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# **Iraq Crisis and U.S. Policy**

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July 21, 2014

**Congressional Research Service**

7-5700

[www.crs.gov](http://www.crs.gov)

R43612

## Summary

The offensive in northern and central Iraq, led by the Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist group the Islamic State (IS) has raised significant concerns for the United States. These concerns include a possible breakup of Iraq's political and territorial order and the establishment of a potential base for terrorist attacks in the region or even against the U.S. homeland. The crisis has raised several questions for U.S. policy because it represents the apparent unraveling of a seemingly stable and secure Iraq that was in place when U.S. combat troops departed Iraq at the end of 2011. Some months after the U.S. departure, the uprising in Syria among some elements of the Sunni Arab community there facilitated the reemergence of IS in areas of Syria and in its original base in Iraq. After late 2011, the Sunni community grew increasingly restive as Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki marginalized senior Sunni leaders, and the skills and capabilities of the Iraq Security Forces deteriorated. Many Sunnis in Iraq oppose IS's tactics and attempts to impose Islamic law, but support it as a vanguard against what they characterize as an oppressive Shiite-dominated national government.

Although the apparent threat to Baghdad itself has eased since early July, U.S. officials assess that the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) will not be able to recapture lost territory without outside help. President Obama has announced several steps to help the Iraqi government reduce the threat to U.S. interests posed by IS, but Administration officials say that additional options might not be implemented—or be effective if implemented—unless Iraqi leaders can rebuild a political consensus. The newly elected Iraqi parliament convened on July 2 but has, to date, not announced agreement on the senior positions of President or Prime Minister. The parliament did select a speaker and two deputy speakers on July 15. Maliki is seeking another term as Prime Minister but several Iraqi factions say he is likely to be replaced.

An aspect of the U.S. response could potentially involve working with Iran to reform the Iraqi political structure and to try to roll back the IS gains. Doing so would raise the potential of linkage between possible U.S.-Iran cooperation on Iraq and the ongoing international diplomacy on Iran's nuclear program. Many Sunnis in Iraq and elsewhere in the region view any U.S. engagement with Iran with suspicion and hostility, raising the stakes of such potential coordination considerably. U.S. officials have generally dismissed prospects for direct military cooperation with Iran.

The crisis has raised additional concerns about the safety of the more than 5,000 U.S. personnel in Iraq and about the international response to the humanitarian effects of the fighting.

For detail on Iraq's political and security situation and U.S. policy since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, see CRS Report RS21968, *Iraq: Politics, Governance, and Human Rights*, by Kenneth Katzman. The report includes substantial information on Iraq's Kurds, Sunni insurgent groups other than IS, Shiite organizations and militias, Iraq's human rights record, and a summary of U.S. assistance to Iraq since 2003. For further information on the connections between the situation in Iraq and that in Syria, see CRS Report RL33487, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, coordinated by Christopher M. Blanchard.

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## Overview: The Situation in Iraq

On June 29, 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, aka ISIS) changed its formal name to simply “the Islamic State” (IS) and declared the establishment of a caliphate in areas under its control in Iraq and Syria. The IS advances within Iraq since June 2014 raise questions about the future of Iraq and the region and pose U.S. policy challenges. The sections below analyze the IS-led offensive, its implications, the U.S. response, and related issues. Previous events and developments, which provide background information potentially relevant to understanding the causes of the offensive and the Iraq Security Forces (ISF) collapse in northern Iraq, are analyzed in greater detail in CRS Report RS21968, *Iraq: Politics, Governance, and Human Rights*, by Kenneth Katzman; CRS Report RL33487, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, coordinated by Christopher M. Blanchard; and CRS Report R43612, *Iraq Crisis and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman et al.

### IS June 2014 Offensive and ISF Retreat

Many observers assessed that the Iraqi government contained an earlier IS-led insurrection that began in Anbar Province in January 2014, even though the government had been unable to regain control of the city of Fallujah from IS-led forces. Such assessments were upended on June 10, 2014, when IS captured the northern city of Mosul amid mass surrenders and desertions by ISF officers and personnel. According to one expert, about 60 out of 243 Iraqi army combat battalions could not be accounted for.<sup>1</sup> In its offensive, the IS reportedly has been either joined, supported, or enabled by Sunni tribal fighters, former members of the late Saddam Hussein’s Baath Party and military, and other Sunni residents.<sup>2</sup> Their enabling of the offensive, despite reservations among many Sunnis about the IS’s brutal tactics against opponents and its intention to impose their version of Islamic law, appears to reflect broad Sunni dissatisfaction with the government of Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki.<sup>3</sup> Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee on June 18, 2014, that “ISIL [now IS] is almost undistinguishable from the other groups” currently fighting the Maliki government.<sup>4</sup>

After taking Mosul, the IS-led fighters advanced to Saddam’s hometown of Tikrit and other cities, and into Diyala Province, which has roughly equal numbers of Sunnis and Shiites. In the course of the offensive, IS and allied fighters looted banks, freed prisoners, and reportedly captured a substantial amount of U.S.-supplied military equipment, such as HMMWVs (“Humvees”) and artillery equipped with Global Positioning System (GPS) targeting systems.<sup>5</sup> IS-led fighters captured the city of Tal Afar west of Mosul on June 16 and reached the outskirts of Baqubah, capital of Diyala, about 38 miles northeast of Baghdad, by June 17. IS-led insurgents in Anbar, with the support of some tribal allies, reportedly seized additional cities along the Euphrates River in that province, including Haditha. In mid-

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Knights in “Iraq’s Dire Situation.” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 17, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Arango. “Uneasy Alliance Gives Insurgents an Edge in Iraq.” *New York Times*, June 19, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> “Unlikely Allies Aid Militants in Iraq.” *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Testimony of Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Martin Dempsey, Senate Armed Services Committee, June 18, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell Prothero. “Iraqi Army Remains on Defensive as Extent of June Debacle Becomes Clearer.” McLatchey Wire Service, July 14, 2014.

July, IS members in Mosul reportedly ordered remaining Christians there to leave the city, and most apparently complied.<sup>6</sup>

IS-led militant attacks on the country's main oil refinery at Baiji have caused gasoline shortages in northern Iraq, including in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)-controlled region.<sup>7</sup> However, the effect of the fighting on Iraq's overall oil production and exports has been limited, in large part because about 75% of Iraq's oil is produced and exported from Iraq's south, where Sunni insurgents are far fewer in number.

