and demanded that parties support its implementation “leading to a transition that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people and enables them independently and democratically to determine their own future.”

² President Asad, interview with Agence France Press, Syrian Arab News Agency, January 21, 2014.

³ Asad, speech at the Damascus Opera House, Syrian Arab News Agency, January 6, 2013.

⁴ Secretary of State John Kerry, Press Statement: Geneva Conference and Situation in Syria, Washington, DC, February 16, 2014.

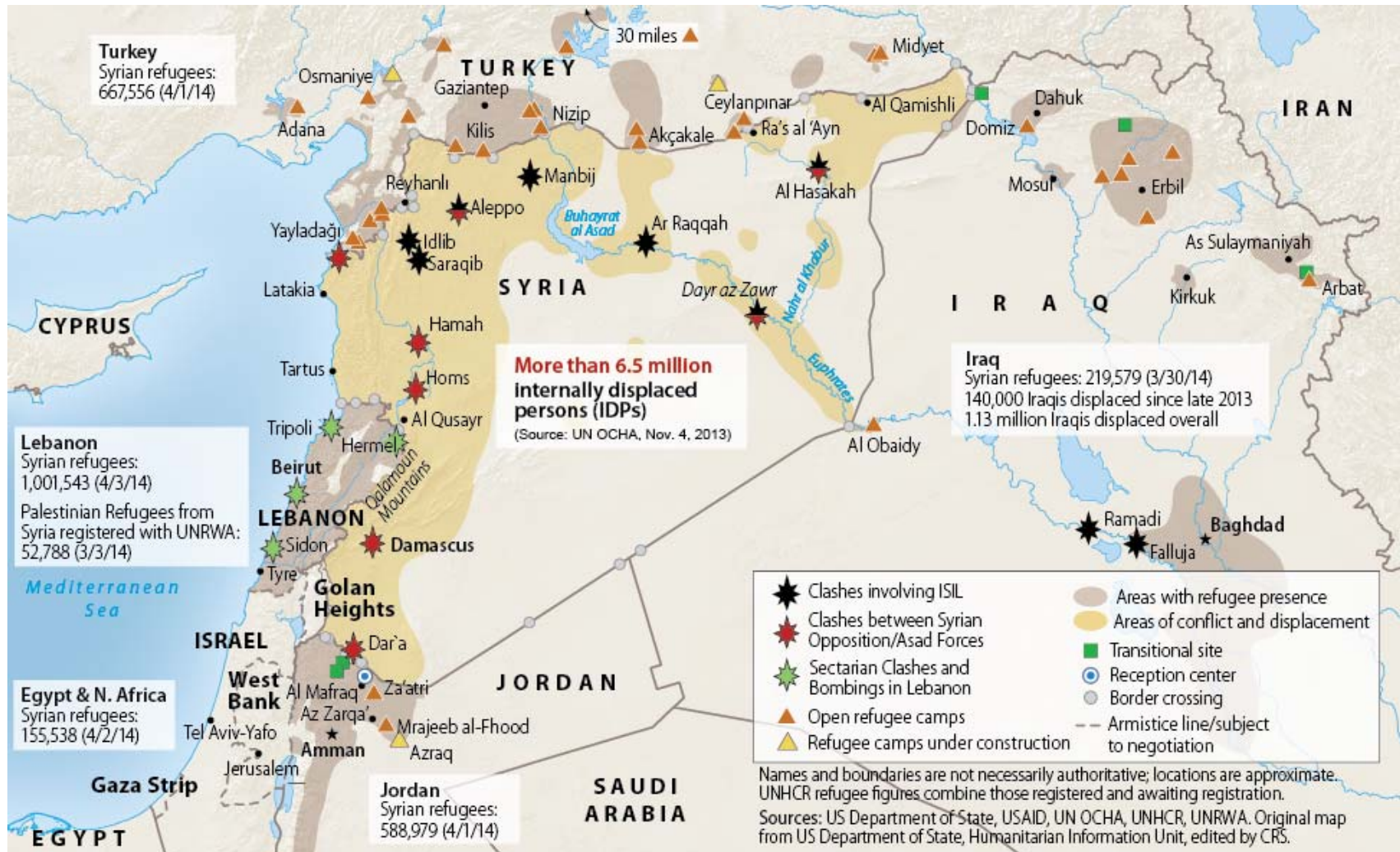
⁵ Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), “Al-Jaafari: we will spare no efforts to make Geneva rounds of talks a success with open-mindedness and a positive spirit,” Damascus, Syria, February 16, 2014.

⁶ Transcript of Press Conference by Joint Special Representative for Syria (JSRS) Lakhdar Brahimi, Geneva, Switzerland, February 15, 2014.

⁷ Secretary of State John Kerry, Intervention at the Geneva II International Conference on Syria, January 22, 2014.

Figure I. Conflict Map and Regional Humanitarian Situation

As of April 2014



Combat between Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, a.k.a. ISIS, **Figure 2**)⁸ and other anti-Asad forces across northern Syria has intensified since late December 2013. In spite of an apparent shared antipathy among opposition groups toward ISIL's brutality, many anti-Asad armed forces and their activist counterparts remain divided over tactics, strategy, and their long-term political goals for Syria. U.S. intelligence estimates the strength of the insurgency in Syria at "somewhere between 75,000 or 80,000 or up to 110,000 to 115,000 insurgents, who are organized into more than 1,500 groups of widely varying political leanings."

As of March 2014, the most powerful and numerous anti-Asad armed forces seek outcomes that are contrary in significant ways to stated U.S. preferences for Syria's political future. Islamist militias seeking to enforce varying degrees of what they recognize as Sunni Islamic law in Syrian society—among them members of the Islamic Front (see below), ISIL, and Jabhat al Nusra—have marginalized other armed groups, including some that received U.S. assistance. U.S. intelligence community leaders have identified the approximately 26,000 members of ISIL, Jabhat al Nusra, and Ahrar al Sham (a key component of the Islamic Front) both as extremists and as the most effective opposition forces in the field. U.S. officials believe that as many as "7,500 foreign fighters from some 50 countries" have travelled to Syria, including Al Qaeda-linked veterans of previous conflicts and Western nationals.⁹

In its recent threat assessment testimony, the U.S. intelligence community judged that Asad "remains unwilling to negotiate himself out of power" and "almost certainly intends to remain the ruler of Syria."¹⁰ Iran and Hezbollah share that objective and continue to invest heavily in Syria on Asad's behalf. That testimony noted that infighting among anti-Asad groups has given government forces and their supporters an advantage in some areas, but that an overall stalemate is likely to prevail in the conflict for the foreseeable future.¹¹

As clashes and diplomatic discussions continue, Syrian civilians continue to suffer in what U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper has described as an "apocalyptic disaster." U.N. sources report that since March 2011, the conflict has driven more than 2.6 million Syrians into neighboring countries as refugees (out of a total population of more than 22 million). According to U.S. officials, more than 6.5 million Syrians are internally displaced. The United States is the largest bilateral provider of humanitarian assistance, with more than \$1.7 billion allocated to date.¹² In December 2013, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA) appealed for an additional \$6.5 billion in humanitarian assistance funding to respond

⁸ The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) also is commonly referred to in English language reports as the Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham (ISIS). *Al Sham* is an Arabic term for the Levant. Some Syrians refer to ISIL as "Daesh," its Arabic acronym.

⁹ Remarks by James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, to the Senate Armed Services Committee, February 11, 2014.

¹⁰ Office of the Director for National Intelligence, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, January 29, 2014.

¹¹ Office of the Director for National Intelligence, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, January 29, 2014.

¹² For details on U.S. humanitarian assistance see USAID, Syria Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #11, Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, March 27, 2014. Some U.S. aid to opposition forces and some humanitarian assistance were placed on hold in December 2013, as fighting in northern Syria disrupted mechanisms put in place to monitor and secure U.S. supplies.

to the crisis in 2014.¹³ For more information on humanitarian issues, see CRS Report R43119, *Syria: Overview of the Humanitarian Response*, by Rhoda Margesson and Susan G. Chesser.

The negative effects of the humanitarian and regional security crises emanating from Syria now appear to be beyond the power of any single actor, including the United States, to independently contain or fully address. The region-wide flood of Syrian refugees, the growth of armed extremist groups in Syria, and the assertive involvement of Iran, Turkey, and Sunni Arab governments in Syria's civil war are negatively affecting overall regional stability. The war in Syria also is exacerbating local sectarian and political conflicts within Lebanon and Iraq, where violence is escalating and threatens national stability.

