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

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Summary

The summer 2014 offensive in neighboring Iraq by the insurgent terrorist group known as the Islamic State (IS, aka the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or ISIL/ISIS) has reshaped longstanding debates over U.S. policy toward the three-year old conflict in Syria. The Islamic State controls large areas of northeastern Syria, where it continues to clash with forces opposed to and aligned with the government of Bashar al Asad. Meanwhile, fighting continues in other parts of Syria, pitting government forces and their foreign allies against a range of anti-government insurgents, many of whom also are engaged in battles with IS forces.

Since March 2011, the conflict has driven more than 3 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 \$2.4 billion in funding identified to date. The United States also has allocated a total of \$287 million to date for nonlethal assistance to select opposition groups. Prior to the Islamic State's mid-2014 advances in Iraq, the Administration had requested \$2.75 billion in funding for the Syria crisis for Fiscal Year (FY) 2015.

Neither pro-Asad forces nor their opponents appear capable of achieving outright victory in the short term. However, the prospect of international intervention to degrade the capabilities of the Islamic State appears to be driving speculation among many parties to the conflict that dramatic changes in the dynamics of what has remained a grinding war of attrition could soon be possible. Some opposition forces seek to cast themselves as potential allies to outsiders who are opposed to both the Islamic State and the Syrian government, while others reject the idea of foreign intervention outright or demand that foreigners focus solely on toppling President Asad. Syrian officials have stated their conditional willingness to serve as partners with the international community in counterterrorism operations in Syria, a position that reflects their desire to create an image and role for the Asad government as a bulwark against Sunni Islamist extremism.

For the United States and others examining options for weakening the Islamic State, these conditions raise questions about how best to pursue new counterterrorism and regional security goals without strengthening the Syrian government relative to the opposition groups and civilians it has brutalized during the conflict. Similar questions arise in relation to options for countering the Islamic State without bolstering other anti-U.S. Islamist groups. At present, anti-Asad armed forces and their activist counterparts remain divided over tactics, strategy, and their long-term political goals for Syria, with some powerful Islamist forces seeking outcomes that are contrary in significant ways to stated U.S. preferences for Syria's political future. The United Nations Security Council also seeks continued Syrian government cooperation with efforts to verifiably end Syria's chemical weapons program. As of September 2014, all declared chemical weapons had been removed from Syria, and all declared materials of priority concern had been destroyed. Related facilities are set for destruction by March 2015.

Congress is considering FY2015 appropriations legislation (H.R. 5013/S. 2499) that would reauthorize the provision of nonlethal assistance in Syria for certain purposes notwithstanding other provisions of law and prohibit the use of defense funds to provide man-portable air defense weapons (MANPADs) to entities in Syria (H.R. 4870). Senate committees have endorsed FY2015 defense appropriations and authorization legislation (H.R. 4870/S. 2410) that would support arming and training of vetted opposition forces for select purposes. Congress also may

consider measures to authorize or restrict the use of force against the Islamic State in Syria and beyond.

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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 in the western part of the country. The Asad government continues to receive support from Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. Contrary to some observers' predictions, it has shown no indication of an imminent collapse or an intention to leave power. Recent regime losses in confrontations with forces of the Islamic State (IS, aka the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or ISIL/ISIS) in northeastern Syria may create new public pressure on the government to improve military performance and leadership.

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. Much of the armed opposition seeks to replace the Asad government with a state ruled according to some form of Sunni Islamic law, which non-Sunni minority groups oppose. Kurdish groups control some areas of northeastern Syria and may seek autonomy or independence in the future.

The Islamic State also controls large areas of the northeast, including most of the Euphrates River valley and some areas adjacent to Syria's borders with Turkey and Iraq. In conjunction with its high-profile mid-2014 military offensive in Iraq, the Islamic State has worked to consolidate control over its territory in Syria. Intensifying international and domestic debates now focus on the Islamic State, the threats it may pose to regional and global security, and appropriate international responses.

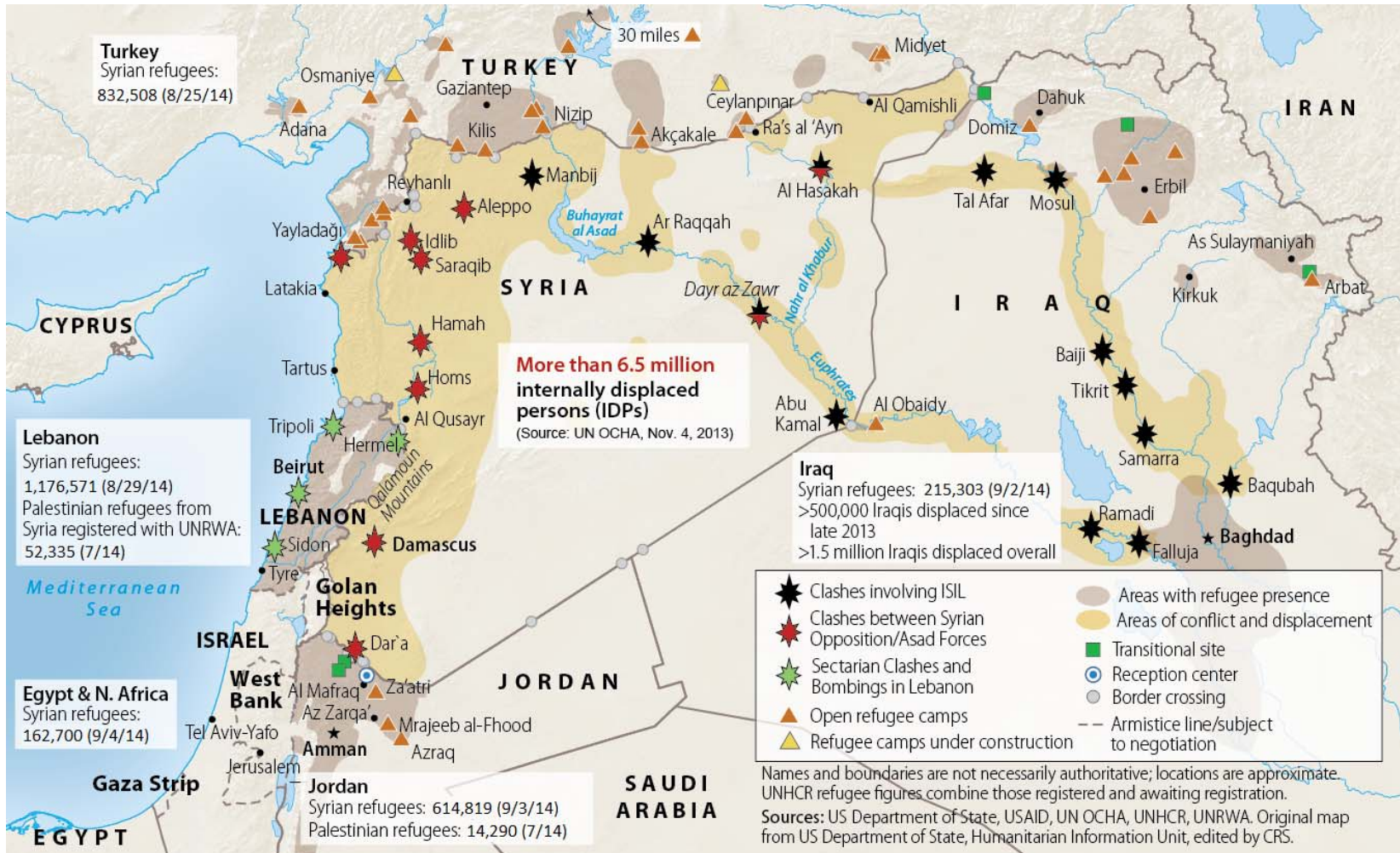
Meanwhile, chemical weapons inspectors work to oversee and implement the final requirements associated with the September 2013 chemical disarmament agreement endorsed by the United Nations (U.N.) Security Council in Resolution 2118. All of Syria's declared chemical weapons materials have been removed from the country and nearly completely destroyed. However, work remains to be done to destroy specific chemical weapons-related facilities, amid ongoing allegations of the use of chlorine gas by government forces. 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.

For the moment, U.S. diplomatic efforts appear to be shifting away from efforts to achieve a negotiated end to fighting and the establishment of a transitional governing body in Syria and toward efforts to build regional and international consensus concerning responses to the rise of the Islamic State. Some members of the Syrian opposition have expressed concern that international efforts to combat the Islamic State will benefit the Asad government or undermine international commitments to provide assistance to opposition groups seeking Asad's ouster.

In Congress, Members are weighing the relative risks and rewards of direct action in Syria against the Islamic State while considering a series of appropriations and authorization proposals that could facilitate the potential provision of overt lethal security assistance to some vetted members of select opposition groups, to include arms and training. Congress also may consider proposed legislation to authorize, set conditions on, or prohibit the use of military force in Syria.