Shiite militias have mobilized to try to help the government prevent IS forces from reaching Baghdad. The Iraqi capital is reportedly about 80% Shiite-inhabited, and many Shiites there and from elsewhere volunteered for militia service—in part answering a call by Iraq's leading Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani—to help the ISF. With support from these militias, the government forces have regrouped to some extent. U.S. officials express increasing confidence that the IS-led offensive will not be able to capture the city outright, although the ISF might yet lose parts of the city.<sup>8</sup> IS-led militants have been able to approach Baghdad International Airport to the southwest of the city. ISF-led forces have conducted some limited counterattacks on Tikrit and in Anbar Province, but Gen. Dempsey stated on July 3 that the ISF would have difficulty recapturing any lost ground without external support.<sup>9</sup>

As a consequence of the reliance on the Shiite militias, sectarian violence in Baghdad is reportedly escalating as Shiites retaliate against Sunnis for the IS-led offensive and Sunnis respond.<sup>10</sup> The United Nations reported that June 2014 was the deadliest month in Iraq since 2008 with about 2,400 Iraqis killed, of which about two thirds were said to be civilians and the remainder ISF personnel.

As the crisis has unfolded, Prime Minister Maliki—who seeks a third term as Prime Minister in the government formation process resulting from April 30, 2014 national elections – has worked with loyalist Iraqi commanders to help the ISF regroup. Iraq's small air force began conducting some air strikes on IS positions in Mosul and elsewhere as early as June 12. Maliki's emphasis on militarily countering the offensive – rather than on reaching out to the disaffected Sunni Arab community – appears intended to shore up his base in the Shiite community as Iraqi leaders try to determine the composition of the next national government. Maliki has maintained this stance despite a public call by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry for the Iraqi people “to find leadership... that is prepared to be inclusive and share power.”<sup>11</sup>

## **Iraq's Kurds Take Advantage of ISF Collapse**

The ISF collapse in the north enabled the *peshmerga* (Kurdish militia) of the Kurds' autonomous political entity in northern Iraq, the KRG, to capture Kirkuk and large nearby oil fields. The Kurds have long sought to control that oil-rich region, which they claim is historic Kurdish territory, and to affiliate the province with the KRG. Many experts assert that the Kurds are unlikely to willingly return control of Kirkuk to the central government.<sup>12</sup> The capture has prompted renewed discussion among KRG leaders

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<sup>6</sup> Alissa Rubin. “ISIS Expels Last Iraqi Christians From Mosul.” *New York Times*, July 19, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Steven Mufson. “Iraq's Biggest Oil Refinery Is on Fire. How Important is That?” *Washington Post*, June 18, 2014

<sup>8</sup> Eric Schmitt and Michael Gordon. “U.S. Sees Risks in Assisting a Compromised Iraqi Force.” *New York Times*, July 14, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Craig Whitlock. “Pentagon Leaders: Iraq Probably Needs Outside Help to Retake Seized Territory.” *Washington Post*, July 3, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Alissa Rubin and Rod Nordland. “As Sunnis Die in Iraq, a Cycle is Restarting.” *New York Times*, June 18, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> “Kerry says U.S. wants Iraqis to find inclusive leadership,” Reuters, June 22, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Author conversation with expert on the Iraqi Kurds. June 14, 2014.

about seeking outright independence from Iraq, and in early July KRG President Masoud Barzani asked the KRG parliament to plan a referendum on independence.<sup>13</sup> That step appeared to defy reported private U.S. official urgings for the Iraqi Kurds not to seek independence, and aforementioned U.S. calls for efforts within the Iraqi political process to form a new, inclusive central government in Baghdad.

It is unclear whether the potential for Kurdish secession to trigger political and military responses from Baghdad or neighboring countries, coupled with the likely loss of its receipts of a percentage of Iraq's nationwide oil revenue, might lead the Kurds to defer a decision on formal independence, as they have since achieving autonomy a decade ago. KRG leaders might be using the independence issue, along with their newly-controlled territory, as leverage in their disputes with Baghdad. KRG leaders strongly oppose a third term for Prime Minister Maliki, and suspended their participation in Iraq's current government in response to Maliki's July 2014 accusations that Kurds were complicit in the June IS-led offensive. On July 11, *peshmerga* reportedly seized control of two key oil fields near Kirkuk from a state-controlled company. That same day, Maliki replaced Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari, a Kurd, with deputy prime minister Hussein Shahrastani, a Shiite from Maliki's coalition.<sup>14</sup>

## **The Crisis's Implications for Iraqi Government Formation**

The crisis has the potential to produce major change in Iraq's leadership—in part to address stated U.S. concerns that Maliki is largely to blame for the crisis by alienating the Sunni community. Elections for the Iraqi Council of Representatives (COR) were held on April 30, 2014, which has yet to fully form a new government. Several Iraqi factions – as well as some within Maliki's core coalition – oppose a third term for Maliki as Prime Minister in spite of the dominant performance of the Maliki-led “State of Law” coalition in the election. The new COR convened July 2 and several times thereafter to begin the government formation process, and succeeded on July 15 in selecting as COR Speaker Salim al Jabburi (a Sunni Arab), and two deputies. However, it is not clear whether the selection of a COR Speaker means that the major factions have reached agreement on the other two most senior positions in Iraq's government. By informal agreement, the COR speakership is held by a Sunni Arab; the largely ceremonial presidency is held by a Kurd; and the powerful executive post of Prime Minister is held by a Shiite Arab. With the COR leadership team chosen, the constitution calls for a president to be selected within two weeks, and for a Prime Minister to be selected by one month after that. In past government formation processes, these constitutional deadlines were not met. As negotiations on the key positions accelerated, President Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) faction of Iraqi Kurds, returned to Iraq after almost two years of treatment in Germany for a 2012 stroke.

Maliki has argued that he should retain his post because his coalition won far more seats in the April 30 election than did any other bloc, and, running in Baghdad Province, he won by far the most votes of any single candidate in the election. Maliki's chances of securing a third term appeared to fade after June 20, when Ayatollah Sistani issued a statement that the major factions should form “an effective government that enjoys broad national support, avoids past mistakes, and opens new horizons toward a better future for all Iraqis...”<sup>15</sup> Potential candidates to replace Maliki include two other figures from his Da'wa Party (the core of his State of Law coalition): Tariq Najm al Abdullah and acting Minister of National Security (intelligence) Falah al-Fayyad. State of Law coalition member, foreign minister, and deputy prime

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<sup>13</sup> For more information on the Kurds and the potential for the Iraqi Kurds to declare independence, see CRS Report IN10105, *The Kurds and Possible Iraqi Kurdish Independence*, by Jim Zanotti and Kenneth Katzman.