Policy makers in the United States and other countries appear to feel both compelled to respond to these crises and hesitant to embrace options for doing so that may have political and security risks such as the commitment of military forces to combat or the provision of large-scale material assistance to armed elements of the opposition. In light of these conditions and trends, Congress may face tough choices about U.S. policy toward Syria and the related expenditure of U.S. relief and security assistance funds for years to come.

Anti-Asad Forces

Anti-Asad forces have been engaged in a series of realignments and internal conflicts since mid-2013, creating complications for external parties seeking to provide support. To date, the United States has sought to build the capacity of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) and local activists as well as to provide nonlethal and lethal support to armed groups affiliated with a Supreme Military Command Council (SMC), whose leadership is in flux. In mid-February, SOC figures announced that General Salim Idris was being replaced as SMC commander by Brigadier General Abdul-Ilah al Bashir al Noemi. Idris and other commanders have rejected the change and attempts to resolve differences continue. Many armed Sunni groups disavowed the SOC's participation in January-February 2014 talks with the Asad government in Switzerland. The U.S. government has recognized the SOC as the legitimate representative of the Syrian opposition.

In late 2013, a number of powerful Islamist militia groups—some of which formerly recognized the leadership of Idris and the SMC—announced the formation of a new Islamic Front.¹⁴ The Islamic Front and other recently created opposition coalitions active in northern Syria, such as the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) and the Mujahedin Army, have been engaged in a campaign to evict ISIL from areas of northern and eastern Syria since early January 2014. Prior to the outbreak of the confrontation with ISIL, many expert observers considered the Front to be the most powerful element of the armed opposition in northern Syria (see the **Appendix**). The pressures of confrontation between members of the Islamic Front and ISIL may be undermining the cohesion of the group, as differences in ideology, strategy, priorities, and preferred tactics encourage individuals, units, and groups within the Front to reconsider their positions.

¹³ For more information, see UNOCHA Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan (SHARP) 2014 and 2014 Regional Response Plan (RRP).

¹⁴ The following armed groups constitute the core of the Islamic Front and were the original signatories of its charter: Ahrar al Sham Islamic Movement; Suqur al Sham Brigades; Ansar al Sham Battalions; Jaysh al Islam; Liwa al Tawhid; and Liwa al Haqq.

The Front's charter declared its goals to include "the full overthrow of the Al Asad regime in Syria and for building an Islamic state ruled by the sharia of God Almighty alone."¹⁵ The Front explicitly rejects the concepts of secularism and a civil state, rejects "foreign dictates," and is committed to maintaining the territorial integrity of Syria. Front leaders have rejected the SOC and issued a statement on January 20 in conjunction with the Mujahedin Army and another group rejecting the Geneva II talks and setting a series of conditions that must be achieved before they will contemplate a settlement.¹⁶ The statement calls for "the entire regime, including its head and all its criminal figures" to step down and calls for security bodies to be held legally accountable. The Front and its allies further demand that there be "no interference in the form of the future state after the regime [steps down] and no imposition of any matter that conflicts with the Islamic identity of the masses or which takes away the rights of any section of society."

Jabhat al Nusra, an Al Qaeda-affiliated militia and U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, first sought to mediate between ISIL and its adversaries but has since engaged in battles with ISIL and called on ISIL members to defect to other Islamist groups in light of ISIL's intransigent brutality (**Figure 2**). In general, Al Nusra is viewed as more accommodating and cooperative than ISIL by other opposition forces, including some who oppose its ideology. Some members of the Islamic Front and other non-Islamist opposition groups appear to coordinate operations with Jabhat al Nusra in different parts of the country.

The ISIL-opposition battles have momentarily supplanted deeper questions about the future composition and direction of the Syrian opposition and the provision of external support to its armed elements. The formation of the Islamic Front in November 2013 raised questions about which forces actually remained affiliated with the SMC and whether they are credible partners for the United States and others. Then, in December, Islamic Front fighters took control of facilities and equipment belonging to the U.S.-backed SMC, including some U.S.-supplied materiel. The incident, the Front's continued rejection of the U.S.-preferred strategy of negotiation, and the group's long-term goal of establishing an Islamic state in Syria raise fundamental questions about whether and how the United States should engage with the Front and its allies, despite their capabilities and prominence.

In a January 2014 communiqué from their meeting in Paris, the United States and other members of the "Friends of Syria core group of countries" [AKA the "London 11" or "Core Group"]¹⁷ stated that, "all armed groups must respect democratic and pluralistic values, recognize the political authority of the National Coalition [SOC] and accept the prospect of a democratic transition negotiated in Geneva...."¹⁸ It remains to be seen whether statements by the Islamic Front and others rejecting secular democracy, the political authority of the SOC, and negotiations with the Asad government will preclude engagement by outsiders with the Front and its allies against Al Qaeda-affiliated groups in Syria or against pro-Asad forces.

¹⁵ Charter of the Islamic Front. For translation, see U.S. Government Open Source Center (OSC) Document TRR2013112671951889, Syria: New 'Islamic Front' Formation Releases Charter, November 26, 2013.

¹⁶ The signatories—The Islamic Front, the Mujahedin Army, and the Islamic Union for the Soldiers of the Levant—refer to themselves as the "forces active on the ground" in contrast to "those who only represent themselves." OSC Document TRR2014012066474330, "Syria: IF, Others Reject Regime Presence at Geneva 2, Issue Conditions for Political Solution," January 20, 2014.

¹⁷ The group consists of: Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

¹⁸ Foreign Ministry of France, Declaration of the Core Group Ministerial Meeting on Syria, Paris, January 12, 2014.

Some reports suggest the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) and one of its prominent commanders, Jamal Maarouf, or individual elements of the SMC may emerge as focal points for new external assistance from the United States and others seeking to back relatively moderate armed opposition forces. However, some Syrians consider members of the SRF and similar locally organized forces to be corrupt, and the provision of outside assistance to select groups on conditional political terms may provoke divisions and further infighting. In particular, Islamist forces may seek to delegitimize and militarily target other groups perceived to be cooperating with the United States and other outside powers. Reconciling U.S. and other third party support for armed opposition groups with U.S. diplomatic efforts seeking a negotiated settlement and a transitional governing body may be challenged by the refusal of certain armed groups to endorse the terms of proposed settlements.

Terrorist Threats Posed by Syria- and Iraq-Based Sunni Extremists

Since January 2014, U.S. officials have made several public statements describing the potential for Syria-based extremists to pose a direct terrorist threat to the United States. U.S. and European officials have highlighted the particular threat posed by foreign fighters, some of whom hold U.S. and European passports. Central Intelligence Agency Director John Brennan said in testimony before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence in February 2014 that:

...there are three groups of people that are a concern, from an extremist standpoint; Ahrar al Sham, Jabhat al Nusra, which is the Al Qaeda element within Syria, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). It's those latter two I think are most dedicated to the terrorist agenda. We are concerned about the use of Syrian territory by the Al Qaeda organization to recruit individuals and develop the capability to be able not just to carry out attacks inside of Syria, but also to use Syria as a launching pad. So it's those elements—Al Qaeda and ISIL - that I'm concerned about, especially the ability of these groups to attract individuals from other countries, both from the West, as well as throughout the Middle East and South Asia, and with some experienced operatives there who have had experience in carrying out a global jihad. ... There are camps inside of both Iraq and Syria that are used by Al Qaeda to develop capabilities that are applicable, both in the theater, as well as beyond.¹⁹

Brennan called the threat posed by these groups “a near-term concern, as well as a long-term concern,” and said that “the intelligence community, including CIA, is working very closely with our partners internationally to try to address the terrorist challenge.” In press reports, unnamed intelligence officials have described the foreign fighter problem as “one of the most significant threats we're dealing with,” and the Federal Bureau of Investigation reportedly is monitoring several returnees from Syria. Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson has called the terrorist threat from Syria “a matter of homeland security.”

Secretary Kerry has accused the Asad government of “funding some of those extremists—even purposely ceding some territory to them in order to make them more of a problem so he can make the argument that he is somehow the protector against them.”²⁰ Several press reports allege that opposition groups have sold oil and petroleum products from areas under their control to agents of the Syrian government. The Asad government's past permissiveness toward anti-U.S. Sunni extremist groups during the U.S. presence in Iraq and Asad's release of several prominent extremists from prison in 2011 raise further questions about the regime's strategy.

