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The “Islamic State” Crisis and U.S. Policy

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Summary

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. There is debate over the degree to which the Islamic State organization might represent a direct terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland or to U.S. facilities and personnel in the region.

The Islamic State (IS) was initially part of the insurgency against coalition forces in Iraq and has in the years since the 2011 U.S. withdrawal from Iraq expanded its control over areas of northwestern Iraq and northeastern Syria. The Islamic State has thrived in the disaffected Sunni tribal areas of Iraq and in the remote provinces of Syria torn by the civil war. In the summer of 2014, Islamic State-led forces, supported by Sunni Arab tribalists and groups linked to ousted Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, advanced along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, seizing multiple population centers including Mosul, Iraq's second largest city. Since then, IS forces have massacred Iraqi civilians, often from ethnic or religious minorities, and recently executed two American journalists who had been held in captivity. The Islamic State's tactics have drawn the ire of the international community, increasing U.S. attention on Iraq's political problems and on the civil war in Syria.

On September 10, President Obama announced a multifaceted strategy to "degrade, and ultimately destroy" the Islamic State organization. The announced strategy is for the United States to lead and expand a multilateral coalition that will undertake direct military action, provide support for partner ground forces in Iraq and Syria, gather and share intelligence and use financial measures to try to progressively shrink the geographic and political space, manpower, and financial resources available to the Islamic State. The Administration and its allies all have ruled out deploying combat forces to either Iraq or Syria.

Some assert that the U.S. strategy will attract the support of Sunnis in both Syria and Iraq in a broad effort to defeat the Islamic State. Others assess that the strategy might have minimal effect because local anti-IS forces will not have support from U.S. or other western combat troops.

For details on Islamic State operations in Iraq and U.S. policy toward Iraq since the 2003 U.S. invasion, see CRS Report RS21968, *Iraq: Politics, Governance, and Human Rights*, by Kenneth Katzman. For further information on the Islamic State's operations in Syria, see CRS Report RL33487, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, coordinated by Christopher M. Blanchard.

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The Islamic State

The Islamic State (IS, aka the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL/ISIS) 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. The Islamic State has thrived in the disaffected Sunni Muslim-inhabited areas of Iraq and in the remote provinces of Syria torn by the civil war. The Islamic State's tactics have drawn the ire of the international community, increasing U.S. attention on Iraq's political problems and on the civil war in Syria.

Although the Islamic State is considered a direct threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East, it is unclear if it currently poses a significant direct threat to U.S. homeland security. 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."¹ 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, as many as 12,000 foreign fighters have travelled to Syria, including more than 1,000 Europeans, and more than 100 U.S. citizens. 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. Olsen also stated that U.S. 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."

Statements and media materials released by the Islamic State reflect an uncompromising, exclusionary worldview and a relentless ambition. Statements by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and Islamic State 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."² 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 Assad government, although some sources allege that operatives for the Islamic State and its antecedents have benefitted from evolving financial and security arrangements with Damascus that started during the 2003-2011 U.S. military presence in Iraq.

In July 2012, 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."³ 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."⁴ English language propaganda

¹ Remarks at the Brookings Institution by NCTC Director Matthew G. Olsen, September 3, 2014.

² 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.

³ OSC Report GMP20120721586002, "Islamic State of Iraq Amir Calls on Sunni Tribes to 'Repent,'" July 21, 2012.

⁴ 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.

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.

Background

The Islamic State's ideological and organizational roots lie in the forces built and led by the late Abu Musab al Zarqawi in Iraq from 2002 through 2006—*Tawhid wal Jihad* (Monotheism and Jihad) and Al Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers (aka Al Qaeda in Iraq, or AQ-I). Following Zarqawi's death at the hands of U.S. forces in June 2006, AQ-I leaders repackaged the group as a coalition known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). ISI 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),⁵ 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,"⁶ 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.

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.

Additional analysis can be found in: CRS Report RL33487, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, coordinated by Christopher M. Blanchard; and CRS Report RS21968, *Iraq: Politics, Governance, and Human Rights*, by Kenneth Katzman.

The Situation in Iraq

Many observers assessed that the Iraqi government contained an earlier IS-led insurrection that began in Anbar Province in January 2014, even though the government had been unable to regain control of the city of Fallujah from IS-led forces. Such assessments were upended on June 10, 2014, when the Islamic State captured the northern city of Mosul amid mass surrenders and desertions by ISF officers and personnel. According to one expert, about 60 out of 243 Iraqi army combat battalions could not be accounted for.⁷ In its offensive, the Islamic State reportedly has been either joined, supported, or enabled by Sunni tribal fighters, former members of the late Saddam Hussein's Baath Party and military, and other Sunni residents.⁸ Their enabling of the offensive, despite reservations among many Sunnis about the Islamic State's brutal tactics against opponents and its intention to impose its version of Islamic law,

⁵ Al Baghdadi reportedly was arrested and detained by U.S. forces in Iraq.