<sup>14</sup> Alissa Rubin. “Rift with Kurds Widens as Iraqi Leader Replaces the Foreign Minister.” *New York Times*, July 12, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> “Top Shiite Cleric Deals Blow to Al Maliki Leadership.” *USA Today*, June 20, 2014.

minister Hussein Shahrastani also may be a candidate.<sup>16</sup> Other possible replacements are Shiite figures who are not in Maliki's immediate State of Law bloc but are within the broader, pan-Shiite "National Alliance" that encompasses all Shiite factions in the COR. They include secular Shiite politician Ahmad Chalabi, who demonstrated some political strength in the July 15 vote for COR deputy speaker, even though he ultimately lost that post to Haydar al Abbadi, a member of Maliki's Da'wa Party. The other deputy speaker selected was Aram Sheikh, of the Gorran ("Change") Kurdish faction.

## Other Possible Outcomes

Some of the longer-term possibilities, which are not mutually exclusive, include

- **An IS-led seizure or siege of Baghdad.** Either of these developments could cause the government to fall and IS to expand the Islamic state that it has declared. The outright seizure of Baghdad is considered unlikely, as noted above, but a siege is possible because of the significant Sunni population in towns just north and west of the city that IS and its allies are attempting to capture. The fall or siege of Baghdad could prompt large-scale Iranian ground intervention, and could raise the likelihood of U.S. ground intervention as well.
- **De facto federalism or partition of Iraq.** Another possible outcome could be that IS fails to take Baghdad, but the Maliki government, the ISF, and Maliki's Shiite allies are unable to push the insurrection back. That could produce a new, accepted but informal, political structure in which each of the major communities—Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds—administer areas under their de facto political and military control.<sup>17</sup>
- **Long-standing civil war.** Another potential outcome is that the situation in Iraq devolves into a long-term outright civil war, in which forces loyal to the various parties—to the Sunni insurrection, the Kurdistan Regional Government, and the Maliki government and its Shiite militia supporters—alternately gain and lose territory in a long struggle for power.
- **A restoration of the pre-2013 situation.** It is possible that the militias and outside assistance could enable the government to recapture the territory gained by the IS-led offensives. That could calm the current crisis but might not necessarily quiet Sunni unrest over the longer term.

## U.S. Response

President Obama and other U.S. officials attributed the ISF collapse largely to the failure of Iraqi leaders, particularly Maliki, to build an inclusive government that could hold the allegiance of Sunni citizens or Sunni ISF personnel. Citing the legacy of the U.S. intervention in Iraq and the potential IS threat to U.S. interests, President Obama stated on June 13, 2014, that the Iraqi government "needs additional support to break the momentum of extremist groups and bolster the capabilities of Iraqi security forces."<sup>18</sup> He said that he had requested that his national security team prepare a range of options. The actions announced by

<sup>16</sup> Liz Sly. "Embattled Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki 'Will Not Go Quietly,' Friends and Foes Say." *Washington Post*, June 21, 2014; author conversations with Iraq experts in Washington, DC. June-July 2014.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.timesofisrael.com/as-fighting-nears-baghdad-un-warns-of-iraq-break-up/>

<sup>18</sup> White House. "Statement by the President on Iraq." June 13, 2014.

President Obama on June 19, 2014, and selected other options that have been considered, are discussed below.<sup>19</sup> President Obama’s statements on the crisis have implied U.S. support for the replacement of Maliki, but it is not clear whether the Administration would discontinue the assistance it is providing—or refuse any further assistance—if Maliki secures another term.

- *Advice, Training, and Intelligence Sharing.* In his June 19 statement, President Obama announced that he was sending up to 300 U.S. advisers to assess the ISF and gather intelligence on the IS. Press reports indicate that these will be Special Operations Forces.<sup>20</sup> As of mid- July, about 200 of the advisers had arrived and had reportedly submitted their assessment of the ISF to U.S. Defense Department officials. That evaluation reportedly concludes that only about half of all ISF units are sufficiently capable for U.S. advisers to help them regain captured territory, were the President to decide on such an expanded mission.<sup>21</sup> Such a mission, if successful, would presumably reduce the geographic and political space available to the IS. On the other hand, a combat advisory mission could potentially contradict President Obama’s statement on June 19, 2014, that the United States “will not pursue military actions that support one sect inside of Iraq at the expense of another.”<sup>22</sup> Some commentators further argue that sending forces as advisers creates a potential for expanding U.S. involvement beyond what President Obama announced.
- *U.S. combat troop deployment.* President Obama has ruled out this option, saying, “We will not be sending U.S. troops back into combat in Iraq.”<sup>23</sup> There may be several reasons for ruling out this option, including public opinion within the United States as well as the apparent view within the Administration that U.S. troops would not be capable of fixing the political problems that, in the Administration’s apparent view, have been primarily responsible for the success of the IS-led insurrection. Were this an active option, one potential complication is that there is no active “Status of Forces” Agreement (SOFA) with Iraq that would U.S. military personnel legal immunity from Iraqi law. The advisers discussed above are operating under a temporary SOFA specific for their mission.
- *Airstrikes.* The U.S. advisers discussed above, as well as stepped-up manned and unmanned surveillance flights, are gathering intelligence for potential U.S. airstrikes against IS leaders and bases in Iraq.<sup>24</sup> No decision on strikes has been announced. U.S. officials have asserted that the IS has few clearly discernible targets that would not risk causing Iraqi civilian casualties, and it is not clear that airstrikes alone could defeat the IS-led insurrection. U.S. strikes also could conceivably further harden the Sunni-tribal-IS alliance of convenience, contrary to apparent U.S. efforts to drive it apart. Former top U.S. commander in Iraq General David Petraeus expressed an additional pitfall to significant airstrikes, saying: “This cannot be the United States being the air force for [Shiite] militias or a [Shiite] on Sunni Arab fight.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>19</sup> “Text of Obama’s Remarks on Iraq.” Federal News Service, June 19, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> “Obama to Make Case for Sending Special Forces to Iraq. CBS News, June 17, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Eric Schmitt and Michael Gordon. “U.S. Sees Risks in Assisting a Compromised Iraqi Force.” op.cit.