In July 2012, ISIL leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi warned U.S. leaders that “The mujahidin have set out to chase the affiliates of your armies that have fled. ... You will see them in your own country, God willing. The war with you has just begun.”²¹ In January 2014, Baghdadi concluded a statement on recent regional developments with a further warning for the United States: “Know, O defender of the Cross, that a proxy war will not help you in the Levant, just as it will not help you in Iraq. Soon, you will be in direct conflict—God permitting—against your will. The youths of Islam have steeled themselves for this day. ‘So wait; we too will wait with you,’ [partial Koranic verse, Al Tawbah, 9:52].”²²

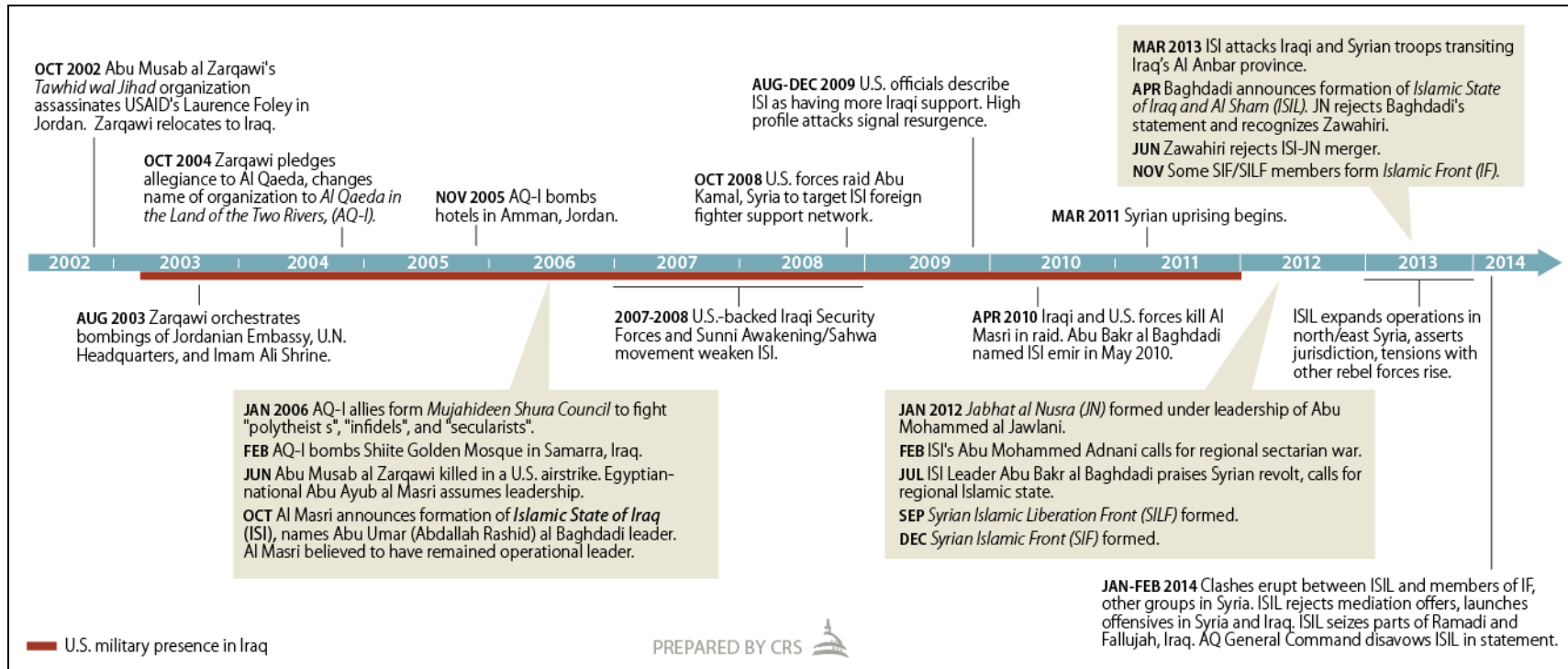
¹⁹ Testimony of CIA Director John Brennan, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, February 5, 2014.

²⁰ Ben Hubbard, “Syria Proposes Aleppo Cease-Fire...” *New York Times*, January 17, 2014.

²¹ OSC Report GMP20120721586002, “Islamic State of Iraq Amir Calls on Sunni Tribes To ‘Repent,’” July 21, 2012.

²² OSC Report TRR2014011980831299, “Statement by ISIL Emir Condemning ‘War’ Against Group,” Jan. 19, 2014.

Figure 2. Evolution of Al Qaeda Affiliates and Select Extremist Forces in Iraq and Syria, 2002-2014



Source: U.S. government reporting and U.S. Government Open Source Center (OSC) reports.

Pro-Asad Forces²³

The Syrian government has continued military and security operations against insurgents while pursuing political measures intended to boost Asad's domestic and international legitimacy. Government forces in March continued operations in Aleppo and areas north of Damascus, in an effort to isolate rebels and sever their supply lines.²⁴ Meanwhile, Syria's Information Minister in mid-March stated that presidential elections would be held in the summer of 2014 in all provinces except Raqqah, which is under the control of ISIL.²⁵

Asad is planning to stand for reelection, according to U.S. and Syrian officials,²⁶ despite opposition demands that he cede power to a transitional governing body as outlined in the June 2012 Geneva communiqué. Asad has stated that presidential elections will include multiple candidates in accordance with Syria's new constitution, which was approved by referendum in 2012.²⁷ However, the new election law stipulates that candidates must have maintained continuous residence in Syria for 10 years prior to nomination and must hold no other nationality or prior criminal convictions²⁸—effectively disqualifying many members of the Syrian Opposition Council who currently reside in exile. The United States and other members of the Core Group on Syria have rejected Asad's potential candidacy. On April 3, the Core Group issued a statement saying:

any unilateral decision by the Syrian regime to hold presidential elections would be entirely inconsistent with the Geneva Communiqué's call for the establishment of a transitional governing body to oversee constitutional reforms leading to free and fair elections in a neutral environment. Elections organized by the Assad regime would be a parody of democracy, would reveal the regime's rejection of the basis of the Geneva talks, and would deepen the division of Syria.²⁹

As described above, the Syrian government participated in the Geneva II negotiations, but insisted that counterterrorism issues be addressed before any discussion of a potential transition. At present, Asad appears disinclined to make concessions that would significantly undermine his hold on power, particularly if he assesses that his military ultimately can prevail over insurgents or at least hold them at bay. Asad may judge that his move to declare and destroy his government's chemical weapons has eased international pressure on his government, and that peace talks will further expose opposition divisions—perhaps thereby demonstrating that his government lacks a credible negotiating partner.

²³ Prepared by Carla Humud, Analyst in Middle Eastern and African Affairs.

²⁴ "Syrian army to impose blockade in Aleppo," *Al Monitor*, March 5, 2014; and "Syrian army, Hezbollah storm Yabrud," *Daily Star*, March 15, 2014.

²⁵ "Syria plans presidential elections in summer; minister says Assad will likely be one of several candidates," *Wall Street Journal*, March 16, 2014.

²⁶ "Syrians have decided that Asad should run in elections: minister," Reuters, January 7, 2014; and, Office of the Director for National Intelligence, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, January 29, 2014.

²⁷ Syrian Arab News Agency, "President al-Assad gives interview to the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper," June 17, 2013.

²⁸ "Syrian presidential election law excludes most opposition leaders," *Reuters*, March 14, 2014.

²⁹ Joint Statement by the London 11 Countries, April 3, 2014.

Shia Armed Groups and Iranian Support for the Syrian Government

The involvement of Shia militias and Iran in the Syrian conflict has evolved since 2011 from an advisory to an operational role, with forces in some cases now fighting alongside Syrian troops. Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran have traditionally depended on the presence of a friendly government in Damascus to facilitate the transit of weapons from Iran to Hezbollah and to preserve their ability to challenge Israel. Hezbollah and Iranian roles in Syria appear designed to bolster Asad's ability to suppress the opposition but also to secure their interests in Syria in the event that the Asad government does not survive.³⁰

Hezbollah

In August 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned Hezbollah for providing training, advice, and logistical support to the Syrian government.³¹ U.S. officials also noted that Hezbollah has helped the Syrian government push rebel forces out of some areas in Syria. Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, who was personally sanctioned for his role in overseeing Hezbollah's assistance to Damascus, publicly acknowledged Hezbollah's involvement in Syria in May 2013. Nasrallah also recently expressed confidence that the risk of the Asad regime's defeat and the partition of Syria had passed even if a war of attrition may persist.³² He further referred to the need for reconciliation initiatives to bolster the Asad government's support among Syrians.