Figure I. Conflict Map and Regional Humanitarian Situation

(As of September 2014)



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

In February 2014, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper estimated 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.”¹ In spite of an apparent shared antipathy among opposition groups toward the brutality of the Islamic State and the Asad government, many anti-Asad armed forces and their activist counterparts remain divided over tactics, strategy, and their long-term political goals for Syria. As of September 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), the Islamic State, and *Jabhat al Nusra* (the Support Front)—have marginalized other armed groups, including some that received U.S. nonlethal assistance. Earlier this year, U.S. intelligence community leaders identified the approximately 26,000 members of ISIL, Jabhat al Nusra, and *Ahrar al Sham* (Freemen of the Levant, a key component of the Islamic Front) both as extremists and as the most effective opposition forces in the field. On September 3, National Counterterrorism Center Director Matthew Olsen stated that as many as 12,000 foreign fighters have travelled to Syria, including more than 1,000 Europeans, and more than 100 U.S. citizens.² Previous U.S. government assessments suggest that these fighters hail from more than 50 countries and that among them are Al Qaeda-linked veterans of previous conflicts.

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 3 million Syrians into neighboring countries as refugees (out of a total population of more than 22 million; see **Figure 1**). 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 \$2.4 billion allocated to date.³ In December 2013, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA) appealed for an additional \$6.5 billion in humanitarian funding to respond in 2014.⁴ 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 spread of conflict to neighboring Lebanon and Iraq are negatively affecting overall regional stability. To date, policy makers in the United States and other countries have appeared to feel both compelled to respond to these crises and cautious in considering 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.

¹ Remarks by DNI James R. Clapper to the Senate Armed Services Committee, February 11, 2014.

² Remarks at the Brookings Institution by NCTC Director Matthew G. Olsen, September 3, 2014.

³ For details on U.S. humanitarian assistance see USAID, Syria Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #20, Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, July 30, 2014.

⁴ UNOCHA Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan (SHARP) 2014 and 2014 Regional Response Plan (RRP).

Anti-Asad Forces

Syrian Opposition Coalition and Select Armed Elements

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. Many armed Sunni groups disavowed the SOC's participation in the January-February 2014 "Geneva II" talks with the Asad government in Switzerland. The U.S. government has recognized the SOC as the legitimate representative of the Syrian opposition and in May 2014 determined that the SOC's representative office in the United States would be considered a foreign mission pursuant to the Foreign Missions Act (22 U.S.C. 4301-4316).⁵

In July, the SOC elected Hadi Bahra, a Syrian businessman reportedly with close ties to Saudi Arabia, as its new leader. Bahra served as a negotiator at the U.S.-backed peace talks in early 2014, and has been an outspoken critic of U.S. suggestions that the opposition's disorganization and infighting have contributed to its lack of success. In June 2014, Bahra argued, "The expansion of cross-border extremism is a result of the reluctance of our friendly countries, including the United States, to give sufficient support for the Syrian people and the mainstream rebels to curb the rise of extremist groups and terrorist organizations that are being imported from Syria's neighboring countries."⁶ Under Bahra's leadership, the SOC continues to advocate for an expansion of U.S. and other third-party support to opposition groups as a means of combating extremist groups in Syria and pressuring the Asad government to agree to a negotiated settlement to the conflict.

The other major component of U.S. assistance has been the provision of nonlethal and lethal support to armed groups, nominally in coordination with a Supreme Military Command Council (SMC), whose leadership has been in flux for much of 2014. In June 2014, several military officers reportedly resigned from the SMC, and SMC leader Brigadier General Abdul-Ilah al Bashir al Noemi warned that U.S. support for individual armed groups risked creating "warlords."⁷ General Salim Idris, the former leader of the SMC, and other commanders rejected leadership changes earlier in 2014 and distanced themselves from the SMC's general staff and the SOC's then-defense minister. On June 26, the opposition's interim government reportedly issued a decision disbanding the SMC, a move rejected by Bashir and others. In July, the SOC voted to dissolve the opposition's interim government, and subsequent reports suggest that efforts to reorganize the military command and its liaison mechanisms with the SOC are under way. SOC President Bahra said in July 2014 that the SOC leadership had,

"begun studying the absorption of the active rebel battalions within the SMC as a step towards organizing the military efforts under one banner to counter to the growing threat of extremist groups. It has become clear that Asad will not be forced to sit at the negotiating

⁵ According to an unnamed Administration official, the determination will not grant personnel of the office diplomatic immunity or convey control or ownership of Syrian state property under U.S. jurisdiction to the SOC. As of June 2014, the United States government had not formally withdrawn diplomatic recognition from the government of Bashar al Asad, although the State Department had expelled some Syrian diplomats from the United States.

⁶ Syrian Opposition Coalition, "Obama's Remarks Cast Greater Responsibility on his Administration," June 24, 2014.

⁷ Dasha Afanasieva, "U.S. arms could create Syria 'warlords', rebel commander says," Reuters, June 9, 2014.

table unless the military situation on the ground is changed in favor of the revolutionary forces, a thing that can only be achieved through organizing the rebel factions into a unified body.”⁸

Some reports suggest the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) and one of its prominent commanders, Jamal Maarouf, or individual elements formerly associated with the SMC may be emerging as focal points for new external assistance from the United States and others seeking to back relatively moderate armed opposition forces. In August 2014, the SRF and other groups announced the formation of a new Revolutionary Command Council to coordinate their efforts. It remains to be seen how effective the new coordination body may be or how it may relate to SOC/SMC related efforts to provide command and control over opposition forces. Since April 2014, a coalition of militia forces known as *Harakat Hazm* (Resoluteness Movement) and several other groups have released videos of their operatives loading and firing what appears to be U.S.-origin anti-tank weaponry in Syria.⁹ Specific public information is lacking about sources of weaponry and which units or personnel may have continuing access to U.S.-origin weaponry.¹⁰ In August, the Islamist militia coalition known as the Ansar al Islam Front posted similar videos that purport to depict their personnel firing U.S.-origin anti-tank weapons.¹¹ An official affiliated with Harakat Hazm told the *New York Times* that “friendly states” had provided “modest numbers” of the weapons.¹² The commander of the group told the *Washington Post* that those who supplied the missiles had U.S. government approval and said the shipment “suggests a change in the U.S. attitude toward allowing Syria’s friends to support the Syrian people.”¹³

Asked about the reported shipments and use of U.S. origin weaponry by Syrian rebels, U.S. National Security Council spokeswoman Bernadette Meehan said, “The United States is committed to building the capacity of the moderate opposition, including through the provision of assistance to vetted members of the moderate armed opposition. As we have consistently said, we are not going to detail every single type of our assistance.”¹⁴ On May 5, an unnamed senior Administration official reiterated that formulation to members of the press in a background briefing, while stating that “asymmetry which exists on the ground militarily, unfortunately, between the regime and the moderate opposition is problematic for the emergence of the kinds of political conditions necessary for a serious political process. And we and others are focused on that.”¹⁵ In June, the Administration requested funding and authority to arm and train vetted opposition forces after endorsing a Senate Armed Services Committee proposal contained in Section 1209 of S. 2410. As discussed below (see “Proposed Expansion of Lethal and Nonlethal

⁸ Syrian Opposition Coalition, “Syrian Coalition Works To Absorb New Rebel Battalions Within FSA,” July 19, 2014.

⁹ See Harakat Hazm YouTube Channel, April 15, 2014, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5x5Q4aTGvu0>.

¹⁰ Section 3(a)(2) of the Arms Export Control Act (22 U.S.C. 2753 (a)(2)) applies obligations, restrictions, and possible penalties for misuse of U.S.-origin equipment to any retransfer by foreign recipients of U.S.-supplied defense articles, defense services, and related technical data to another nation. If such a retransfer occurred in the absence of prior U.S. approval, then the nation making such a transfer could be determined to be in violation of its agreement with the United States not to take such an action without prior consent from the U.S. government.

¹¹ See Ansar al Islam Front YouTube Channel, August 10, 2014, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9pxIFUKEZg> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QcIDMPQkPw>.

¹² Ben Hubbard, “Syrian Election Announced; Rebels Report New Weapons,” *New York Times*, April 21, 2014.

¹³ Liz Sly, “Syrian rebels who received first U.S. missiles of war see shipment as ‘an important first step,’” *Washington Post*, April 27, 2014.

¹⁴ Tom Bowman and Alice Fordham, “CIA Is Quietly Ramping Up Aid To Syrian Rebels, Sources Say,” National Public Radio (Online), April 23, 2014

¹⁵ Transcript of Background Briefing on Syria by Senior Administration Official, U.S. State Department, May 5, 2014.

Assistance”), President Obama has signaled his intention to expand assistance to select opposition groups in Syria as a component of new efforts to combat the Islamic State.

Armed Islamist Groups

In late 2013, a number of powerful Islamist militias—some of which formerly participated in the structure of the SMC—announced the formation of a new Islamic Front.¹⁶ In early 2014, the Islamic Front and other opposition coalitions active in northern Syria moved to evict Islamic State fighters from areas of northern and western Syria, and they remain engaged in hostilities with IS forces in many areas. Prior to the outbreak of the confrontation with the Islamic State, many expert observers considered the Islamic Front to be the most powerful element of the armed opposition in northern Syria. The pressures of confrontation between members of the Islamic Front and the Islamic State appear to have undermined the cohesion of the Front, as differences in ideology, strategy, priorities, and preferred tactics have encouraged individuals, units, and groups within it to reconsider their positions. In July 2014, Islamic Front member groups in Aleppo announced their complete merger under the leadership of former *Liwa al Tawhid* (Monotheism Brigade) leader Abdelaziz Salameh. Zahran Alloush, the military commander of the Islamic Front-affiliated *Jaysh al Islam* (Army of Islam), continues to lead anti-regime operations in the eastern suburbs of Damascus, where a coalition of armed Islamist groups recently agreed to form a separate Unified Military Command. On September 9, an explosion and fire killed many of the leaders of the powerful Ahrar al Sham Islamic Movement at a meeting in Idlib province, leading many observers to speculate about the group’s future, in spite of its size and capabilities.