<sup>22</sup> “Text of Obama’s Remarks on Iraq.” op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> White House, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Gordon and Eric Schmitt. “Iraq Is Said to Seek U.S. Strikes on Insurgents.” *New York Times*, June 12, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Nico Hines. “Petraeus: U.S. Must Not Become the Shia Militia’s Air Force.” *The Daily Beast*, June 18, 2014.

- *Arms Deliveries.* An option is to sell Iraq additional military equipment, such as tanks and armored vehicles, to replace those lost in the IS-led offensive. Another option is to accelerate deliveries of arms already purchased by Iraq, including F-16 aircraft and Apache attack helicopters. The United States has been delivering additional HELLFIRE missiles that Iraq's small air force is using against IS targets. However, the capture of U.S.-supplied weaponry by IS fighters in the June offensive raises the risk that new and more sophisticated U.S. weapons could fall into IS hands. Moreover, U.S. officials and Members of Congress have previously expressed concerns about the potential for the Iraqi government to use sophisticated air assets against protesters and civilian opponents rather than IS targets.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Josh Rogin. "Congress to Iraq's Maliki: No Ams for a Civil War." Daily Beast, January 8, 2014.

### The Islamic State (IS)<sup>27</sup>

On June 29, 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, aka ISIS) formally declared the establishment of an Islamic caliphate extending from Aleppo province in Syria to Diyala province in Iraq. The declaration named ISIL's leader Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al Badri al Samarra'i (aka Abu Bakr al Baghdadi),<sup>28</sup> as imam and caliph and noted that the group would henceforth be known as the Islamic State (IS).<sup>29</sup>

The IS is a transnational Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist group that has expanded its control over areas of northwestern Iraq and northeastern Syria since 2013. The group's ideological and organizational roots lie in the forces built and led by the late Abu Musab al Zarqawi in Iraq from 2002 through 2006—*Tawhid wal Jihad* (Monotheism and Jihad) and Al Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers (aka Al Qaeda in Iraq, or AQ-I). Following Zarqawi's death at the hands of U.S. forces in June 2006, AQ-I leaders repackaged the group as a coalition known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). ISI was weakened, but not eliminated, by the time of the U.S. withdrawal in 2011. Under the leadership of Baghdadi, ISI rebuilt its capabilities. By early 2013, the group was conducting dozens of deadly attacks a month inside Iraq. The precise nature of the relationship between ISI/IS and Al Qaeda leaders from 2006 onward is unclear. In recent months, IS leaders have stated their view that their group "is not and has never been an offshoot of Al Qaeda,"<sup>30</sup> and that, given that they view themselves as a state and a sovereign political entity, they have given leaders of the Al Qaeda organization deference rather than pledges of obedience.

ISIL was formed in April 2013, when Al Baghdadi announced his intent to merge his forces in Iraq and Syria with those of the Syria-based *Jabhat al Nusra* (Support Front). Nusra Front and Al Qaeda leaders rejected the merger, underscoring growing tensions among Sunni extremists in the region that have since erupted into conflict. In July 2013, ISIL attacked prisons at Abu Ghraib and Taji in Iraq, reportedly freeing several hundred detained members. ISIL continued a fierce wave of attacks across northern, western, and central Iraq, while in Syria the group consolidated control over the city and province of Raqqa and expanded its presence in northwestern areas then controlled by other rebel forces. Late 2013 saw the Iraqi government seeking expanded counterterrorism and military assistance from the United States, ostensibly to meet the growing ISIL threat. Inside Syria, ISIL alienated its rebel counterparts further, and an anti-ISIL campaign erupted there in early 2014, expelling the group from some areas it had controlled and unleashing a cycle of ongoing infighting. In Syria, ISIL remains strongest in Raqqa, Dayr az Zawr, and Hasakah. ISIL's attempts to assert control over the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi in Iraq's Anbar province and its June 2014 offensive in northern Iraq underscored the group's lethality and ability to conduct combat operations and manage partnerships with local groups in multiple areas over large geographic distances. The durability of the IS's partnerships are questionable: it remains at violent odds with Islamist and secular armed groups in Syria, and tribal, Islamist, and Baathist armed groups in Iraq have a history of opposing IS's previous incarnations.

Statements and media materials released by IS figures reflect an uncompromising, exclusionary worldview. Statements by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and IS spokesman Abu Mohammed al Adnani feature sectarian calls for violence and identify Shiites, non-Muslims, and unsupportive Sunnis as enemies.<sup>31</sup> The group describes Iraqi Shiites derogatorily as "rejectionists" and "polytheists" and paints the Iraqi government of Nuri al Maliki as a puppet of Iran. Similar ire is aimed at Syrian Alawites and the government of Bashar al Asad, although some sources allege that ISIL operatives have benefitted from evolving financial and security arrangements with Damascus dating back to the time of the U.S. presence in Iraq.

Senior U.S. officials have stated that the IS poses a serious threat to the United States and maintains training camps in Iraq and Syria, but presently lacks the capability to carry out operations on U.S. territory.<sup>32</sup> In July 2012, Al Baghdadi warned U.S. leaders that "the war with you has just begun." In January 2014, he said, "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."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Prepared by Christopher Blanchard, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs.

<sup>28</sup> Al Baghdadi was arrested and detained by U.S. forces in Iraq at Camp Bucca, until his release in 2009.

<sup>29</sup> U.S. Government Open Source Center Report TRR2014062966139093, June 29, 2014.