As of March 2014, Hezbollah fighters remained active in the Qalamoun region northwest of Damascus, where they reportedly assisted in the recent recapture of the opposition stronghold of Yabroud.³³ A senior Israeli military official in March 2014 stated that Hezbollah currently maintains 4,000 to 5,000 fighters in Syria.³⁴

Over the past year, Hezbollah has worked with the Syrian military to protect regime supply lines by helping to clear rebel-held towns along the Damascus-Homs stretch of the M-5 highway.³⁵ Hezbollah personnel in 2013 played significant roles in battles around Al Qusayr and the Qalamoun Mountains region, in which rebel presence along the highway threatened the government's ability to move forces and to access predominantly Alawite strongholds on the coast.³⁶ Hezbollah forces on the Lebanese side of the border reportedly monitor and target rebel positions near the border that facilitate attacks in Syria and Lebanon.

Last year saw an uptick in violence against Hezbollah targets in Lebanon, and the militia's support for the Asad government appears to be contributing to the rise in sectarian violence and tension in Lebanon. Jabhat al Nusra and ISIL have claimed responsibility for attacks on

³⁰ "Iran and Hezbollah build militia networks in Syria in event that Asad falls," *Washington Post*, February 10, 2013.

³¹ E.O. 13582, U.S. Department of Treasury, August 10, 2012.

³² "Hezbollah leader Nasrallah vows to keep fighters in Syria," *BBC*, February 16, 2014; and, OSC Report LIR2014040766062493, "Lebanon's Nasrallah to Al-Safir: Risk of Bombings Drops, Danger of Syrian Regime's Fall Ends," *Al Safir* Online (Beirut), April 7, 2014.

³³ "Drastic rise in Hezbollah death toll as party battles for Yabroud," *The Daily Star*, March 10, 2014.

³⁴ "Israel watches warily as Hezbollah gains battle skills in Syria," *New York Times*, March 10, 2014.

³⁵ "Syrian Army goes all-in to take back strategic highway," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 2, 2013.

³⁶ "Hezbollah and the fight for control in Qalamoun," Institute for the Study of War, November 26, 2013.

Hezbollah-controlled areas of Beirut and eastern Lebanon, describing the attacks as retaliation for Hezbollah's intervention in Syria.³⁷

Iraqi Militias

Analysts estimate that there are between 2,000 and 5,000 Iraqi Shia fighting in Syria on behalf of the Syrian government.³⁸ Many hail from Iraqi Shia political and militia groups including Asa'ib Ahl al Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah. Members identify their objective as the defense of Shia holy sites such as the tomb of Sayyida Zeinab, the granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammad, in southern Damascus. Other reports describe these groups as assuming a broad operational role, noting that militias have formed sniper teams, led ambushes, established checkpoints, and provided infantry support for Syrian armored units.³⁹

It is difficult to assess the motivations of individual Iraqi fighters in Syria or determine whether Assad's survival is their primary goal. Some of the fighters appear to be young volunteers driven by a desire to protect Shia holy sites, while others are trained militiamen who previously fought coalition forces in Iraq. Reports suggest that Iraqi fighters receive training in Iran before being flown in small batches into Syria, and that they work closely with Lebanese Hezbollah.⁴⁰ However, it is unclear who ultimately exercises command and control over these militias. Clashes between Iraqi and local Syrian militias in mid-2013 resulted in some Iraqi combatants refusing to fight under Syrian command.⁴¹ Recent attacks by ISIL and others on Iraqi Shia could prompt some of these groups to redirect their efforts to domestic struggles.

Iranian Support

Since 2011, Iran has provided technical, training, and financial assistance both to the Syrian government and to pro-regime Shia militias operating in Syria. In February 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) for providing substantial technical assistance to Syrian intelligence, noting that MOIS also participated in multiple joint projects with Hezbollah.⁴² Treasury also designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) for training Syrian forces, and Iraqi Shia militias fighting in Syria have credited Iran for providing training and coordinating their travel into the country. Mohammad Ali Jafari, head of the IRGC, acknowledged in September 2012 that some members of the Quds Force were present in Syria,⁴³ and U.S. officials have described them as also working closely with Hezbollah. Regional observers in March 2014 estimated that between 1,000 and 1,500 IRGC members were present in Syria.⁴⁴ In terms of non-lethal aid, Iran

³⁷ "Hezbollah undeterred by ISIS claim, threats," *Daily Star*, January 6, 2014.

³⁸ "Leaked video: Iran guiding thousands of Shiite fighters to Syria," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 23, 2013; "From Qusair to Yabrud: Shiite foreign fighters in Syria," *Al Monitor*, March 6, 2014.

³⁹ "From Karbala to Sayyida Zaynab: Iraqi Fighters in Syria's Shi'a Militias," CTC Sentinel, August 27, 2013.

⁴⁰ "From Karbala to Sayyida Zaynab: Iraqi Fighters in Syria's Shi'a Militias," CTC Sentinel, August 27, 2013.

⁴¹ "Iraqi Shi'ites flock to Assad's side as sectarian split widens," *Reuters*, June 19, 2013.

⁴² Department of the Treasury, Press Release, February 16, 2012.

⁴³ "Elite Iranian unit's commander says his forces are in Syria," *Washington Post*, September 16, 2012.

⁴⁴ "From Qusair to Yabrud: Shiite foreign fighters in Syria," *Al Monitor*, March 6, 2014.

has provided Syria with billions of dollars in credit to purchase oil, food, and import goods from Iran.⁴⁵

Chemical Weapons and Disarmament: Background⁴⁶

A major policy concern of the United States has been the use or loss of control of chemical weapons stocks in Syria during that country's ongoing civil war. The United States and other countries have assessed that the Syrian government has used chemical weapons repeatedly against opposition forces and civilians in the country. The largest-scale use to date was reportedly on August 21, 2013. The U.N. Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic released its report on September 16, 2013, concluding that surface-to-surface rockets containing sarin were used in the Ghouta area of Damascus against civilians on a "relatively large scale." The U.N. investigative mission was not tasked with assigning culpability for the attacks.

The Obama Administration threatened military action against Syria in response to chemical weapons use in Syria in August 2013. In a diplomatic solution that resulted in the Administration withdrawing the threat, Syria agreed to join the international Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which requires Syria to destroy all of its chemical weapons stocks and production facilities. Based on a joint U.S.-Russian proposal, the Executive Council of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), an intergovernmental body tasked with implementation of the CWC, approved a destruction plan under which Syria is required to destroy all chemical weapons by June 30, 2014. Under Security Council Resolution 2118, the OPCW is to report to the U.N. Security Council on implementation on a monthly basis.

Syria is required to declare and destroy all of its chemical weapons stocks and production facilities under international supervision. Syria is believed to have more than 1,000 metric tons of chemical warfare agents and precursor chemicals. This stockpile includes several hundred metric tons of the nerve agent sarin, which represents the bulk of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile. Damascus also has several hundred metric tons of mustard agent in ready-to-use form and several metric tons of the nerve agent VX.

A joint mission of U.N. and OPCW personnel was created to monitor and facilitate Syrian chemical weapons disarmament.⁴⁷ OPCW-U.N. experts arrived in Damascus on October 1, 2013, and began to inspect Syria's declared chemical weapons facilities. The OPCW spokesman told reporters on October 31 that the Syrian government met the November 1, 2013, destruction deadline for disabling production equipment, and that all chemical weapons stocks and agents in Syria were under "tamper-proof" seal. The first stage of destruction activities focused on destroying "critical equipment" at chemical weapons production facilities and mixing and filling units.

⁴⁵ "Iranians dial up presence in Syria," *Wall Street Journal*, September 16, 2013.

⁴⁶ Prepared by Mary Beth Nikitin, Specialist in Nonproliferation.

⁴⁷ See <http://opcw.unmissions.org/>.

Removal of Chemicals

The current stage of the chemical weapons destruction process involves transportation and removal of chemical weapons agents from the country. These are liquid chemicals that have not been loaded into delivery vehicles. The OPCW Executive Council on November 14, 2013, approved the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons agents ("priority 1" chemicals) outside of Syria due to the security situation in the country. The United States and others have provided equipment to the OPCW-U.N. Joint Mission to help safely transfer these chemicals from storage facilities to the Syrian port of Latakia. Once all the chemicals are at the port, Danish and Norwegian ships are to pick up the chemicals and remove them from Syria. The first quantity of priority chemicals was moved to the port of Latakia in early January 2014.