⁶ OSC Report TRN2014051234500562, "Al-Furqan Releases ISIL Al-Adnani's Message Criticizing Al-Zawahiri, Refusing to Leave Syria," Twitter, May 11-12, 2014.

⁷ Michael Knights in "Iraq's Dire Situation," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 17, 2014.

⁸ Tim Arango, "Uneasy Alliance Gives Insurgents an Edge in Iraq," *New York Times*, June 19, 2014.

appeared to reflect broad Sunni dissatisfaction with the government of Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki, who was replaced in September as discussed below.⁹

After taking Mosul, the IS-led fighters advanced to Saddam's hometown of Tikrit and other cities, and into Diyala Province, which has roughly equal numbers of Sunnis and Shiites. In the course of the offensive, IS and allied fighters looted banks, freed prisoners, and reportedly captured a substantial amount of U.S.-supplied military equipment, such as HMMWVs ("Humvees") and artillery equipped with Global Positioning System (GPS) targeting systems.¹⁰ Islamic State-led fighters captured the city of Tal Afar west of Mosul on June 16 and reached the outskirts of Baqubah, capital of Diyala, about 38 miles northeast of Baghdad, by June 17. Islamic State-led insurgents in Anbar, with the support of some tribal allies, reportedly seized additional cities along the Euphrates River in that province. In mid-July, IS members in Mosul reportedly ordered remaining Christians there to leave the city, and most apparently complied.¹¹ After initially establishing a relatively quiet front line with territory controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and its *peshmerga* militia fighters, IS-led fighters went on the offensive against Kurdish-controlled territory in early August, as discussed in a separate section below.

Islamic State-led militant attacks on the country's main oil refinery at Baiji have caused gasoline shortages in northern Iraq, including in the KRG.¹² However, the effect of the fighting on Iraq's overall oil production and exports has been relatively limited, in large part because about 75% of Iraq's oil is produced and exported from Iraq's south, where Sunni insurgents are far fewer in number.

Shiite militias mobilized to try to help the government prevent IS forces from reaching Baghdad. The Iraqi capital is reportedly about 80% Shiite-inhabited, and many Shiites there and from elsewhere volunteered for militia service—in part answering a call by Iraq's leading Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani—to help the ISF. With support from these militias, the government forces regrouped to some extent, and U.S. officials expressed confidence that the IS-led offensive would not capture the city outright, although the ISF might yet lose parts of the city.¹³ Islamic State-led militants have been able to approach Baghdad International Airport to the southwest of the city. ISF-led forces have conducted some limited counterattacks on Tikrit and cities near Tikrit in Anbar Province, but General Dempsey stated on July 3 that the ISF would have difficulty recapturing any lost ground without external support.¹⁴

The ISF collapse in the north enabled the *peshmerga* (Kurdish militia) to capture Kirkuk and large nearby oil fields abandoned by the ISF. The Kurds have long sought to control that oil-rich region, which they claim is historic Kurdish territory, and to affiliate the province with their autonomous region run by a Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). On July 11, *peshmerga* reportedly seized control of two key oil fields near Kirkuk from a state-controlled company. Many experts assert that the Kurds are unlikely to willingly return control of Kirkuk and related areas to the central government.¹⁵

⁹ "Unlikely Allies Aid Militants in Iraq," *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2014.

¹⁰ Mitchell Prothero, "Iraqi Army Remains on Defensive as Extent of June Debacle Becomes Clearer," McLatchey Wire Service, July 14, 2014.

¹¹ Alissa Rubin, "ISIS Expels Last Iraqi Christians from Mosul," *New York Times*, July 19, 2014.

¹² Steven Mufson, "Iraq's Biggest Oil Refinery Is on Fire. How Important is That?" *Washington Post*, June 18, 2014.

¹³ Eric Schmitt and Michael Gordon, "U.S. Sees Risks in Assisting a Compromised Iraqi Force," *New York Times*, July 14, 2014.

¹⁴ Craig Whitlock, "Pentagon Leaders: Iraq Probably Needs Outside Help to Retake Seized Territory," *Washington Post*, July 3, 2014.

¹⁵ Author conversations with expert on the Iraqi Kurds, June-August 2014.