The Islamic Front’s November 2013 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.”¹⁷ In that document, the Front explicitly rejected the concepts of secularism and a civil state, rejected “foreign dictates,” and stated its commitment 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.¹⁸ The statement called for “the entire regime, including its head and all its criminal figures” to step down and called for security bodies to be held legally accountable. The Front and its allies further demanded 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.” A “Revolutionary Code of Honor” issued by the Front and other groups in May 2014 drew criticism from some hard-line Islamist figures for not explicitly calling for an Islamic state for post-Asad Syria. The Islamic Front sought to forbid its supporters from participating in the June 2014 presidential election, but also forbid attacks on polling stations and encouraged its supporters not to consider voters to be infidels.

¹⁶ The following armed groups were the original signatories of the Islamic Front charter: Ahrar al Sham Islamic Movement; Suqur al Sham Brigades; Ansar al Sham Battalions; Jaysh al Islam; Liwa al Tawhid; and Liwa al Haqq.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ 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.

Jabhat al Nusra, an Al Qaeda-affiliated militia and U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, first sought to mediate between the Islamic State and its adversaries, but is now in outright conflict with the group (see **Figure 2** for a timeline of the emergence of the Islamic State and Jabhat al Nusra). Their confrontation has sent shockwaves through the global jihadist community as different clerics, armed group leaders, and individual supporters have declared their respective views on the infighting. In general, other Syrian opposition forces have viewed Jabhat al Nusra as more accommodating and cooperative than the Islamic State, including some groups who oppose Jabhat al Nusra's ideology. Some members of the Islamic Front and other non-Islamist opposition groups coordinate their operations with Jabhat al Nusra in different areas. The pressures of combat against the Islamic State and the incompatibility of political goals among the groups produce pressure for and against such coordination.

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.”¹⁹ 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.

The intra-opposition battles and the mid-2014 offensive launched by the Islamic State have drawn increased global attention to the 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 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 them.

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”)²⁰ 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....”²¹ 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 the Islamic State, Al Qaeda-affiliated groups, and/or against pro-Asad forces.

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 terrorist threats to the United States. In particular, U.S. and

¹⁹ Ben Hubbard, “Syria Proposes Aleppo Cease-Fire...” *New York Times*, January 17, 2014.

²⁰ The group consists of Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

²¹ Foreign Ministry of France, Declaration of the Core Group Ministerial Meeting on Syria, Paris, January 12, 2014.

European officials have highlighted the threat that may be 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.²²

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 August 2014, the U.S. government supported the adoption of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2170, which strengthened international sanctions measures designed to combat the Islamic State, Jabhat al Nusra, and Al Qaeda-affiliated entities. The resolution calls upon all Member States “to take national measures to suppress the flow of foreign terrorist fighters to, and bring to justice, in accordance with applicable international law, foreign terrorist fighters of, ISIL, ANF and all other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with Al Qaida,” and reiterates Member States’ obligation to prevent terrorist travel, limit supplies of weapons and financing, and exchange information on the groups. On September 5, Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel announced plans to “form a multinational task force to share more information about the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and from Syria into Iraq,” saying, “These foreign fighters represent an acute threat to our NATO allies.”²³

The Islamic State (IS, aka the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL/ISIS)

The Islamic State is a transnational Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist group that has expanded its control over areas of northwestern Iraq and northeastern Syria since 2013, threatening the security of both countries and drawing increased attention from the international community.

In September 2014, National Counterterrorism Center Director Matthew Olsen stated that the group poses “a direct and significant threat to us—and to Iraqi and Syrian civilians—in the region and potentially to us here at home.”²⁴ Olsen reported that the Islamic State “has more than 10,000 fighters ... And its strategic goal is to establish an Islamic caliphate through armed conflict with governments it considers apostate—including Iraq, Syria, and the United States.” Olsen stated that “we have no credible information that ISIL is planning to attack the U.S.,” and highlighted potential threats posed by foreign fighters with Western passports. According to Olsen, U.S.

²² Testimony of CIA Director John Brennan, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, February 5, 2014.

²³ Joint Statement by Secretary Kerry and Secretary Hagel on the ISIL Meeting, September 5, 2014.

²⁴ Remarks at the Brookings Institution by NCTC Director Matthew G. Olsen, September 3, 2014.

counterterrorism officials “remain mindful of the possibility that an ISIL-sympathizer—perhaps motivated by online propaganda—could conduct a limited, self-directed attack here at home with no warning.” However, Olsen noted that, “In our view, any threat to the U.S. homeland from these types of extremists is likely to be limited in scope and scale.”

In Syria, the Islamic State remains strongest in the province of Al Raqqah and in the eastern provinces of Dayr az Zawr and Hasakah, adjacent to western Iraq. Its recent military operations in Syria have focused on seizing control of Syrian government military bases in Al Raqqah province, specifically the 93rd Brigade north of Al Raqqa city and the Taqba airbase. The government-controlled Al Kuwayris airfield east of Aleppo also remained under siege. Islamic State fighters continue to clash with other Syrian opposition forces in areas northeast of Aleppo and remain engaged in combat with Syrian Kurdish militias and Arab tribal militias in Hasakah and Dayr az Zawr provinces.

In Iraq, the Islamic State’s attempts to assert control over the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi in Al Anbar province and its mid-2014 offensive across northern and western Iraq have underscored the group’s lethality and ability to conduct combat operations and manage partnerships with local groups in multiple areas over large geographic distances. Reports suggest that the Islamic State’s possession of military weaponry and its willingness to use brutal tactics against its adversaries contribute to the group’s ability to leverage its relatively limited size to control communities through intimidation across a wide area. As of early September 2014, the Islamic State controlled Mosul and areas west to the Syrian border, exercised control over areas of the Euphrates River valley from the Syrian border to Abu Ghraib on the outskirts of Baghdad, and was conducting intense military operations in communities along the Tigris River valley, including in Tikrit and Sammara. The durability of the Islamic State’s partnerships is questionable given ongoing clashes with other armed groups in Syria and past opposition to the Islamic State’s antecedents from Arab tribes, other Islamists, Kurdish groups, and Baathists in Iraq.

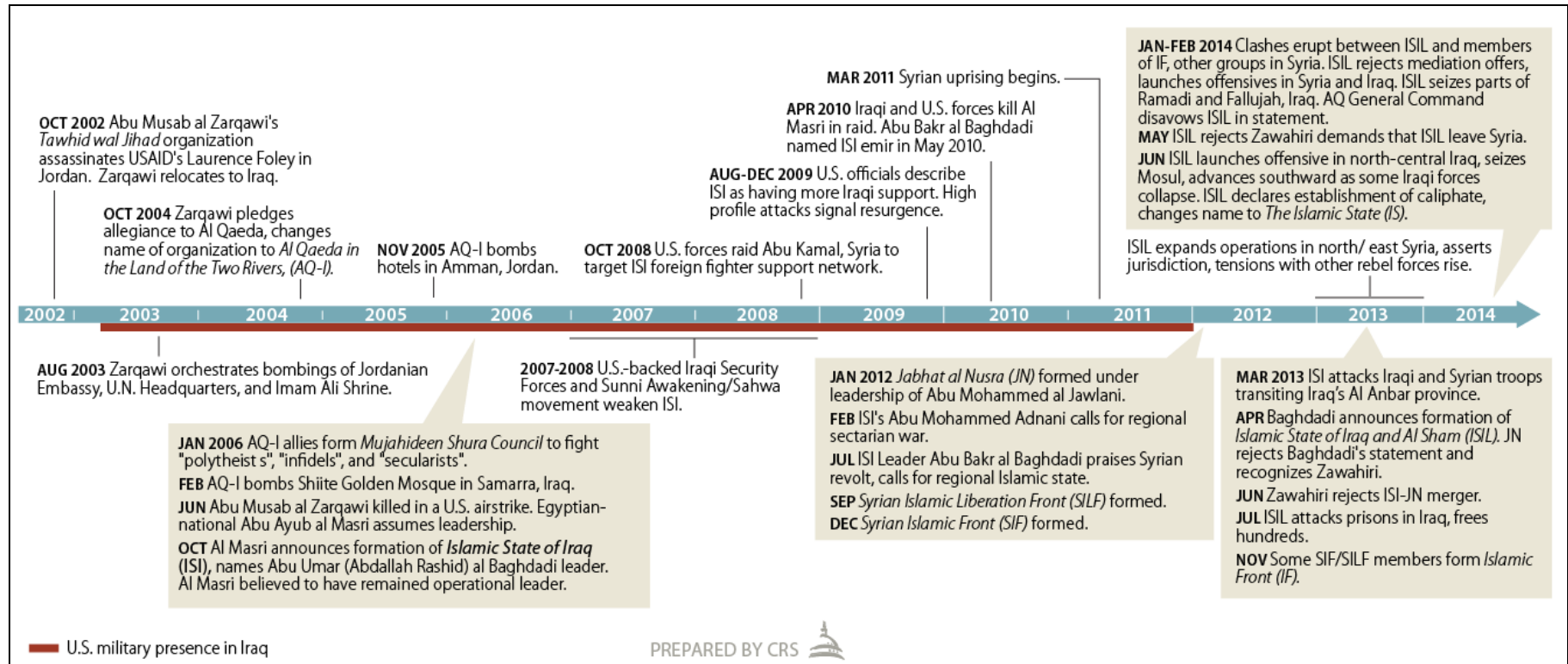
Background

The group’s ideological and organizational roots (**Figure 2**) 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 lost its two top leaders in 2010 and was weakened, but not eliminated, by the time of the U.S. withdrawal in 2011. Under the leadership of Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al Badri al Samarra’i (aka Abu Bakr al Baghdadi),²⁵ ISI rebuilt its capabilities. By early 2013, the group was conducting dozens of deadly attacks a month inside Iraq. The precise nature of ISI’s relationship to Al Qaeda leaders from 2006 onward is unclear. In recent months, Islamic State leaders have stated their view that their group “is not and has never been an offshoot of Al Qaeda,”²⁶ 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.