No country had agreed to conduct destruction operations on its territory due to public concerns about the dangers of the material, but also due to the short timeline for destruction which in some cases would not have allowed for the required environmental and health impact assessments. Therefore, the United States plans to neutralize the liquid chemical weapons agents on board the Maritime Administration's Motor Vessel (MV) *Cape Ray* using newly installed field deployable hydrolysis systems (FDHS). This ship is expected to receive 700 metric tons of both mustard agent and DF compound, a key component in sarin.⁴⁸ U.S. personnel, including 64 Army chemical specialists, will run the operation. The MV *Cape Ray* is now at the port of Rota, Spain. Once removed from Latakia, the most dangerous compounds in approximately 60 containers will be transferred to the *Cape Ray* at the Italian port of Gioia Tauro for destruction at sea in international waters. NATO has canceled cooperation with the Russian Federation on guarding the *Cape Ray* during chemical weapons destruction activities because of Russia's actions in Ukraine.⁴⁹ Less sensitive chemicals will be shipped to commercial processing facilities, for example in the United Kingdom. Companies in Finland and the United States were awarded contracts for processing the liquid waste from the destruction process.⁵⁰

Syria did not meet the original deadline of December 31, 2013, for removal of these agents from its territory. According to the OPCW Director General, the delays were caused by "security concerns, the procurement and delivery of large quantities of packaging and transportation materials and equipment, and adverse weather conditions."⁵¹ Reports in early January quoted a Syrian government official as saying two CW storage sites have been under attack.⁵² The Syrian government also missed a February 5, 2014, deadline, raising questions about the intentions of the Syrian government. Syria has asked for a new deadline of mid-May. In February, the U.N. Security Council called upon Syria to expedite removal of the chemicals. The United States in particular had been critical of the slow progress by the Syrian government. As U.S. Ambassador to the OPCW Robert Mikulak said,

⁴⁸ "Army to Destroy Syrian Chemical Weapons Aboard Ship," *Army News Service*, January 3, 2014.

⁴⁹ "NATO to cancel activities with Russia, step up military cooperation with Ukraine," *Stars and Stripes*, March 6, 2014.

⁵⁰ "OPCW awards contracts to two companies for destruction of Syrian chemical and effluents," OPCW-U.N. Joint Mission Press Release February 14, 2014, <http://opcw.unmissions.org/AboutOPCWUNJointMission/tabid/54/ctl/Details/mid/651/ItemID/182/Default.aspx>

⁵¹ "Director General says Removal of Priority Chemicals in Syria Marks Important New Phase in Work of Joint Mission," OPCW press release, January 8, 2014.

⁵² Nick Cumming-Bruce and Rick Gladstone, "Syrian Government Reports 2 Attacks on Chemical Arms Sites," *New York Times*, January 8, 2014.

The international community has put into place everything that is necessary for transport and destruction of these chemicals. Sufficient equipment and material has been provided to Syria. The ships to carry the chemicals away from Syria are waiting. The U.S. ship to destroy CW agent and precursors is now in the region and waiting. Commercial facilities to destroy other chemicals have been selected and contracts awarded; they are waiting. And yet Syria continues to drag its feet.⁵³

In March, OPCW-U.N. Joint Mission Special Coordinator Sigrid Kaag described “important progress” in efforts to expedite the transfer and destruction of chemicals and encouraged the Syrian government “to sustain the current pace.”⁵⁴ As of April 8, Secretary Kerry confirmed the March 20 Joint Mission estimate that the Syrian government had moved eleven shipments of chemicals to the port of Latakia, representing around 53.6% of total stocks to be removed.⁵⁵ Secretary Kerry also reaffirmed that he has been working with the Russian government to expedite the transport of chemicals to Latakia for removal, so that the deadline for destruction of the chemicals could be met.

Destruction of Production Facilities

The Syrian government also did not meet the deadline of March 15, 2014, for destruction of its 12 chemical weapons production facilities, and has proposed that the facilities not be completely destroyed but instead made inaccessible.⁵⁶ The CWC requires that production facilities be “physically destroyed.” U.S. Ambassador to the OPCW Robert Mikulak said in a February statement that the Executive Council should require Syria to physically destroy the facilities in line with the Convention.⁵⁷ The OPCW is now working on a destruction plan for these facilities with Syria.

Despite these delays, however, U.N. officials say they are optimistic that the final deadline, June 30, 2014, for destruction of all chemical weapons and production facilities will be met.

U.S. and International Funding for CW Elimination Efforts

The international community, including the United States, is contributing both technical and financial assistance to the OPCW-U.N. Joint Mission. In-kind technical assistance to date includes specialized packaging from the United States for transporting chemical weapons in Syria, security related support from Russia for Syrian ground movement of the materials, and cargo ships and naval vessels from Denmark and Norway.⁵⁸ Italy has volunteered to provide a port for transferring the agent from the cargo ships to the *Cape Ray*; the United Kingdom and Germany have provided a chemical processing facility for the destruction of some of the chemical materials.

⁵³ Robert P. Mikulak, “Statement to the Thirty-Ninth Meeting of the Executive Council,” The Hague, Netherlands, February 21, 2014.

⁵⁴ “Over half of Syria’s chemical weapons removed or destroyed, says joint OPCW-UN mission,” UN News Centre, March 20, 2014.

⁵⁵ Ibid.; Secretary of State John Kerry Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 8, 2014.

⁵⁶ “Syria to miss deadline to destroy 12 chemical arms sites,” *Reuters*, March 6, 2014.

⁵⁷ <http://www.state.gov/t/avc/rls/2014/221891.htm>.

⁵⁸ <http://opcw.unmissions.org/Portals/opcw-un-syria/General%20FAQs%20for%20PDF.pdf>.

According to the State Department, the United States has given approximately \$6 million in financial assistance to the OPCW and U.N. joint mission through the State Department-administered Nonproliferation and Disarmament Fund. The United States has also given significant in-kind assistance to international inspectors. The largest contribution to the international effort has come from the Department of Defense Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) Program. On April 8, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Rebecca K.C. Hersman said that the CTR program had allocated \$160 million to support the CW elimination effort. DOD CTR also accepted \$19 million in contributions from Germany, the UK, and Canada to assist with CTR programs, including the effort in Syria. Since the bulk of this funding was spent preparing the MV *Cape Ray* and equipping inspectors, the budget request for FY2015 is less than what was spent this past year—\$15.7 million for technical expertise and resources to support the U.N.-OPCW Joint Mission in FY2015.

For more information on Syria's chemical weapons and U.S. and international participation in the disarmament process, see CRS Report R42848, *Syria's Chemical Weapons: Issues for Congress*, coordinated by Mary Beth D. Nikitin.

U.S. Policy and Assistance

Debates over U.S. policy toward Syria since 2011 have repeatedly returned to the question of U.S. military intervention, whether to protect civilians, target terrorist groups, or punish Syrian forces suspected of involvement in chemical weapons attacks or other attacks on opposition-held areas. To date, Administration officials have stated that U.S. military intervention to shape the outcome of Syria's civil conflict or to change the Syrian regime may not achieve U.S. objectives, and may lead to unintended negative consequences. Administration officials have cited a number of reasons for their reluctance to undertake direct military intervention or provide large-scale assistance to shift the balance of power in Syria, including fears of exacerbating the violence; inviting greater regional spillover or intervention; or opening a power vacuum that could benefit the extremists who are part of the opposition.⁵⁹ Uncertain costs, military constraints, and domestic political opposition to such involvement also are likely factors.

Some critics of the Administration's policy argue that many of these negative outcomes are occurring even in the absence of U.S. intervention and suggest that the image and influence of the United States are weakened by a refusal to intervene to protect civilians or respond to provocations. Others express concern that military intervention will exacerbate negative conditions prevailing on the ground and suggest that the United States cannot ensure that intervention or support provided to opposition groups will not benefit extremists. Recent Administration official statements concerning potential terrorist threats emanating from Syria have led to a reconsideration of many of these questions by some Members of Congress and the public. Some press reports suggest that Administration officials may be revisiting policy options that could expand U.S. involvement in the conflict in Syria, but U.S. officials have declined to confirm or deny reports about the contours of internal deliberations. On April 8, Secretary of State Kerry referred to ongoing consideration of policy options in testimony before the Senate

⁵⁹ Other competing foreign policy priorities also have influenced the Administration's position, such as a desire to maintain Russian and Chinese support for international sanctions on Iran's nuclear program and concern that sectarian and strategic competition in Syria could ignite a regional conflict and threaten U.S. allies and global security interests.