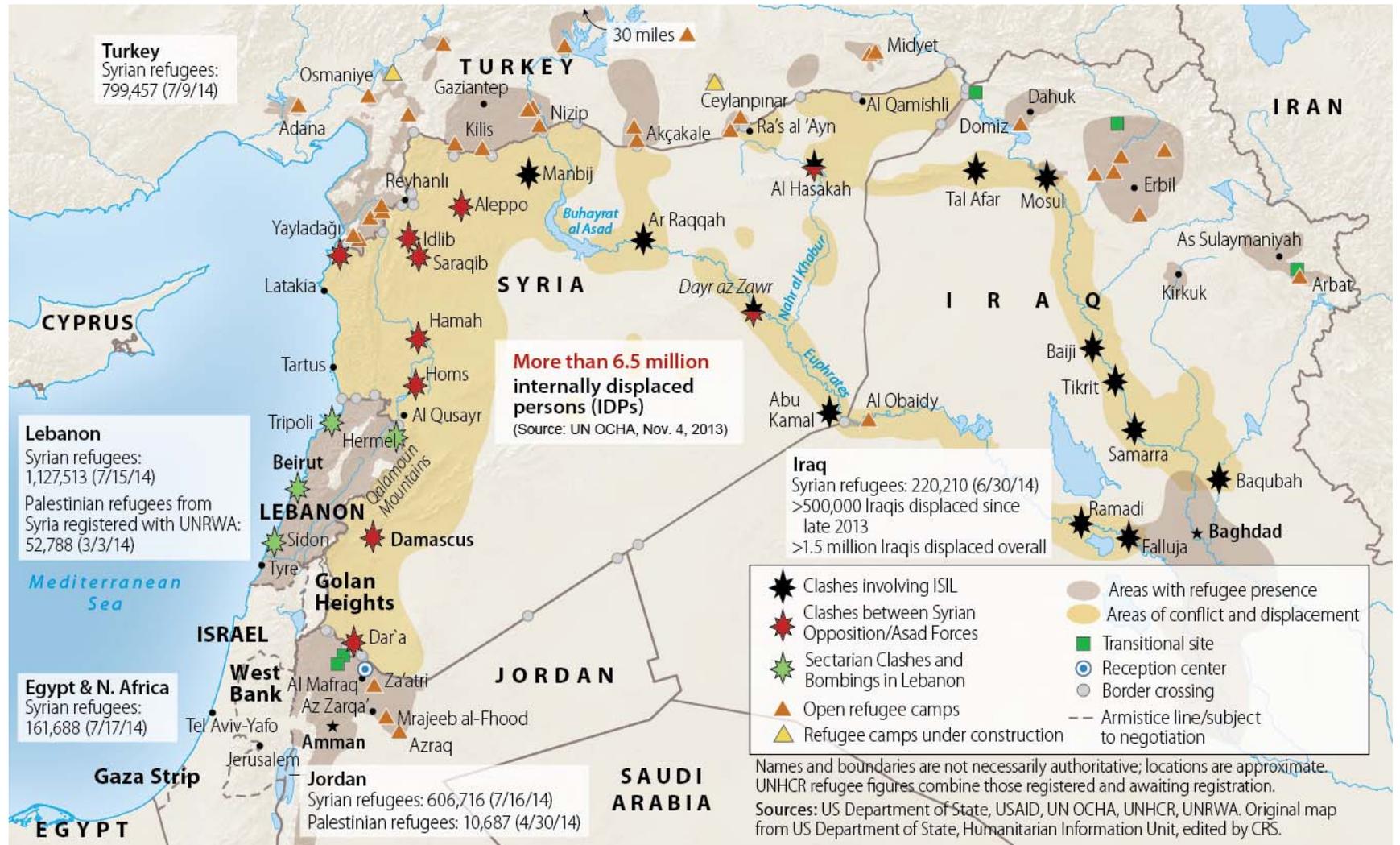
<sup>30</sup> OSC Report TRN2014051234500562, May 11-2, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> OSC Report GMP20130409405003, April 9, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Statements by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey, and Secretary of State John Kerry, June 2014. See also Testimony of Central Intelligence Agency Director John Brennan before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, February 2014.

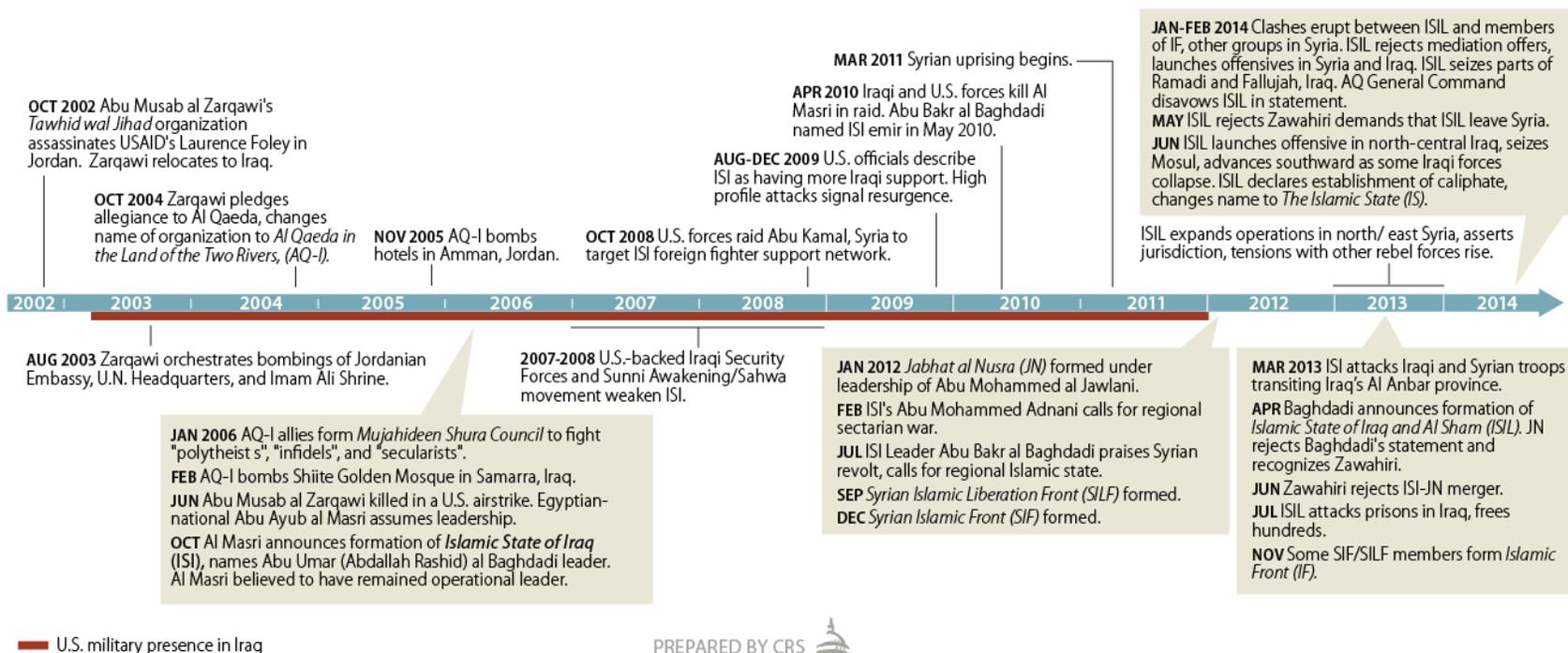
<sup>33</sup> OSC Report GMP20120721586002, July 21, 2012; and OSC Report TRR2014011980831299, January 19, 2014.