²⁵ Al Baghdadi was arrested and detained by U.S. forces in Iraq at Camp Bucca, until his release in 2009.

²⁶ OSC Report TRN2014051234500562, “Al-Furqan Releases ISIL Al-Adnani’s Message Criticizing Al-Zawahiri, Refusing To Leave Syria,” Twitter, May 11-2, 2014.

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



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

In April 2013, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi announced his intent to merge his forces in Iraq and Syria with those of the Syria-based Jabhat al Nusra, under the name the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS). Jabhat al Nusra and Al Qaeda leaders rejected the merger, underscoring growing tensions among Sunni extremists in the region. In July 2013, ISIL attacked prisons at Abu Ghraib and Taji in Iraq, reportedly freeing several hundred detained members and shaking international confidence in Iraq's security forces. 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 Islamic State threat. Inside Syria, the Islamic State alienated its rebel counterparts further, and an anti-IS campaign erupted there in early 2014, expelling the group from some areas it had controlled and unleashing a cycle of ongoing infighting. Following the launch of its mid-2014 assault in northern Iraq, ISIL changed its name yet again to "the Islamic State" and announced the formation of a caliphate bridging areas in its control in Iraq and Syria under the leadership of Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi.

Ideology

Statements and media materials released by ISIL reflect an uncompromising, exclusionary worldview and a relentless ambition. Statements by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and ISIL's spokesman Abu Mohammed al Adnani feature sectarian calls for violence and identify Shiites, non-Muslims, and unsupportive Sunnis as enemies in the group's struggle to establish "the Islamic State" and to revive their vision of "the caliphate."²⁷ The group describes Iraqi Shiites derogatorily as "rejectionists" and "polytheists" and paints the Iraqi government as a puppet of Iran. Similar ire is aimed at Syrian Alawites and the Asad government, although some sources allege that Islamic State operatives have benefitted from evolving financial and security arrangements with Damascus dating back to the time of the U.S. presence in Iraq.

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."²⁸ In January 2014, Al Baghdadi threatened the United States directly, saying, "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."²⁹ English language propaganda and recruiting material released by the group in connection with its recent executions of U.S. citizens James Foley and Stephen Sotloff suggest the group is attempting to portray itself as responding to U.S. aggression, a posture adopted by its predecessors and now rivals in Al Qaeda.

²⁷ OSC Report GMP20130409405003, "ISI Emir Declares ISI, Al-Nusra Front: 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant,'" Translated from *Ansar al Mujahideen Network*, April 9, 2013.

²⁸ OSC Report GMP20120721586002, "Islamic State of Iraq Amir Calls on Sunni Tribes To 'Repent,'" July 21, 2012.

²⁹ OSC Report TRR2014011980831299, "Al-Furqan Establishment Releases Audio Statement by ISIL Emir Condemning 'War' Against Group," Translated from *Al Minbar al I'lami Jihadist Forum*, January 19, 2014.

Potential Effects of Islamic State Operations in Iraq on Syria³⁰

IS gains in Iraq are likely to facilitate the flow of weapons and fighters into eastern Syria to the Islamic State and other groups, and may increase bilateral cooperation between the Iraqi and Syrian governments. Captured U.S.-origin military equipment provided to Iraqi security forces has appeared in photos reportedly taken in Syria and posted on social media outlets. Islamic State advances in Iraq could weaken the Syrian government's ability to hold ground in contested areas, as some Iraqi Shia militants who had previously fought alongside Asad forces return home to combat IS forces.³¹ Syrian forces reportedly 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.³² Increased cooperation between Damascus and Baghdad could alter the dynamics in both conflicts. It could undermine ongoing U.S. efforts to encourage Iraqi leaders to press Asad to step down in favor of a transitional government. Increased Iraqi-Syrian cooperation could also make Baghdad less likely to 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.³³ Like other segments of the Syrian opposition, Syrian tribes have at times been reluctant to expand engagement with government forces beyond their own local areas. Since early 2014, the Islamic State 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. Any Iraqi or U.S. efforts to disrupt or sever IS supply lines linking eastern Syria and western Iraq could benefit Syrian military and Al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al Nusra forces also operating in the area.

Pro-Asad Forces³⁴

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 continued operations throughout Western Syria in an effort to isolate rebels and sever their supply lines.³⁵ The government since the beginning of the year has also conducted more than 40 local truces with rebel groups in besieged areas of Damascus, the Damascus countryside, and Homs that have allowed it to gain greater control in some contested areas.³⁶

On August 25, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al Muallem at a news conference in Damascus emphasized the regional threat from terrorist groups such as the Islamic State, and stated that

³⁰ Prepared by Carla Humud, Analyst in Middle Eastern and African Affairs.

³¹ "Seeing their gains at risk, Shiites flock to join militias," *New York Times*, June 13, 2014.

³² "Syria pounds ISIS bases in coordination with Iraq," *Daily Star*, June 15, 2014.

³³ "Sunni fighters gain as they battle 2 governments, and other rebels," *New York Times*, June 11, 2014. See also, Jamestown Foundation, "The Tribal Factor in Syria's Rebellion: A Survey of Armed Tribal Groups in Syria," *Terrorism Monitor* Vol. 11, Issue 13, June 27, 2013, and, Nicholas Heras, "The Battle for Syria's Al-Hasakah Province," U.S. Military Academy Combatting Terrorism Center, *CTC Sentinel*, October 24, 2013.

³⁴ Prepared by Carla Humud, Analyst in Middle Eastern and African Affairs.

³⁵ "Syria: military bombards Aleppo," *Associated Press*, June 16, 2014.

³⁶ OSC Report LIR2014061158407788, "Syria: regime exploiting humanitarian crisis to win truce deals, gain ground," June 11, 2014,

Damascus was open to counterterrorism cooperation with the West as long as any operations were coordinated with the Syrian government. Muallem added that coordination would also serve to “prevent a misunderstanding. This is because we have air defense systems. Unless there is coordination, we might get to this point.”³⁷ However, some observers contend that Syria’s air defense network provides uneven coverage—heaviest in areas around Damascus and minimal in the sparsely populated northeast where the Islamic State is most prevalent.³⁸

Prior to the Islamic State’s rapid territorial advance in the summer, some observers suggested that the Asad government had not devoted significant resources to countering the group—in part because its presence supported the government’s characterization of the opposition as dominated by extremists. The government also appeared to see some benefit in the Islamic State’s tendency to combat other Syrian opposition groups.³⁹ However, as the Islamic State increased attacks on isolated military outposts in the northeast, Syrian forces in August stepped up airstrikes against IS positions in Aleppo, Raqqah, Dayr az Zawr, and Hasakah provinces.⁴⁰ Despite its use of airpower against the Islamic State, the military’s concentration of ground forces in western Syria appears to have significantly limited its ability to recover territory in the country’s northeast.

Asad in July was sworn in for a third seven-year term as president after winning elections condemned as illegitimate by Syrian oppositionists, the United States, and the European Union.⁴¹ Elections were held in all provinces except Raqqah in northern Syria, which remains under the control of the Islamic State.⁴² Syrian government officials reported that Asad won with 88.7% of the vote—falling short of the 97% victory he claimed in the 2007 presidential referendum.⁴³ Opposition leaders were effectively disqualified from running by Syria’s revised election law, which stipulates that candidates must have maintained continuous residence in Syria for 10 years prior to nomination and hold no other nationality or prior criminal convictions.⁴⁴ Syria’s Supreme Constitutional court put voter turnout at 73.4%, although some Asad opponents stated that they voted primarily to avoid retribution.⁴⁵ Syrian oppositionists, as well as the United States and the European Union, condemned the vote as illegitimate.⁴⁶

The United States and other members of the Core Group on Syria had previously rejected Asad’s candidacy, noting that a decision to hold presidential elections was inconsistent with the Geneva Communique’s call for the establishment of a transitional governing body.⁴⁷ Although the Syrian government participated in the Geneva II negotiations in early 2014, its representatives insisted that counterterrorism issues be addressed before any discussion of a potential transition. Asad appears disinclined to make concessions that would significantly undermine his hold on power,

³⁷ OSC Report LIN2014082555835404.