Foreign Relations Committee and suggested that the United States was more engaged in supporting opposition elements than it had been to date.

While condemning Asad as a thug and a murderer and aiding some of his adversaries, Administration officials have continued to stress the need for a negotiated political solution to the conflict in the hopes of keeping the Syrian state intact, securing its weapon stockpiles and borders, and combating extremist groups now active there. The implementation of U.S. strategy in Syria to date has included the provision of both nonlethal and lethal assistance to select Syrian opposition groups, a sustained international diplomatic effort to establish a negotiated transition, and the provision of humanitarian assistance in Syria and neighboring countries. Through 2013, these initiatives were implemented under the auspices of an ad hoc series of assistance notifications to Congress providing for the waiver of certain restrictions on the use of U.S. funds for assistance in Syria and the assertion of emergency contingency authorities to reprogram and allocate funds for use in response to the crisis. Cumulatively, the notifications illustrate an evolution of U.S. involvement in the direction of seeking deeper partnership with select opposition actors on the ground in Syria, while seeking to bolster and unify opposition figures based outside of Syria.

At the October 2013 Friends of Syria conference in London, Secretary Kerry announced that the United States, along with other members of the “London 11” group, had “agreed to increase ... coordinated assistance to the opposition, including to the Syrian Opposition Coalition.... And we also committed to do more to assist the brave people who are on the ground in Syria.” The Obama Administration subsequently notified Congress of plans to expand nonlethal assistance to various opposition groups. Through 2013, U.S. efforts to improve coordination among opposition groups in aid delivery had mixed success, with some observers criticizing the SOC’s Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) for lacking capacity and duplicating partnerships among donors and local organizations.

As of April 2014, the United States had allocated nearly \$260 million in support of the non-armed opposition (including the SOC and local activists), more than half of which had been delivered as of late March.⁶⁰ The delivery of some assistance to select groups reportedly has been resumed after having been suspended as a result of the Islamic Front’s seizure of SOC/SMC-controlled warehouse facilities and intra-opposition fighting in northern Syria.⁶¹ The FY2014 Consolidated Appropriations bill (H.R. 3547, P.L. 113-76) provides new authority for the Administration to use FY2014 and previously appropriated monies in the Economic Support Fund (ESF) account to provide nonlethal assistance for certain purposes in Syria (see textbox below). An unspecified amount of funding may be subject to this authority.

⁶⁰ See U.S. State Department Fact Sheet, U.S. Assistance and Support for the Transition, January 17, 2014; and Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Anne Patterson Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, March 26, 2014.

⁶¹ The State Department has reported that lines of supply for nonlethal support to armed opposition elements are “periodically contested by the regime or extremist fighters.” In the wake of the incident the Obama Administration “decided that it was a risk to be providing that assistance if it’s going to the extremists.” However, on January 12, Secretary Kerry said the Administration is “considering the renewal of that assistance to the opposition,” and referred to “augmented support to the opposition” in remarks in Montreux, Switzerland, on January 22. See Secretary of State Kerry, Remarks with Qatari Foreign Minister Khalid bin Muhammad al Atiyah, Paris, France, January 12, 2014; and, Secretary of State Kerry, Press Availability at the Geneva II International Conference on Syria, January 22, 2014.

FY2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act and Nonlethal Assistance in Syria

Section 7041(i) of Division K of the FY2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act (H.R. 3547, P.L. 113-76) significantly expands the Administration's authority to provide nonlethal assistance in Syria for certain purposes using the Economic Support Fund (ESF) account. Such assistance had been restricted by a series of preexisting provisions of law (including some terrorism-related provisions) that required the President to assert emergency and contingency authorities to provide such assistance to the Syrian opposition and communities in Syria. The new authority makes FY2014 and prior year ESF funding available "notwithstanding any other provision of law for non-lethal assistance for programs to address the needs of civilians affected by conflict in Syria, and for programs that seek to—

- (A) establish governance in Syria that is representative, inclusive, and accountable;
- (B) develop and implement political processes that are democratic, transparent, and adhere to the rule of law;
- (C) further the legitimacy of the Syrian opposition through cross-border programs;
- (D) develop civil society and an independent media in Syria;
- (E) promote economic development in Syria;
- (F) document, investigate, and prosecute human rights violations in Syria, including through transitional justice programs and support for nongovernmental organizations; and
- (G) counter extremist ideologies."

The act requires the Secretary of State to "take all appropriate steps to ensure that mechanisms are in place for the adequate monitoring, oversight, and control of such assistance inside Syria," and requires the Secretary of State to "promptly inform the appropriate congressional committees of each significant instance in which assistance provided pursuant to the authority of this subsection has been compromised, to include the type and amount of assistance affected, a description of the incident and parties involved, and an explanation of the Department of State's response." The latter provision may be of particular interest in light of the reported seizure of U.S. provided assistance by armed groups in December 2013.

The act further requires the Obama Administration to submit a comprehensive interagency strategy prior to using the authority that would include a "mission statement, achievable objectives and timelines, and a description of inter-agency and donor coordination and implementation of such strategy." The strategy, which may be classified, must also include "a description of oversight and vetting procedures to prevent the misuse of funds." All funds obligated pursuant to the new authority are subject to established congressional notification procedures.

In the 113th Congress, other proposals to authorize the expanded provision of nonlethal and lethal assistance in Syria with various provisos have been considered, including S. 960, the Syria Transition Support Act of 2013, and H.R. 1327, the Free Syria Act of 2013. S. 960 was approved by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as amended by a 15-3 vote in May 2013.

FY2015 Budget Request for Syria

The FY2015 assistance request for Syria reflects the two main elements of the Obama Administration's policy response: (1) humanitarian assistance to meet the needs of internally displaced Syrians and refugees in neighboring countries, and (2) political, economic, and non-lethal military support for national and local opposition groups. Funds provided since 2011 in Syria and in neighboring countries for these combined purposes exceed \$2 billion to date.

Of the total \$1.26 billion in FY2015 funding requested specifically for Syria in the foreign operations budget request, \$1.1 billion in Overseas Contingency Operations funds would support humanitarian response needs from the Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA-OCO) and International Disaster Assistance (IDA-OCO) accounts. A further \$155 million from the Economic Support Fund-Overseas Contingency Operations (ESF-OCO), International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement-Overseas Contingency Operations (INCLE-OCO), and Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, De-mining, and Related Programs (NADR) accounts would support the Syrian opposition and transition related initiatives. If a transition should occur,

FY2015 funds would support a political transition toward democracy, as well as reconstruction and recovery efforts. Specific proposals for the use of those funds have not been made available as of April 8, 2014.

Table I. U.S. Foreign Assistance for Syria, FY2013-FY2015 Request

(In current \$ thousands, Fiscal Year denotes source of funds)

Account	FY2013 (Actual)	FY2014 (Estimate)	FY2015 (Request)
ESF	20,780 (OCO)	n.a.	125,000 (OCO)
INCLE	0	n.a.	10,000 (OCO)
NADR	0	n.a.	20,000
PKO	38,620 (OCO)	n.a.	0
FFP	18,338	n.a.	0
Total^a	77,738	n.a.	155,000

Source: State Department and Foreign Operations and Related Programs, Congressional Budget Justification, FY2015.

Notes: FY2014 estimates for Syria spending were not available as of April 2014. Funds appropriated in fiscal years prior to FY2013 have supported U.S. assistance programs since 2011. n.a. = not available.

- a. The FY2013 total figure does not reflect all of the \$260 million allocated for support to the Syrian opposition to date. The FY2015 Syria request includes, but Table 3 does not show, \$1.1 billion within Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA-OCO) and International Disaster Assistance (IDA-OCO) accounts expected to be used for humanitarian assistance related to the Syria conflict.

Issues Shaping Future U.S. Assistance

As with humanitarian assistance, U.S. efforts to support local security and service delivery efforts to date have been hindered by a lack of regular access to areas in need. According to Administration officials, border closures, ongoing fighting, and risks from extremist groups have presented unique challenges. U.S. officials have stated their expectation that U.S. equipment will be returned to the control of SMC leaders by the Islamic Front and reiterated their view that the SOC and SMC remain the “legitimate representatives of the Syrian opposition and the Syrian people.”⁶² On January 12, the United States and other Core Group members stated that they “fully support the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army and other democratic opposition forces in their action against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).”