**Figure I. Iraq, Syria, and Regional Unrest**



**Notes:** Clash symbols in Syria and Iraq denote areas where recent clashes have occurred, not necessarily areas of current control.

**Figure 2. Evolution of IS/ISIL and Extremist Groups in Iraq and Syria, 2002-2014**



## Syria Dimension<sup>34</sup>

Since 2013, IS fighters have used Syria both as a staging ground for attacks in Iraq and as a parallel theater of operations.<sup>35</sup> In early 2014, IS reestablished control in most areas of the northern Syrian province of Raqqah and reasserted itself to the east in Dayr az Zawr, a province rich in oil and gas resources bordering the Anbar region of Iraq. Since late 2013, the IS has controlled several oilfields in Dayr az Zawr and reportedly has drawn revenue from oil sales to the Syrian government. With the proceeds, the group was able to maintain operational independence from Al Qaeda's leadership and pay competitive salaries to its fighters. The IS derived additional revenue in Syria by imposing taxes on local populations and demanding a percentage of the funds involved in humanitarian and commercial operations in areas under its control.<sup>36</sup> The IS also has operated north of Dayr az Zawr in Hasakah province, establishing a connection to Iraq's Nineveh province that it was apparently able to exploit in its eventual advance towards Mosul.

IS gains in Iraq are likely to facilitate the flow of weapons and fighters into eastern Syria to the IS and other groups, both because of the publicity from these gains and because of the supply lines they open. Captured U.S.-origin military equipment provided to Iraqi security forces already has appeared in photos reportedly taken in Syria and posted on social media outlets. At the same time, IS's expanding theater of conflict could subject it to overextension.

IS gains may also motivate the Maliki and Asad governments to cooperate more closely in seeking to counter the IS. IS advances in Iraq could weaken the Syrian's government's ability to hold ground in contested areas, as some Iraqi Shiite militants who had previously fought alongside Asad forces return home to combat the IS.<sup>37</sup> In mid-June 2014, Syrian forces conducted air strikes against IS-held areas of Raqqah and Hasakah in coordination with the Iraqi government, according to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.<sup>38</sup> Syria later struck IS targets near a border crossing between the two states. Maliki welcomed the strikes, which he stated occurred on the Syrian side of the border. U.S. and Iraqi military sources stated, however, that the Syrian strikes took place inside Iraq.<sup>39</sup> Increased cooperation between Damascus and Baghdad could alter the dynamics in both conflicts. It could also undermine ongoing U.S. efforts to encourage Iraqi leaders to support U.S. efforts to press Asad to step down in favor of a transitional government. Increased Iraqi-Syrian cooperation could also decrease the likelihood that Baghdad would comply with U.S. requests to crack down on Iranian overflights of weapons and equipment to Damascus.

It is unclear what impact IS gains in Iraq would have outside of eastern Syria. At least half of Syria-based IS fighters are Syrian or Iraqi tribesmen, according to a Syrian IS defector.<sup>40</sup> Like

<sup>34</sup> Prepared by Carla Humud, Analyst in Middle Eastern and African Affairs. For more information see CRS Report RL33487, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, coordinated by Christopher M. Blanchard.

<sup>35</sup> "Syria war fueling attacks by al Qaeda in Iraq, officials say," *New York Times*, August 15, 2013.

<sup>36</sup> "Sunni fighters gain as they battle 2 governments, and other rebels," *New York Times*, June 11, 2014.

<sup>37</sup> "Seeing their gains at risk, Shiites flock to join militias," *New York Times*, June 13, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> "Syria pounds ISIS bases in coordination with Iraq," *Daily Star*, June 15, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> "Iraqi PM welcomes Syria air strikes on border crossing," *BBC*, June 26, 2014.

<sup>40</sup> "Sunni Fighters Gain as They Battle 2 Governments and Other Rebels," *New York Times*, June 11, 2014.

other segments of the Syrian opposition, Syrian tribes have at times been reluctant to expand hostilities against government forces beyond their own local areas.<sup>41</sup> The IS to date has concentrated its forces in Syria's northeast, and has largely avoided regular confrontations in the country's main urban areas in Syria's western half.

Ongoing IS operations in Syria are focused in Dayr az Zawr, as the group fights to consolidate its supply lines to the city of Abu Kamal, a key node along the Syria-Iraq border. Press and social media reports suggest that IS, by mid-July, had seized large sectors of the provincial capital of Dayr az-Zawr, although some neighborhoods remain contested by the regime and other rebel groups.<sup>42</sup> Following the IS declaration of a caliphate, many local and tribal rebel forces surrendered to the group and withdrew from their positions, further expanding the IS presence in the Dayr az-Zawr countryside.<sup>43</sup> Any Iraqi or U.S. efforts to disrupt or sever IS supply lines through Abu Kamal or between Dayr az Zawr and Mosul could benefit Syrian military and Nusra Front forces also operating in the area.

## Iran Dimension

The rapidity of the ISF collapse appeared to align the interests of Iran and the United States in preventing an IS seizure of Baghdad. Secretary of State John Kerry said in an interview that the United States was “open to discussions [with Iran on Iraq] if there’s something constructive that can be contributed by Iran.”<sup>44</sup> U.S. diplomats reportedly discussed the situation in Iraq at the margins of the June 16 talks on Iran’s nuclear program, reportedly seeking Iran’s cooperation to compel Prime Minister Maliki to share power or be replaced outright.<sup>45</sup> No decision on direct cooperation on Iraq was announced after that meeting. A U.S. State Department spokeswoman sought to refute criticism that the bilateral discussion on Iraq could provide Iran additional leverage in the nuclear talks, saying on June 18 that U.S. officials insisted on maintaining a firewall between the ongoing nuclear negotiations and the crisis in Iraq.<sup>46</sup>

Many observers remain skeptical that that the United States could or should cooperate with Iran on Iraq. Iran has been a staunch supporter of the Shiite-led government in Iraq and those in Iran who control policy toward Iraq do not necessarily share the U.S. goal of creating a broad-based, inclusive central government. Iran reportedly is open to supporting an alternative to Maliki as Prime Minister but has not publicly insisted he be replaced.<sup>47</sup>

In actions that appear to further U.S. objectives in Iraq, Iran has reportedly been delivering arms and ammunition to Iraq since early in the crisis. In early July, Iran returned to Iraq about a dozen of the 100+ Iraqi combat aircraft that were flown to Iran at the start of the 1991 war between Iraq

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<sup>41</sup> “The Tribal Factor in Syria’s Rebellion: A Survey of Armed Tribal Groups in Syria.” The Jamestown Foundation, June 27, 2013.