³⁸ “Syrian Air-Defense Capabilities and the Threat to Potential U.S. Air Operations,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 23, 2014.

³⁹ “Blamed for Rise of ISIS, Syrian Leader Is Pushed to Escalate Fight,” *New York Times*, August 22, 2014.

⁴⁰ “Syria Update: August 16-22,” Institute for the Study of War; and OSC Report LIR2014082584348354.

⁴¹ “Assad re-elected in wartime election,” *Al Jazeera*, June 5, 2014.

⁴² “Syria plans presidential elections in summer; minister says Assad will likely be one of several candidates,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 16, 2014.

⁴³ “Assad re-elected in wartime election,” *Al Jazeera*, June 5, 2014.

⁴⁴ “Syrian presidential election law excludes most opposition leaders,” *Reuters*, March 14, 2014.

⁴⁵ “After Assad’s election triumph, fear grips stay-at-home Syrians,” *Reuters*, June 5, 2014.

⁴⁶ “Assad re-elected in wartime election,” *Al Jazeera*, June 5, 2014.

⁴⁷ Joint Statement by the London 11 Countries, April 3, 2014.

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. Syrian officials may also hope that Western fears of Islamic State expansion in the region could lead to renewed cooperation with the Asad government, bolstering its legitimacy.

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 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.⁴⁸

Hezbollah

In August 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned Hezbollah for providing training, advice, and logistical support to the Syrian government.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ He further referred to the need for reconciliation initiatives to bolster the Asad government's support among Syrians.

As of September 2014, Hezbollah fighters remained engaged in operations in the Qalamoun region northwest of Damascus, where the departure of some Iraqi paramilitary forces could place additional pressure on the group.⁵¹ The London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights in August reported that at least 561 Hezbollah fighters had been killed in Syria since early 2013.⁵² A senior Israeli military official in March 2014 stated that Hezbollah currently maintains 4,000 to 5,000 fighters in Syria.⁵³

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.⁵⁴ Hezbollah personnel in 2013 played significant roles in battles around Al Qusayr and the

⁴⁸ "Iran and Hezbollah build militia networks in Syria in event that Asad falls," *Washington Post*, February 10, 2013.

⁴⁹ E.O. 13582, U.S. Department of Treasury, August 10, 2012.

⁵⁰ "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.

⁵¹ "ISIS' Iraq offensive could trigger Hezbollah to fill gap left in Syria," *Daily Star*, June 16, 2014.

⁵² OSC Report LIR2014082258507908.

⁵³ "Israel watches warily as Hezbollah gains battle skills in Syria," *New York Times*, March 10, 2014.

⁵⁴ "Syrian Army goes all-in to take back strategic highway," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 2, 2013.

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.⁵⁵ 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 Hezbollah-controlled areas of Beirut and eastern Lebanon, describing the attacks as retaliation for Hezbollah's intervention in Syria.⁵⁶

Iraqi Militias

Analysts estimate that there are between 2,000 and 5,000 Iraqi Shia fighting in Syria on behalf of the Syrian government.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸

It is difficult to assess the motivations of individual Iraqi fighters in Syria or determine whether Asad'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.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ Recent gains by ISIL in Iraq have prompted some Iraqi fighters in Syria to return home and join local militias.⁶¹

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.⁶² Treasury also designated the Islamic

⁵⁵ "Hezbollah and the fight for control in Qalamoun," Institute for the Study of War, November 26, 2013.

⁵⁶ "Hezbollah undeterred by ISIS claim, threats," *Daily Star*, January 6, 2014.

⁵⁷ "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.

⁵⁸ "From Karbala to Sayyida Zaynab: Iraqi Fighters in Syria's Shi'a Militias," CTC Sentinel, August 27, 2013.

⁵⁹ "From Karbala to Sayyida Zaynab: Iraqi Fighters in Syria's Shi'a Militias," CTC Sentinel, August 27, 2013.

⁶⁰ "Iraqi Shi'ites flock to Assad's side as sectarian split widens," *Reuters*, June 19, 2013.

⁶¹ "Seeing their gains at risk, shiites flock to join militias," *New York Times*, June 13, 2014.

⁶² Department of the Treasury, Press Release, February 16, 2012.

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,⁶³ 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.⁶⁴ In terms of nonlethal aid, Iran has provided Syria with billions of dollars in credit to purchase oil, food, and import goods from Iran.⁶⁵

Chemical Weapons and Disarmament⁶⁶

A major policy concern of the United States has been the use or loss of control of chemical weapons stocks in Syria during the 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. Syria is believed to have possessed more than 1,000 metric tons of chemical warfare agents and precursor chemicals. This stockpile included several hundred metric tons of the nerve agent sarin, which represented the bulk of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile. Damascus also had several hundred metric tons of mustard agent in ready-to-use form and several metric tons of the nerve agent VX.⁶⁷

The largest-scale use to date was reportedly an attack using nerve gas on August 21, 2013, which the U.S. government estimated killed over 1,400 people.⁶⁸ 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 the chemical weapons nerve agent 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.

Chlorine gas attacks in northern Syria have been repeatedly reported since mid-April 2014. The OPCW established a Fact-Finding Mission to investigate these allegations. In their second report released on September 10, the investigators concluded they have "compelling confirmation" that a toxic chemical was used "systematically and repeatedly" as a weapon against villages in northern Syria.⁶⁹ The Fact-Finding Mission concludes that "chlorine, either pure or in mixture" was used in attacks on the villages of Talmanes, Al Tamanah and Kafr Zeta. The report's findings are based on interviews and other evidence. The mission came under attack gathering evidence onsite in May. Chlorine is not required to be declared or destroyed under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), although its use in warfare is still prohibited under the Convention.

⁶³ "Elite Iranian unit's commander says his forces are in Syria," *Washington Post*, September 16, 2012.

⁶⁴ "From Qusair to Yabrud: Shiite foreign fighters in Syria," *Al Monitor*, March 6, 2014.

⁶⁵ "Iranians dial up presence in Syria," *Wall Street Journal*, September 16, 2013.

⁶⁶ Prepared by Mary Beth Nikitin, Specialist in Nonproliferation.

⁶⁷ See CRS Report R42862, *Chemical Weapons: A Summary Report of Characteristics and Effects*, by Dana A. Shea; and Center for Disease Control, "Facts about Sarin," May 20, 2013. <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/agent/sarin/basics/facts.asp>.

⁶⁸ Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013, White House Office of the Press Secretary, August 30, 2013.

⁶⁹ "OPCW Fact Finding Mission: 'Compelling Confirmation' that Chlorine Gas Used as Weapon in Syria," OPCW Press Release, September 10, 2014.

By mid-August 2014, the international community had removed and destroyed Syrian declared chemical weapons stocks, including nerve agents. A year earlier, in August 2013, the Obama Administration had threatened military action against Syria in response to alleged nerve gas attacks by Syrian government forces. As part of a diplomatic solution to the crisis based on a U.S.-Russian joint proposal, the Administration withdrew the threat of military force and Syria agreed to give up its chemical weapons and join the international Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which bans the use of any toxic chemicals in warfare and requires Syria to destroy all of its chemical weapons stocks and production facilities under international supervision. The Executive Council of the OPCW, an intergovernmental body tasked with implementation of the CWC, approved a destruction plan under which Syria was required to destroy all chemical weapons by June 30, 2014. According to the Director General, Syria did not meet the June 30 deadline for destruction of all chemical weapons and production facilities,⁷⁰ but all declared chemical weapons agents had been removed from the country as of June 23, 2014. One hundred percent of the most dangerous “priority” chemical weapons agents declared by Syria had been destroyed by August 8, 2014, and 96% of all other chemicals.⁷¹ However, despite this progress, destruction of facilities is still underway, and the United States has raised questions over whether Syria has declared all of its chemical weapons.

Removal of Chemicals

A joint mission of U.N. and OPCW personnel was created to monitor and facilitate Syrian chemical weapons disarmament.⁷² OPCW-U.N. experts arrived in Damascus on October 1, 2013, and began to inspect Syria’s declared chemical weapons facilities. The first stage of destruction activities focused on destroying “critical equipment” at chemical weapons production facilities. The OPCW spokesman told reporters on October 31, 2013 that the Syrian government met the deadline for disabling production equipment, and that all chemical weapons stocks and agents in Syria were under “tamper-proof” seal.

The second stage of the chemical weapons destruction process involved transportation and removal of chemical weapons agents from the country. These were 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 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 the chemicals arrived at the port, Danish and Norwegian ships picked up the chemicals and removed them from Syria. The first quantity of priority chemicals was moved to the port of Latakia in early January 2014, and the last shipment was on June 23, 2014. This was the first time all of a country’s declared chemical weapons agents have been removed from its territory.

While this task was completed in six months, Syria had repeatedly missed several previous deadlines. According to the OPCW Director General, the delays were caused by “security concerns, the procurement and delivery of large quantities of packaging and transportation

⁷⁰ “8% of Syrian chemicals still remain to be removed; Fact-Finding Mission in Syria; Some progress on Syrian production facilities,” OPCW Press Release, June 17, 2014.

⁷¹ “Ninety-six percent of Syria’s declared chemical weapons destroyed – UN-OPCW mission chief,” UN-OPCW Joint Mission Press Release, September 4, 2014.