In light of these developments, the future nature and direction of U.S. engagement with certain Syrian opposition groups may be in flux. On the one hand, advocates of continued U.S. support for opposition groups aligned with U.S. values and preferences argue that the withdrawal or reduction of such assistance would bolster less cooperative or friendly groups. Advocates further argue that if the United States withdraws or reduces its support, then it may “force” moderate groups to turn to extremist groups for funding and support—thereby increasing the influence of extremists while reducing U.S. leverage. On the other hand, critics of continued U.S. support argue that such assistance risks exacerbating rivalry among opposition groups and reducing the

⁶² Statement of U.S. State Department Spokesperson Marie Harf, Press Briefing, Washington, DC, December 16, 2013.

credibility of groups and individuals seen to be aligned with the United States. Critics of support further point to problems in ensuring the identity of end users of provided support and the uses of U.S.-provided support. Administration officials have stated that they remain open to engagement with all opposition groups not affiliated with Al Qaeda. The Islamic Front reportedly has rebuffed U.S. requests for consultation to date, and its charter states that it rejects “foreign dictates that undermine its decision-making capabilities.”⁶³

Efforts to provide lethal assistance to armed opposition elements have similarly evolved and were reported to be expanding in late 2013 amid criticism by some opposition leaders that desired support has not been forthcoming. In June 2013, Deputy National Security Adviser for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes said that the President had “authorized the expansion of our assistance to the Supreme Military Council,” and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel said in a September 2013 hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Administration was taking steps to provide arms to some Syrian rebels under covert action authorities.⁶⁴ Press reports have cited unidentified U.S. officials suggesting that as of early October 2013, very little lethal equipment had been delivered and fewer than 1,000 opposition fighters had received U.S. supervised training in Jordan. CRS cannot confirm these reports. Press reports further suggested that the program was being enlarged to produce “a few hundred trained fighters each month,”⁶⁵ but it is unclear what effect, if any, recent developments, including infighting among opposition groups, have had on any such plans or programs.

To date, U.S. officials have not publicly described in detail which elements of the opposition may be receiving training, what such training may entail, what types of weaponry may be provided in the program, and what safeguards may be in place to monitor the disposition of equipment and the actions of any U.S. trained personnel. In late September, the Administration notified Congress of its intent to use emergency authorities available to the President under the Foreign Assistance Act to provide additional “nonlethal commodities and services” to the SMC. In January, the State Department referred to completed deliveries of food, medical equipment, and vehicles and “planned deliveries of satellite access equipment, laptops, radio communication equipment, and medical kits to moderate SMC elements” in a summary of its nonlethal support efforts to date.⁶⁶

On October 22, Secretary Kerry said that the “London 11” group had “agreed to direct military aid exclusively through the Supreme Military Council ... to curtail the influence of extremists, to isolate the extremists, and to change the balance on the ground.”⁶⁷ However, as noted above, several prominent Islamist militia groups now coordinate their operations independent of the SMC and have rejected the political and military leadership of the SOC/SMC. Disputes within the

⁶³ OSC Document TRR2013112671951889.

⁶⁴ Secretary Hagel said, “it was June of this year that the president made the decision to support lethal assistance to the opposition. As you all know, we have been very supportive with hundreds of millions of dollars of non-lethal assistance. The vetting process that Secretary Kerry noted has been significant, but—I’ll ask General Dempsey if he wants to add anything—but we, the Department of Defense, have not been directly involved in this. This is, as you know, a covert action. And, as Secretary Kerry noted, probably to [go] into much more detail would—would require a closed or classified hearing.”

⁶⁵ Greg Miller, “CIA ramping up covert training program for moderate Syrian rebels,” *Washington Post*, October 2, 2013; and, Adam Entous and Nour Malas, “U.S. Still Hasn’t Armed Syrian Rebels,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 4, 2013.

⁶⁶ Office of the State Department Spokesperson, “The Syrian Crisis: U.S. Assistance and Support for the Transition,” January 17, 2014

⁶⁷ Remarks of Secretary of State John Kerry, London, United Kingdom, October 22, 2013.

SMC over its leadership also may complicate international efforts to engage with the SMC leadership as a conduit for support to moderate armed elements. It remains to be seen whether these realignments, disputes, and policy statements have decisively changed the context in which the United States and its allies are providing support to the armed opposition, or whether or how such support may change in the near future. On April 8, Secretary Kerry told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that “the fact is we are doing more than we've ever been doing.”

Outlook

Looking ahead, U.S. policy makers face a series of difficult choices as they seek to balance their demands that Asad ultimately leave power on the one hand, and their desire for the Syrian government to remain cooperative with implementation of the OPCW Executive Council decision, participate in negotiations with the opposition, and facilitate humanitarian access on the other. By seeking a negotiated rather than a military solution, U.S. policy apparently seeks to bring the conflict to a close while maintaining the security benefits associated with the preservation of some Syrian state institutions. However, recent statements by U.S. officials and other members of the Core Group envision negotiations that will end with the leaders of the current regime having no part in transitional governance in Syria.

As of April 2014, Secretary of State Kerry has acknowledged that President Asad feels more confident in his position and has alluded to a need to change the calculus of the Asad government and the opposition in order to bolster chances for successful negotiations. In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on April 8, Secretary Kerry said:

Today, Assad feels fairly secure in Damascus and in some of the corridor going north to the ports. And that's been his strategy. But around him in the south, particularly, in the east and in the north, there is not that kind of security. In fact, the opposition has made some gains recently. And so the key here is - how do you get the parties to a place where they both understand that there isn't going to be a military solution that doesn't destroy the country absolutely and totally, but which ultimately could be negotiated? There has to be a recognition by both of the ripeness of that moment. It's not now. We all understand that. So the question is: Can you do something in order to create that? And that's a legitimate question for the Congress; a legitimate question for the Administration.

Absent a change in conditions that compels Asad's departure or empowers opposition groups to fully depose Asad, current U.S. demands for a negotiated settlement leading to the establishment of a transitional governing body would appear to require the leaders of the current government to agree to leave power voluntarily, which they may continue to resist doing without guarantees of their safety and/or immunity. Opposition members may be unable or unwilling to make such guarantees. U.S. officials have raised the prospect of international peacekeeping arrangements to guarantee elements of a negotiated settlement, but such arrangements could require an international mandate, military forces, and financial contributions that may prove difficult to procure. Meanwhile, powerful armed Islamist opposition forces reject negotiation, seek the creation of an Islamic state, and have vowed to continue fighting until the entire Syrian government is toppled.

Reconciling the current U.S. diplomatic strategy and desire for cooperation on chemical weapons destruction with the simultaneous provision of U.S. assistance to select elements of the opposition may become more difficult in the event that negotiations begin and show promise, or in the event

that anti-U.S. Islamist forces or Al Qaeda affiliates make further gains at the expense of their counterparts.

In light of these conditions, responding to the humanitarian needs generated by the crisis and working to prevent the destabilization of Syria's neighbors will remain key agenda items for U.S. decision makers for the foreseeable future.

Appendix. Select Group Profiles

The following descriptions of armed groups operating in Syria are provided as reference estimates compiled, reconciled, and edited by CRS from third-party open-source analysis.⁶⁸ CRS cannot independently verify the size, equipment, and current areas of operation of the groups described. In considering these and other analyses of the size, composition, and goals of specific groups there are several factors to consider:

- At present, open source analysis of armed groups operating in Syria relies largely on the self-reporting of individual groups and coalitions. Information is not evenly and regularly available for all groups. Verification is imperfect and is based on independent analysis of self-reported and third party-reported information. Social media outlets and news reports can help verify information, but most analysts consider it to be very difficult to confirm data points.
- There are hundreds of active militia forces, ranging in size from a few dozen to thousands and organized around a wide variety of local communities, ethnic and religious identities, and political-religious ideologies. The size and relative strength of groups have varied and will continue to vary by location and time.
- Trends in the conflict have reflected both diversification and profusion of armed groups and improvement in the size and capabilities of some actors relative to others. Many groups and units who claim to coordinate under various fronts and coalitions in fact appear to operate independently and reserve the right to change allegiances.
- The use of religious or secular imagery and messages by groups may not be reliable indicators of the long term political aims of their members or their likely success in implementing those aims. Factors motivating individuals to support certain groups may not be ideological but practical. For example, the funding available to Islamist groups from various public and private sources in the Persian Gulf may be leading some secular groups to adopt Islamist rhetoric. Others may mask extremist agendas.