<sup>42</sup> “Syria’s Allies are Stretched by Widening War.” Wall Street Journal, July 14, 2014; “Resistance Emerges as ISIS Consolidates in Deir az Zour,” July 15, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> “ISIS Advances in Deir ez Zour.” Institute for the Study of War,” July 5, 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Gordon and David Sanger. “U.S. Is Exploring Talks with Iran on Crisis in Iraq.” *New York Times*, June 17, 2014.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> “U.S. is Exploring Talks with Iran on Crisis in Iraq.” op. cit.

<sup>47</sup> Author conversations with experts on Iran. Washington, DC. June-July 2014

and the United States-led coalition. Iranian pilots apparently also are flying the aircraft: in July 2014 Iran announced that one of its pilots had died in operations in Iraq.<sup>48</sup>

Some experts assess, however, that Iran's assistance to Iraq will be counterproductive to U.S. aims. Iran helped establish many of the Shiite militias that fought the United States during 2003-2011, and Iran reportedly has sent Islamic Revolutionary Guard-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) personnel into Iraq to help re-organize these Shiite militias to assist in the fighting. As discussed above, the revival of the militias is increasing tensions with Iraq's Sunnis, including those who still live in Baghdad and fear Shiite sectarian violence. Many Shiite militia forces had gone to Syria to help President Assad but returned to Iraq after the fall of Mosul to help defend Baghdad.

## **Selected Additional Issues Raised by the Crisis**

### **Humanitarian Impact and Response<sup>49</sup>**

According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) approximately 1.2 million people have been displaced by fighting in and around Mosul and in areas reaching south towards Baghdad. The actual displacement figures remain fluid and difficult to fully ascertain. More than 300,000 of those displaced have reportedly fled to the relatively secure KRG-controlled region of Iraq (KRI) or have formed ad hoc camps along its border. Others have scattered elsewhere – with the majority located in Western Anbar governorate as well as Dohuk, Nineveh, and Erbil governorates. These figures include an estimated 500,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who fled fighting in Anbar province earlier this year. In addition, there are more than 1.1 million Iraqis who were displaced from the previous conflict in Iraq. Many had sought refuge in Syria between 2003 and 2011 and are thought to remain displaced. With 2.3 million displaced Iraqis inside the country, an urgent humanitarian crisis is emerging and humanitarian actors are scrambling to meet the needs of IDPs and conflict victims. There are also over 400,000 Iraqi refugees living in other countries.<sup>50</sup>

Priority needs include Core Relief Items (CRIs) such as shelter, food, clean water, and non-food assistance. IDPs are residing with relatives and in host communities, mosques, tents, schools, unfinished buildings, and other government facilities. Various reports indicate that access to hospitals is limited, with some not functioning at all. Temporary transit facilities have been set up close to KRG border areas to provide medical assistance and drinking water. Humanitarian organizations are mobilizing teams to assess the situation further where possible and to coordinate a response. Access in KRI is reportedly good and organizations are able to provide assistance. Access in areas of conflict in the rest of the country is limited. There are concerns about the impact of hostilities on minorities, particularly Christians. Freedom of movement – where IDPs are able to move to areas of safety and between governorates – has been complicated by conflict causing some, particularly in areas surrounding Baghdad, to be stranded.

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<sup>48</sup> “Iran News Agency Reports Death of Iranian Pilot in Iraq.” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. July 5, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> This section was prepared by Rhoda Margesson, Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy.

<sup>50</sup> Although this section is focused primarily on the situation in Iraq, the situations of displacement and movement of populations are intertwined with the conflict in neighboring Syria.

According to the U.N. Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), the KRG policy on establishing IDP camps has yet to be fully determined. Camps in Erbil and Dohuk already exist and the KRG authorities are working to find a way to address the needs of the displaced, including identifying a location for additional camps. However, there are reports that local authorities do not want to allow large numbers of IDPs into their territory. The region is already housing more than 220,000 refugees from Syria. According to UNHCR, due to renewed conflict in Iraq, approximately 6,000 Syrians have returned to Syria since early June 2014.

UNAMI is coordinating the response by the U.N. Humanitarian Country Team and some partner organizations. The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA) launched a Strategic Response Plan (SRP) for Iraq in March 2014 for \$104 million to support the Iraqi government in its efforts to meet the humanitarian needs of the people affected by fighting in Anbar Province. On June 24 UNOCHA launched a revised SRP, requesting \$312.1 million in funding to include support for the significantly increased caseload of IDPs and a wider geographical focus. Funding from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), a multilateral funding mechanism administered through the United Nations, is also under consideration.

## Responses to Threats to U.S. Personnel, Facilities and Citizens<sup>51</sup>

On June 15, the Department of State announced that while the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad would remain open, a number of personnel would be “temporarily relocated” to Consulate Generals in Basrah and Erbil as well as to Department of State facilities in Amman, Jordan. The relocations were reportedly being carried out by non-military means. The announcement stated that a “substantial majority of the U.S. Embassy presence in Iraq” would remain in place and that, with an expected addition of security personnel, the Embassy would be “fully equipped” to carry out “its national security mission.”<sup>52</sup>

News reports suggested that roughly 200 Marine Corps guards and contractors were in place at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad prior to the crisis to protect the Embassy.<sup>53</sup> Since the crisis began, the White House has announced two deployments to reinforce that number. On June 16, the White House informed Congress that up to approximately 275 U.S. military personnel were being dispatched to Iraq to assist with the temporary relocation of diplomatic personnel, a deployment undertaken with the consent of the Government of Iraq.<sup>54</sup> On June 30, the White House announced the deployment of up to an additional 200 U.S. Armed Forces personnel to provide increased security to the U.S. Embassy and its support facilities, as well as to reinforce the Baghdad International Airport. According to the White House notification to Congress, provided “consistent with” the War Powers Act, the deployed forces would be accompanied by helicopters and unmanned drones. The force “is deploying for the purpose of protecting U.S. citizens and property, if necessary, and is equipped for combat,” according to the statement, and may/will “remain in Iraq until the security situation becomes such that it is no longer needed.”<sup>55</sup> The

<sup>51</sup> Prepared by Alex Tiersky, Analyst in Foreign Affairs. For more information on this issue, see: CRS Report IN10090, *Crisis in Iraq: Securing U.S. Citizens, Personnel, and Facilities*, by Alex Tiersky.