⁷² See <http://opcw.unmissions.org/>.

materials and equipment, and adverse weather conditions.”⁷³ There was active military engagement in the areas near storage sites. These delays raised questions about the intentions of the Syrian government. 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,

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.⁷⁴

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.”⁷⁵ On April 29, the Joint Mission estimated that the Syrian government had moved 18 shipments of chemicals to the port of Latakia, representing around 92.5% of total stocks to be removed (up from 53.6% in mid-March).⁷⁶ Ambassador Mikulak on April 29, 2014, said that “almost 100 tons of Priority 1 and Priority 2 chemicals still remain in Syria.” He also said that the storage site where the remaining stocks were located was occupied by Syrian government forces and therefore packing and preparation for transport should have started immediately.⁷⁷ Fighting in the region of the site, which is northeast of Damascus, had raised concerns about the overland transportation of the materials. The Syrian government said the material could not be moved due to security concerns in the surrounding area. However, on June 23, 2014, the OPCW announced that it had supervised the removal of the final shipment of chemicals to the port of Latakia and they were successfully transferred and removed from the port.⁷⁸

Destruction of Chemical Weapons Outside of Syria

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 offered 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 received 600 metric tons of both mustard agent and DF compound, a key component in sarin.⁷⁹ U.S. personnel, including 64 Army chemical

⁷³ “Director General says removal of priority chemicals in Syria marks important new phase in work of Joint Mission,” OPCW press release, January 8, 2014.

⁷⁴ Robert P. Mikulak, “Statement to the Thirty-Ninth Meeting of the Executive Council,” The Hague, Netherlands, February 21, 2014. <http://www.state.gov/t/avc/rls/2014/221891.htm>.

⁷⁵ “Over half of Syria’s chemical weapons removed or destroyed, says joint OPCW-UN mission,” UN News Centre, March 20, 2014.

⁷⁶ Secretary of State John Kerry Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 8, 2014; and, Robert P. Mikulak, “Statement to the Fortieth Meeting of the Executive Council,” The Hague, Netherlands, April 29, 2014.

⁷⁷ Robert P. Mikulak, “Statement to the Fortieth Meeting of the Executive Council,” The Hague, Netherlands, April 29, 2014.

⁷⁸ “Announcement to the media on last consignment of chemical leaving Syria,” OPCW Press Release, June 24, 2014.

⁷⁹ “Army to destroy Syrian chemical weapons aboard Ship,” *Army News Service*, January 3, 2014.

specialists, ran the operation. Once removed from Latakia, the most dangerous compounds in approximately 60 containers were transferred to the *Cape Ray* at the Italian port of Gioia Tauro for destruction at sea in international waters. Less sensitive chemicals will be shipped to commercial processing facilities in the Finland, the United Kingdom and the United States. Companies in Finland and the United States were awarded contracts for processing the liquid waste from the destruction process.⁸⁰

As of July 24, 2014 all 1300 metric tons of chemicals removed from the Syrian Arab Republic had been successfully delivered to destruction facilities outside of Syria.⁸¹ On July 2, 2014, 600 metric tons of Priority 1 chemical weapons were successfully loaded onto the U.S. vessel MV *Cape Ray* in the port of Gioia Tauro, Italy. The destruction of the chemical weapons onboard was completed on August 18, 2014. This included 581 metric tons of DF, and 19 metric tons of sulfur mustard.⁸²

The remaining 700 metric tons of chemicals have been successfully delivered to Riihimaki, Ellesmere Port, and Port Arthur, Texas—commercial land-based facility locations in Finland, the United Kingdom and United States respectively. On August 7, 2014, the United Kingdom announced that it destroyed its consignment of chemical weapons from Syria—190 metric tons of Priority 1 chemicals—at Ellesmere Port.⁸³

Destruction of Production Facilities

The Syrian government did not meet the deadline of March 15, 2014, for destruction of its 12 declared chemical weapons production facilities, and has proposed that the underground facilities not be completely destroyed but instead made inaccessible.⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵ The OPCW has been developing a destruction plan for these facilities with Syria. Ambassador Mikulak said in a statement on April 29, 2014, that 12 chemical weapons production facilities declared by Syria remain “structurally intact.” Syria had first requested that the facilities be converted for other military purposes. Mikulak noted that Syria should be held to the same standards as other countries that have destroyed their chemical weapons facilities, such as the United States. After negotiations with the OPCW technical secretariat, Syria has agreed to comply with the methodology for destroying the above-ground chemical weapons productions facilities in hangars, according to the Director General.⁸⁶ On July 24, 2014 the OPCW Executive Council decided that seven of the twelve hangars will be “razed to

⁸⁰ “OPCW awards contracts to two companies for destruction of Syrian chemical and effluents,” OPCW-U.N. Joint Mission Press Release February 14, 2014.

⁸¹ “OPCW maritime operation completes delivers of Syrian chemicals to commercial destruction facilities,” OPCW Press Release, July 28, 2014.

⁸² “Hagel Congratulates *Cape Ray* for Syria Mission,” *Defense News*, August 18, 2014.

⁸³ “UK Completes Incineration of Syrian Chemicals,” Foreign and Commonwealth Office Press Release, August 6, 2014.

⁸⁴ “Syria to miss deadline to destroy 12 chemical arms sites,” *Reuters*, March 6, 2014.

⁸⁵ Statement of Robert Mikulak to the Thirty-Ninth Meeting of the Executive Council, The Hague, Netherlands, February 21, 2014.

⁸⁶ “8% of Syrian Chemicals Still Remain to be Removed; Fact-Finding Mission in Syria; Some Progress on Syrian Production Facilities,” OPCW Press Release, June 17, 2014.

the ground” while the remaining five hangars will be “sealed permanently to make them inaccessible.”⁸⁷ Special Coordinator Kaag said that on October 1, the OPCW would “begin destroying the 12 remaining chemical weapons facilities – seven so-called hangars and five tunnels.”⁸⁸ This work is expected to be completed in March 2015.

Completeness of the Declaration

Another area of ongoing concern is whether or not Syria has declared all of its chemical weapons stocks to the OPCW as required by the CWC. U.S. Ambassador Mikulak said in a July 8 statement that “Syria must respond to all outstanding questions and requests for information and demonstrate that it has fully declared all aspects of its chemical weapons arsenal and program.”⁸⁹ A White House statement on August 18 marking the end of destruction operations on the MV *Cape Ray* said that “serious questions remain with respect to the omissions and discrepancies in Syria’s declaration to the OPCW and about continued allegations of use.”⁹⁰ U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power said on September 4 that, “The United States is concerned about all discrepancies, also the potential that there are real omissions in the declaration.”⁹¹ On September 4, Special Coordinator Kaag said that dialogue continues with the Syrian government about discrepancies in the declaration. According to press reports, the OPCW-UN Joint Mission will return to Syria in September to further verify that Syria has declared all stocks. As noted above, chlorine is not required to be declared or destroyed under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), although its use in warfare is still prohibited under the Convention.

Funding for CW Elimination Efforts

The international community, including the United States, has contributed 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.⁹² 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.

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-

⁸⁷ “OPCW Maritime Operation Completes Delivers of Syrian Chemicals to Commercial Destruction Facilities,” OPCW Press Release, July 28, 2014.

⁸⁸ “Ninety-six percent of Syria’s declared chemical weapons destroyed – UN-OPCW mission chief,” UN-OPCW Joint Mission Press Release, September 4, 2014.

⁸⁹ Statement by Robert Mikulak to the Seventy-sixth Session of the Executive Council, The Hague, Netherlands, July 8, 2014.

⁹⁰ “Statement by the President on the Completion of M/V Cape Ray Destruction of Syria’s Declared Chemical Weapons,” White House Statement, August 18, 2014.

⁹¹ “Remarks at the Security Council Stakeout Following Consultations on Syria; U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Samantha Power,” September 4, 2014.

⁹² “Frequently Asked Questions,” OPCW website, <http://www.opcw.org/special-sections/syria-and-the-opcw/frequently-asked-questions/>.

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 M/V *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 questions of assistance for the opposition and potential 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. The contours of these debates are shifting amid intensifying discussion of the wisdom, scope, costs, and risks of potential participation in newly proposed multilateral efforts to combat the Islamic State in Iraq and/or Syria. 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.

In more recent comments about the threats posed by the Islamic State, U.S. officials have announced new multifaceted and multilateral efforts to combat the organization. President Obama said on September 10 that he “will not hesitate to take action against ISIL, in Syria, as well as Iraq.” As of early September 2014, no significant changes in stated U.S. policy objectives toward the broader conflict in Syria had been announced, and President Obama had reiterated his June 2014 request to Congress for authority and funding to establish an overt, Department of Defense-implemented training and equipment program for vetted Syrians (see the “Administration ‘Train and Equip’ Proposal and Congressional Responses” section).