⁶⁸ CRS consulted the following sources and others while preparing the analysis below: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube outlets associated with groups. Charles Lister, "Syria's insurgency beyond Good Guys and Bad Guys," ForeignPolicy.com, Middle East Channel (blog), September 20, 2013. Charles Lister, "Syria's Insurgent Landscape," IHS Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor/IHS Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Centre, September 2013. Aron Lund, "The Non-State Militant Landscape in Syria," U.S. Military Academy Combatting Terrorism Center, *CTC Sentinel*, August 2013. Ian Black, "Saudi Arabia to spend millions to train new rebel force," *The Guardian* (UK), November 7, 2013. Michael Weiss, "Mergers and Acquisitions," *NOW. Online* (Lebanon), October 29, 2013. OSC Document PLN2013100218082086, "Syria: Chief of Newly Formed 'Jaysh al-Islam' Coalition Interviewed on Al-Qa'ida Ties, Geneva II," Al Jazirah Live Satellite Television (Doha) in Arabic, September 20, 2013. Aron Lund, "Islamist Groups Declare Opposition to National Coalition and U.S. Strategy," *Syria Comment* (blog), September 24-5, 2013. OSC Document TRR2013112671951889, "Syria: New 'Islamic Front' Formation Releases Charter," November 26, 2013. Aron Lund, "Say Hello to the Islamic Front," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Syria in Crisis (blog), November 22, 2013. Aaron Y. Zelin, "Rebels Consolidating Strength in Syria: The Islamic Front," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 2177, December 3, 2013.

Figure A-1. Select Anti-Asad Armed Groups

Select Anti-Asad Armed Groups	
	<p>Supreme Military Command Council (SMC) <i>Leader: Brigadier General Abdul-Ilah al Bashir</i> Formation of Supreme Military Command Council (SMC) in December 2012 sought to reorganize non-extremist armed opposition and created regional commands and cooperative committees under the leadership of General Salim Idriss. In February 2014, the SMC voted to replace Idriss as SMC commander with Brigadier General Abdul-Ilah al Bashir, a move that Idriss and some other military commanders have rejected. Members include brigades made up of various combinations of dissident military personnel and civilian recruits, including many forces otherwise identified as members of the “Free Syrian Army” and Islamist militias participating in other coalitions. The direct command authority of the Council leadership and the affiliated Joint Command has not been demonstrated to date. Several regional command members continue to operate their own militia groups independently and in some cases have denounced the political leadership of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC).</p>
	<p>Al Jabhat al Islamiya (Islamic Front) Formed in November 2013, the Islamic Front brings together several of the most powerful Sunni Islamist militia groups in Syria under a shared program, although the full extent and unity of the group and its military command structure remain to be seen. According to the Front’s charter, it seeks “the full overthrow of the al Asad regime in Syria and for building an Islamic state ruled by the sharia of God Almighty alone.” The Front has attempted to position itself as a relatively moderate coordinating body for likeminded Sunni Islamist opposition groups and as an alternative to the exclusionary and brutal approach of the Al Qaeda-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The Front’s charter states that its members believe that force of arms alone will achieve its goal of completely toppling the Asad government, and the Front explicitly rejects the concepts of secularism and a civil state. Its charter states that it will not accept “foreign dictates that undermine its decision-making capabilities” and that it “will not participate in any political activity that violates religion or bestows the power of governance upon anything but the sharia of God Almighty.” The following armed groups constitute the core of the Islamic Front and were the original signatories of its charter: Harakat Ahrar al Sham al Islamiya; Saqour al Sham; Ansar al Sham; Jaysh al Islam; Liwa al Tawhid; and Liwa al Haqq.</p>
	<p>Harakat Ahrar al Sham al Islamiya (Ahrar al Sham) <i>Leader: Hassan Abboud</i> The “Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant” is a coalition of Salafist-jihadist militias active across Syria. Its statements suggest that its members are motivated by anti-Shiite sectarian views and by support for the establishment of an Islamic state. Ahrar al Sham led the creation of the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) in December 2012 and then merged with other SIF members, bringing its forces into closer coordination with other similarly minded militias in northern and eastern Syria. In September 2013, terrorism analyst Charles Lister of IHS Janes called the group “arguably the most strategically powerful militant actor in Syria” and credited its humanitarian relief division with being “the most influential militant-run provider of services in Syria.” The group subsequently aligned itself with the Islamic Front, and Ahrar al Sham leader Hassan Abboud serves as the head of the Front’s political office.</p>
	<p>Saqour al Sham <i>Leader: Ahmed Issa al Sheikh</i> Based in northwestern Idlib province, the “Falcons of Syria” are a Salafist-jihadist militia group that calls for the establishment of an Islamic state and has made contradictory statements about Syrian religious minorities. The group’s estimated nine thousand fighters are considered by many analysts to be among the more religiously conservative forces within the Islamist faction of the Syrian opposition. Ahmed Issa al Sheikh serves as the overall leader of the Islamic Front.</p>
	<p>Jaysh al Islam <i>Leader: Zahran Alloush</i> Based in the Damascus suburbs, the “Army of Islam” (formerly Liwa al Islam or “the Islam Brigade”), is a coalition of Islamist militia led by Salafist figure Zahran Alloush. Alloush’s brigade was credited with the July 2012 bomb attack that killed then-Minister of Defense General Dawoud Rajiha and Deputy Defense Minister Assef Shawkat and injured several other prominent regime security officials. After reorganizing the brigade and recruiting others to join an expanded coalition, Alloush launched the Army of Islam and aligned the group with the Islamic Front, of which he serves as the nominal military commander. Prior to the merger, Alloush was reported to receive support from Saudi Arabia and command as many as 5,000 fighters with an arsenal that included armored vehicles.</p>

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Figure A-2. U.S.-Designated Sunni Terrorist Groups

U.S.-Designated Sunni Terrorist Groups	
	<p>Jabhat Al Nusra (The Support Front for the People of Syria) <i>Leader: Abu Mohammad al Golani</i> A Salafi-jihadist militia, the “Support Front for the People of Syria” emerged in early 2012 and claimed responsibility for a series of high profile suicide bombing attacks against government security forces as well as summary executions of captured regime soldiers. Its leader Abu Mohammed al Golani has stated his allegiance to Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri, and the group’s messaging, tactics, and ideology mirror those of Al Qaeda affiliates in other regional conflict zones. Unofficial estimates suggest it may have as many as 6,000 fighters operating across Syria. Reporting from Syria suggests that Al Nusra Front members have been coordinating with other opposition factions in northern and southern Syria, but not always consistently or successfully. Nusra members engage in organized relief work and service provision efforts to curry favor with civilians, and the group positioned itself as a mediator during January 2014 clashes between other opposition groups and the more uncompromisingly violent Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. The prospect for clashes between Al Nusra and other groups remains, as the Front’s uncompromising views on the long-term implementation of Islamic religious law may create rifts with other Sunni Arabs and Kurds, not to mention religious minorities. The United States has designated Al Nusra as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and two of its leaders as Specially Designated Global Terrorists acting on behalf of Al Qaeda in Iraq (also an FTO) pursuant to Executive Order 13224.</p>
	<p>The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) <i>Leader: Abu Bakr al Baghdadi</i> Estimates of ISIL strength in Syria vary, but some observers believe ISIL may have had as many as 4,000 fighters in the field prior to the January 2014 outbreak of hostilities with other opposition forces. Its main areas of operation are in northern and eastern Syria near the borders of Turkey and Iraq, although ISIL fighters also are reported to operate in and around Homs and on the outskirts of Damascus, with less of a reported presence in southern Syria. ISIL fighters have engaged in sectarian attacks against Shiite and Christian religious sites and individuals suspected of being Shiite fighters. After taking control of the town of Raqqa, ISIL moved to control a key border crossing with Turkey at Azaz, north of Aleppo, and impose themselves in other areas of Idlib and Aleppo provinces. ISIL clashed with Kurdish and other Arab militia groups in the north prior to January 2014, and the outbreak of widespread hostilities with other opposition forces has appeared to result in the ISIL sustaining considerable tactical losses. ISIL’s strategic prospects appear less certain than they did prior to the fighting, but the group had not been defeated. ISIL has been reported to include hundreds of foreign fighters affiliated with the Jaysh al Muhajirin wal Ansar (the Army of Expatriates and Supporters), although foreign fighters were reported to be especially targeted by groups angered by ISIL’s extremism and violent tactics.</p>

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