<sup>52</sup> Department of State Spokesperson, “Press Statement: Iraq,” press release, June 15, 2014.

<sup>53</sup> Dan Lamothe, “U.S. companies pulling contractors from Iraqi bases as security crumbles,” *The Washington Post*, June 12, 2014.

<sup>54</sup> The White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the Press Secretary on the War Powers Resolution Report for Iraq,” press release, June 16, 2014.

<sup>55</sup> The White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Letter from the President—War Powers Resolution Letter regarding (continued...)”

Department of Defense had also previously confirmed that it “has airlift assets at the ready should State Department request them, as per normal interagency support arrangements.”<sup>56</sup>

The State Department posted on June 16 an “Emergency Message for U.S. Citizens: Announcement of Relocation of U.S. Embassy Staff,” which urged “U.S. citizens to avoid travel to Iraq because of current safety and security concerns” and advised those concerned about their safety to “make plans to depart by commercial means.” The statement emphasized that the Embassy should not be contacted with requests for assistance with travel arrangements, and that the Embassy “does not offer ‘protection’ services to individuals who feel unsafe.” While the Embassy remained open, the statement said, Embassy services for U.S. citizens throughout Iraq would be limited due to the security environment.<sup>57</sup>

On June 12, the Department of State confirmed that a number of U.S. citizen contract employees to the Iraqi Government, who were performing services in connection with the U.S. Foreign Military Sales Program in Iraq, were “temporarily relocated” by their companies due to security concerns.<sup>58</sup>

## Possible Questions for Congressional Consideration<sup>59</sup>

What are the current threats to U.S. interests and personnel in Iraq? Can the U.S. government mitigate those threats effectively by using available resources and authorities? Why or why not? If not, what additional resources and/or authorities may be required?

What are overall U.S. priorities in this situation, and how should these priorities shape the U.S. response? Is it realistic and worthwhile for U.S. officials and lawmakers to act in expectation that Iraq’s government can resolve or manage the country’s sectarian, ethnic, and regional differences? If the United States assists the Iraqi government and/or cooperates with other countries to address this crisis, how might those actions affect regional balances and perceptions?

How, if at all, should recent developments in Iraq shape congressional consideration of pending authorization and appropriations legislation for defense and foreign assistance? Should the United States provide more assistance, and/or condition foreign or military assistance to Iraq on the achievement of an inclusive national government?

What were the results of the U.S. military assessment of the ISF by the advisers sent in June? What recommendations did the advisers make, if any? What actions is the Administration

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(...continued)

Iraq,” June 30, 2014.

<sup>56</sup> “DOD Provides Security Help for Baghdad Diplomatic Facilities,” *American Forces Press Service*, June 15, 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Department of State, “Emergency Message for U.S. Citizens: Announcement of Relocation of U.S. Embassy Staff,” press release, June 16, 2014, <http://iraq.usembassy.gov/em-06162014.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Department of State Deputy Spokesperson, Daily Press Briefing, June 12, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/06/227573.htm#IRAQ>.

<sup>59</sup> Prepared by Christopher Blanchard and Jim Zanotti, Specialists in Middle Eastern Affairs.

prepared to take, based on the report of the advisers? Would additional authorities or approvals be needed to augment or expand such support?

What are the humanitarian implications of the crisis, and what actions is the Administration taking in support of international efforts to help refugees and internally displaced persons? How have Iraqi forces used increased U.S. material support, advice, and/or any shared intelligence over this period?

To what extent are the IS's recent military advances a reflection of its organizational capabilities? To what extent do recent developments stem from a lack of capability or organizational shortcomings in Iraq's security forces? Please assess the range of Iraqi Sunni views of the IS and other armed anti-government groups. How likely is the IS to face resistance from Iraqi Sunnis in areas it now controls? How have jihadist and tribal figures responded to the IS declaration of a caliphate in areas under its control?

To what extent do the interests of Iran and the United States in Iraq conflict or coincide? To what extent, if any, do efforts by Iran to support the Iraqi government, contradict or support those of the United States?

What options are available for assisting locally organized forces in areas under IS control, or in areas threatened by the IS, who may effectively resist or disrupt the group's operations? How might such options affect the willingness of the Iraqi government to continue to cooperate with the United States? Should the governments of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey be encouraged to support anti-IS entities in areas adjacent to their territory? Why or why not? If such third-party government support is advisable, how might the United States encourage it, and are the governments in question likely to be receptive to such encouragement?

What might be the broader strategic implications of increased U.S. assistance to the current Iraqi government? Might the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states object to increased U.S. support for the Iraqi government, which the Gulf leaders assert is closely aligned with Iran? How might Iran respond? How might such support affect ongoing Iraqi consideration of post-election government formation issues? How can the United States best pursue its immediate security interests and its objectives of preventing (1) regional sectarian war and (2) foreclosure of the possibility of a territorially integrated, democratically governed Iraq?

What kind of role might Iraq's Kurds play in this crisis? Are they likely to be of help in actively countering IS in areas outside of KRG control? Why or why not? Would such a role be desirable from a U.S. policy perspective?

How are Kurdish efforts to control Kirkuk and its energy resources likely to affect the security situation in that area and in Iraq generally? What actions are the IS and the Iraqi government likely to take vis-à-vis Kurdish forces and authorities?

What is the likelihood that the Kurds will implement a formal secession from Iraq in the near future? How should these considerations affect U.S. policy toward the KRG?

Are changes to U.S. global counterterrorism policies and practices necessary in light of developments related to the IS?

What are the connections, if any, between this crisis and other key regional issues, such as international diplomacy on Iran's nuclear program and the ongoing Syria conflict? Should the United States seek or avoid an approach to the Iraq crisis that also involves these other issues?

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