U.S. officials had rejected Syrian government demands for cooperation in the fight against the Islamic State organization, saying that the United States would not “ask for permission from the Syrian regime” in pursuit of its anti-IS objectives. On August 25, White House spokesman Josh Earnest told reporters that, in the view of the Administration, there was not a “lesser of two evils” between the Islamic State and the government of Bashar al Asad. Earnest said:

In the judgment of this Administration, the people of Syria should have the opportunity to determine the future of their country; they should have the opportunity to exercise some influence over what kind of country they want to live in. That is a basic fundamental human right, a basic fundamental value that this administration supports. It’s why we have weighed in heavily in support of the moderate opposition in Syria. It’s why we urged President Asad to leave power. And it is why we do not believe that ISIL would be acting in the best interest of the people of Syria if they were to take over leadership of that country. ... We’re not

interested in trying to help the Asad regime. In fact, we have been calling for a number of years now for the Asad regime to step down.

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. Administration officials have cited a number of reasons for their reluctance to undertake direct military intervention in Syria or provide large-scale assistance to shift the balance of power there, including fears of exacerbating the violence; inviting greater regional spillover or intervention; or opening a power vacuum that could benefit extremists.⁹³ Uncertain costs, military constraints, and domestic political opposition to such involvement also have been likely factors shaping Administration considerations.

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 by Asad or extremist forces. Others express concern that military intervention will exacerbate negative conditions prevailing on the ground and suggest that the United States cannot ensure that such intervention or support provided to opposition groups will not benefit extremists. Recent Administration 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. The Administration's June 2014 request for funding and authority to arm and train vetted Syrian opposition forces signaled that such reconsideration had taken place, and consideration of a broader anti-Islamic State campaign appears to be driving further reconsideration.

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.

In 2014, a shift toward independently authorized and funded assistance programs appeared to be underway when the terms of the debate began shifting in response to the Islamic State's offensive in Iraq. Cumulatively, congressional notifications and requests submitted to date 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. The stated goal of these efforts has been to place greater pressure on President Asad and his supporters to negotiate a transition agreement that will bring conflict in Syria to an end. If current trends continue, the focus of these efforts could increasingly include supporting entities in Syria that can assist in multilateral counterterrorism operations or assume control of Islamic State-held territory and resources in the wake of any coalition military operations targeting the group.

⁹³ 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.

As of September 2014, the United States had allocated more than \$287 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.⁹⁴ The delivery of some assistance to select groups 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.⁹⁵ The FY2014 Consolidated Appropriations bill (H.R. 3547, P.L. 113-76) provided 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).

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 nonlethal 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 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.

⁹⁴ U.S. State Department, 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.

⁹⁵ 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.” 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.

FY2015 Budget Request for Syria

The FY2015 basic foreign 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 nonlethal military support for national and local opposition groups. Funds provided since 2011 in Syria and in neighboring countries for these combined purposes exceed \$2.6 billion to date.

Of the total \$1.26 billion in FY2015 funding requested specifically for Syria in the basic 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. Specific proposals for the use of those funds are not yet available. The House (H.R. 5013) and Senate (S. 2499) versions of the FY2015 Foreign Operations Appropriations bill would extend “notwithstanding” assistance authority for FY2015 funds, contingent on an update of a strategy required under P.L. 113-76.

Table I. U.S. Foreign Assistance for Syria, FY2013-FY2015 Original Request
(In thousands of current dollars; 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, 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 \$287 million allocated for support to the Syrian opposition to date. The FY2015 Syria request includes, but the table 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.

Proposed Expansion of Lethal and Nonlethal Assistance

Congressional Proposals

In the 113th Congress, proposals to authorize the expanded provision of nonlethal and lethal assistance in Syria with various provisos have been introduced or considered in committees, and

would place various conditions on assistance, establish reporting requirements, grant diverse authorities, and set different time limitations.

- The Senate Armed Services Committee reported version of the FY2015 National Defense Authorization Act (Section 1209 of S. 2410) would authorize the Department of Defense, with the concurrence of the State Department, to train and equip vetted members of select Syrian opposition forces for limited purposes through the year 2018.
- S. 960, the Syria Transition Support Act of 2013, was approved by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as amended by a 15-3 vote in May 2013.
- H.R. 1327, the Free Syria Act of 2013, was introduced in March 2013.
- As noted above, House and Senate Foreign Operations Appropriations bills under consideration for FY2015 would extend FY2014 authorities to provide nonlethal assistance in Syria for select purposes (H.R. 5013 and S. 2499).
- Section 10010 of the House-passed Defense Department appropriations bill for FY2015 (H.R. 4870) would prohibit the use of defense funds “to transfer man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) to any entity in Syria.”
- Other proposals, such as H.R. 2503 and H.R. 2432, seek to prohibit any military assistance to combatants in Syria.

Administration “Train and Equip” Proposal and Congressional Responses

President Obama’s requests to Congress for authority and resources to train and equip vetted members of the Syrian opposition in support of U.S. efforts to combat the Islamic State organization have reinigorated congressional debate on the subject. The Administration’s June 2014 request for FY2015 Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funds included a request for funds and authorities for a proposed \$1.5 billion Syria Regional Stabilization Initiative (RSI), \$500 million of which would support an overt training and equipment program for select Syrians.⁹⁶ According to the RSI request, the Administration sought funding and authorization from Congress to do the following:

Notwithstanding other provisions of law, through December 2018, to provide assistance, including the provision of defense articles and defense services, to appropriately vetted elements of the Syrian opposition and other appropriately vetted Syrian groups or individuals for the following purposes:

(1) Defending the Syrian people from attacks by the Syrian regime, facilitating the provision of essential services, and stabilizing territory controlled by the opposition;

(2) Defending the United States, its friends and allies, and the Syrian people from the threats posed by terrorists in Syria; and

⁹⁶ Estimate #2—FY 2015 Budget Amendments: Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of State and Other International Programs (State/OIP) to update the FY 2015 Overseas Contingency Operations funding levels; for both DOD and State/OIP to implement the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund and the European Reassurance Initiative; and for State/OIP peacekeeping costs in the Central African Republic. Available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget_amendments.

(3) Promoting the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria.

If approved by Congress as requested, the train and equip authority would be supported by \$500 million in FY2015 funding, presumably with requests in future years to follow. The requested authority would allow the U.S. government to accept foreign contributions to authorized efforts to provide such assistance. The request also seeks funding and authority for expanded efforts to “build the capacity of the Syrian opposition and of neighboring countries including Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq to manage the growing spillover effects of the Syrian conflict.” According to the request, the Administration intends to use any funds provided by Congress for the RSI to “leverage existing security cooperation and assistance programs, expand training and related infrastructure, and tailor support packages to meet identified regional needs for areas contending with refugees and other destabilizing effects from the Syrian conflict.”

As of early September, congressional consideration of this request had merged with congressional consideration of a proposed continuing resolution to fund government operations after September 30, 2014. It remains to be seen whether a version of the Administration’s requested authority and funding will be included in a proposed continuing resolution, whether it may be considered as an amendment to such a continuing resolution, or whether Congress might act on the proposal independently.

- As noted above, the Senate Armed Services Committee reported version of the FY2015 National Defense Authorization Act (Section 1209 of S. 2410) would authorize the Department of Defense, with the concurrence of the State Department, to train and equip vetted members of select Syrian opposition forces for limited purposes through the year 2018.
- Section 9015 of the Senate Appropriation Committee’s version of the FY2015 Defense Appropriations bill (H.R. 4870) would authorize assistance, including the provision of defense articles and defense services, to appropriately vetted elements of the Syrian opposition, for, among other purposes, “protecting the United States, its friends and allies, and the Syrian people from threats posed by terrorists in Syria.” Under this section, the committee specifies that up to \$500 million from the Defense Department’s Operation and Maintenance (O&M), a Defense-wide account, may be used for a support program. The Senate Appropriations Defense subcommittee considered and rejected a proposed amendment that would have stripped the authority and funding for the Syria program from the bill.
- In addition, the Senate Appropriation Committee’s version of H.R. 4870 includes O&M appropriations that may be used to “reimburse the government of Jordan, in such amounts as the Secretary of Defense may determine, to maintain the ability of the Jordanian armed forces to maintain security along the border between Jordan and Syria.” Finally, the Senate Appropriations Committee’s version of H.R. 4870 includes \$1 billion in OCO funding for the Department of State’s Complex Crises Fund (CCF) that may be made available for the purposes of “undertaking counterterrorism partnership efforts, responding to crises, and addressing regional instability resulting from the conflict in Syria.”

Potential Operations against the Islamic State and Issues Shaping Future U.S. Policy toward Syria

President Obama has stated that the United States seeks to “degrade and ultimately destroy” the Islamic State.⁹⁷ U.S. counterterrorism, defense, and diplomatic officials have referred to several elements of an Administration strategy to achieve those objectives in public remarks. In general terms, the Administration seeks to leverage the combined, but as yet undetermined efforts of a multilateral global coalition to use diplomatic, military, intelligence, and law enforcement mechanisms to “defeat” the Islamic State. It remains to be seen whether the President will take military action against IS targets inside Syria. For discussion of related war powers and authorities questions related to potential military action, see CRS Report IN10147, *Considerations for Possible Authorization for Use of Military Force Against the Islamic State*, by Matthew C. Weed, and CRS Report R43720, *U.S. Military Action Against the Islamic State: Answers to Frequently Asked Legal Questions*, by Michael John Garcia and Jennifer K. Elsea.

On September 5, President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry suggested that local and regional actors would be expected to continue to bear the burden of conducting ground combat operations with the potential future backing of such a coalition, whose members may provide training, equipment, advice, assistance, and/or conduct supportive military operations.⁹⁸ President Obama said,

... With respect to the situation on the ground in Syria, we will not be placing U.S. ground troops to try to control the areas that are part of the conflict inside of Syria. I don't think that's necessary for us to accomplish our goal. We are going to have to find effective partners on the ground to push back against ISIL. And the moderate coalition there is one that we can work with. We have experience working with many of them. They have been, to some degree, outgunned and outmanned, and that's why it's important for us to work with our friends and allies to support them more effectively.⁹⁹

As noted above, in his address to the nation on September 10, President Obama reiterated his request to Congress for “additional authorities and resources to equip these [vetted Syrian opposition] fighters.”

To date, Iraqi security forces, Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish militias, Iraqi Shiite militias, Syrian government forces, and a broad range of Syrian opposition militias remain the principal military forces engaged in active ground combat against the forces of the Islamic State. It remains to be determined what types of support these entities may be eligible to receive from an emergent anti-Islamic State coalition and on what terms.

Advocates of continued U.S. support for select opposition groups in Syria have argued that the withdrawal or reduction of such assistance would bolster less cooperative or friendly groups. Advocates have further argued 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.

⁹⁷ Remarks by President Obama at NATO Summit Press Conference, September 5, 2014.

⁹⁸ Remarks by Secretary of State John Kerry prior to Meeting on Building an Anti-ISIL Coalition, September 5, 2014.

⁹⁹ Remarks by President Obama at NATO Summit Press Conference, September 5, 2014.

Critics of continued or expanded U.S. support have argued that such assistance risks exacerbating rivalry among opposition groups and reducing the credibility of groups and individuals seen to be aligned with the United States. Critics of support proposals also have pointed to problems in ensuring the identity and intentions of end users of provided support and the uses of U.S.-provided materiel.

The purposes of any expanded U.S. or coalition assistance to armed opposition groups also may be controversial among Syrians. President Obama has suggested that U.S. engagement will remain focused “narrowly” on assisting Syrians in combatting the Islamic State, while continuing “to look for opportunities” to support a political resolution to Syria’s conflict.¹⁰⁰ Some Syrian political and military opposition forces may resent such a narrow focus and insist on broader support for their anti-Asad goals as a condition of working with a U.S.-backed coalition against the Islamic State.

Significant political and strategic questions may be raised by proposals that would further benefit certain non-state actors relative to national governments (such as Kurdish groups) or that might unpredictably alter prevailing dynamics among adversaries in Syria. As noted above, the prospect of potential international cooperation or coordination with the Asad government has already become controversial. The timing and duration of any anti-Islamic State military operations may also be influenced by calculations of the likely relative benefit of such operations for opposition and government forces in Syria. Operations that seriously degrade Islamic State capabilities prior to improvements in the organization and capabilities of U.S.-preferred armed groups could result in substantial military gains for pro-Asad forces or other extremist groups, particularly Jabhat al Nusra. U.S. officials have not publicly estimated how long it may take to train and equip Syrian partner forces.

From a practical perspective, as with humanitarian assistance, U.S. efforts to directly support security and service delivery efforts inside Syria 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. The infighting among opposition forces and the empowerment of the Islamic State in eastern Syria and north and western Iraq creates further complications. Presumably, similar access issues could hinder efforts to expand support to forces fighting the Islamic State.

The provision of overt military assistance to anti-Islamic State or anti-Asad forces would represent a significant evolution in U.S. efforts to support armed opposition elements. President Obama said on September 6, that “in terms of controlling territory, we’re going to have to develop a moderate Sunni opposition that can control territory and that we can work with.”¹⁰¹ To date, U.S. officials have not publicly described which elements of the Syrian opposition may already have received U.S. training, what any training may have entailed, what types of weaponry may have been provided, or what safeguards may be in place to monitor the disposition of equipment and the actions of any U.S.-trained personnel.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ The President said, “our attitude towards Asad continues to be that you know, through his actions, through using chemical weapons on his own people, dropping barrel bombs that killed innocent children that he—he has foregone legitimacy. But when it comes to our policy and the coalition that we’re putting together, our focus specifically is on ISIL. It’s narrowly on ISIL.” President Obama interview with NBC News Meet the Press, September 6, 2014.

¹⁰¹ President Barack Obama, Interview with Meet the Press, NBC News, September 6, 2014.

¹⁰² In June 2013, Deputy National Security Adviser for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes said that the President (continued...)

Overt U.S. assistance to opposition military forces has remained restricted to nonlethal items. In late September 2013, 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. On October 22, 2013, 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.”¹⁰³ In January 2014, 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.¹⁰⁴

As discussed above, several prominent Islamist militia groups continue to coordinate their operations independently and have rejected the political and military leadership of the SOC/SMC. Other non-Islamist groups also are acting independently to consolidate their operations, and emergent coalitions seek to unite some Islamist and non-Islamist armed groups. Disputes among former SMC commanders over leadership also may complicate international efforts to engage with the SMC as a conduit for support to moderate armed elements, whether to increase pressure on President Asad or to combat the Islamic State and other extremist groups. 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. In recent months, Administration officials, including President Obama, have referred to the disorganization of the armed opposition as a liability, while describing U.S. plans to increase support to select opposition elements in pursuit of U.S. objectives.

Possible Questions for Congressional Oversight

- What international and domestic authority might the Administration seek or assert in order to carry out military operations against the Islamic State or other extremist groups in Syria? How much might such operations cost? How long might they last? What geographic, durational, financial, or tactical guidance or restrictions might Congress wish to enact, if any?
- What metrics might be used to gauge the relative success of operations against the Islamic State? How should parallel U.S. concerns about Syria’s broader stability and the future of its democratic opposition shape any U.S. or coalition operations against the Islamic State in Syria?

(...continued)

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. 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 nonlethal 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.”

¹⁰³ Remarks of Secretary of State John Kerry, London, United Kingdom, October 22, 2013.

¹⁰⁴ Office of the State Department Spokesperson, “The Syrian Crisis: U.S. Assistance and Support for the Transition,” January 17, 2014.

- How might Islamic State forces respond to expanded U.S. or coalition military operations against them in Syria? How likely are Islamic State operatives to target countries contributing or hosting military forces? In the short term, what forces in Syria would benefit from efforts to degrade Islamic State capabilities?
- What effects might the provision of overt military assistance to non-state armed groups and individual combatants in Syria's non-international armed conflict have on U.S. efforts to discourage other actors from providing military assistance to the Syrian government or providing similar assistance to actors in other conflicts? What precedents, if any, would Congress be setting if it authorized and funded such an overt program under current circumstances?
- To which groups, entities, and individuals does the Administration intend to provide expanded assistance, including defense articles and services? For what specific purposes? What are their political goals for the future of Syria? What types of weaponry or training may be provided to recipients? What may not be provided? Why? How soon could a force that meets U.S. objectives be created?
- What mechanisms will be put in place to monitor the disposition of any provided U.S. defense articles? What specific vetting criteria will be used to assess the worthiness of intended recipients? What conditions or criteria might prevent a group or individual from being eligible for U.S. assistance?
- Where will such training and equipping efforts take place? With what implications for the host country or countries? How does the Administration expect the current Syrian government and its allies to respond to those assisting any such U.S. efforts?
- How might the provision of overt military assistance to the Syrian opposition or the conduct of military operations in Syria against Islamic State targets without Syrian government permission or cooperation affect the willingness of the Asad government to cooperate on issues of importance to the United States, including counterterrorism, regional security, and the conflict in Iraq? How might the provision of U.S. military assistance to select groups affect the balance of power and political relations among different Syrian opposition groups?
- What countries are likely to contribute financially or militarily to potential U.S. or coalition efforts against the Islamic State in Syria? How might the United States respond if other governments pursue anti-Islamic State or anti-Asad operations outside the framework of a U.S.-led coalition? Will the United States welcome the support of Iran or Hezbollah for anti-Islamic State operations in Syria?
- On what basis and terms should the Administration report to Congress on the status, achievements, and outstanding goals of anti-Islamic State operations in Syria? What additional administrative, program management, and oversight costs, if any, might be associated with proposals to expand support for armed groups in Syria in relation to new anti-Islamic State goals?

Outlook

Looking ahead, U.S. policy makers face a series of difficult choices as they maintain their demands that Asad ultimately leave power; express their desire for the Syrian government to remain cooperative with implementation of its chemical weapons-related commitments, participate in negotiations with the opposition, and facilitate humanitarian access; and pursue new initiatives to degrade and defeat the Islamic State. By seeking a negotiated rather than a military solution to the conflict in Syria, U.S. policy makers have sought to bring the conflict to a close while maintaining the security benefits associated with the preservation of some Syrian state institutions. Those security concerns appear to be reflected in President Obama's recent statements suggesting expanded U.S. engagement in Syria would remain "narrowly" focused on the Islamic State. Nevertheless, as recently as April, Secretary of State John Kerry alluded to a need to make the Asad government feel less secure and to expand support to the opposition in order to bolster chances for successful negotiations. It could prove difficult to manage those efforts while taking new action against Islamic State operatives and other extremists in Syria.

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 facility 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 further destabilization of Syria's neighbors will remain key agenda items for U.S. decision makers for the foreseeable future.

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