The *peshmerga* gains prompted renewed discussion among KRG leaders about seeking outright independence from Iraq. In early July, KRG President Masoud Barzani asked the KRG parliament to plan a referendum on independence.¹⁶ However, Kurdish leaders, including former Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari, said the crisis the KRG faced from the Islamic State offensive against KRG-controlled territory in August has caused KRG leaders to largely shelve the independence effort, at least temporarily. It remains unclear what practical gains would accrue from outright independence, because the Kurds in Iraq already have a substantial degree of autonomy. KRG leaders might view the independence issue primarily as leverage in disputes with Baghdad, such as those over KRG oil exports and revenue-sharing.

Islamic State Goes on Offensive In Kurdish-Controlled Territory

The Kurdish region was shaken—and further talk of pushing for independence apparently stalled indefinitely—when Islamic State-led forces advanced into territory controlled by the *peshmerga* in early August. In the face of superior Islamic State firepower, the relatively lightly armed Kurdish forces retreated from several towns inhabited mostly by Christians and other Iraqi minorities, particularly the Yazidis. The Yazidis are mostly Kurdish speaking and practice a mix of ancient religions, including Zoroastrianism, which held sway in Iran before the advent of Islam.¹⁷ Fearing Islamic State threats to execute them if they did not convert to Islam, an estimated 35,000–50,000 Yazidis fled to Sinjar Mountain.¹⁸ By August 8, Islamic State-led fighters had advanced to within about 40 miles of the KRG capital of Irbil, causing some flight from the city, and heightening U.S. concern about the security of U.S. diplomatic and military personnel there. Reports of human rights violations by the Islamic State emerged, including murder, kidnappings, forced conversions, and physical and sexual assault.¹⁹ Islamic State-led forces captured Iraq's largest dam, the Mosul Dam, as well, which Kurdish leaders assert could have been damaged or used by the Islamic State to flood wide areas of northern and central Iraq.

Effect on Iraqi Government Formation

The crisis has contributed to major change in Iraq's leadership, in part an Iraqi response to stated U.S. concerns that Prime Minister Maliki's policies had alienated the Sunni Arab community. Elections for the Iraqi Council of Representatives (COR) were held on April 30, 2014, beginning the process of forming a new government. By informal agreement, the COR speakership is held by a Sunni Arab; the largely ceremonial presidency is held by a Kurd; and the powerful executive post of Prime Minister is held by a Shiite Arab. Several Iraqi factions – as well as some within Maliki's core coalition – opposed a third term for Maliki as Prime Minister in spite of the dominant performance of the Maliki-led "State of Law" coalition in the election. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry called for the Iraqi people "to find leadership... that is prepared to be inclusive and share power."²⁰

In July, the COR selected as COR Speaker Salim al Jabburi (a Sunni), and two deputies, and veteran Kurdish figure Fouad Masoum as Iraq's President. It is the constitutional responsibility of the President to

¹⁶ For more information on the Kurds and the potential for the Iraqi Kurds to declare independence, see CRS Insight IN10105, *The Kurds and Possible Iraqi Kurdish Independence*, by Jim Zanotti and Kenneth Katzman.

¹⁷ Ishaan Tharoor, "Who Are the Yazidis?" *Washington Post*, August 7, 2014.

¹⁸ UNOCHA, "Iraq: OCHA Flash Update: Iraq Crisis—Significant Displacement from Sinjar," No. 2, August 4, 2014; Assessment Capacities Project, "Humanitarian Implications of Violence in Northern and Central Iraq," August 7, 2014.

¹⁹ UNAMI, Public Information Office, "UN Gravely Concerned About Situation in Northern Iraq; Calls for Urgent Response," August 7, 2014.

²⁰ "Kerry Says U.S. Wants Iraqis to Find Inclusive Leadership," Reuters, June 22, 2014.

ask the candidate of the largest bloc in the COR to form a government. On August 11, President Masoum formally asked Haydar al Abbadi, a 62-year old member of Maliki's Da'wa Party, to become Prime Minister-designate. Al Abbadi's selection attracted public support from U.S. officials as well as from senior figures in Iran, causing support for Maliki's initial challenge of the al-Abbadi designation to collapse. The designation gave him 30 days (until September 10) to form and achieve parliamentary confirmation for a new cabinet. His work program and all but two of his ministerial nominations were approved by the COR on September 8, enabling al-Abbadi to assume the prime ministership. The two powerful security posts of Interior and Defense Minister were not filled with permanent selections; al-Abbadi asserts he will nominate selections to those positions during the week of September 15. On September 10, 2014, in conjunction with a visit by Secretary of State John Kerry, al-Abbadi proposed to recruit Sunnis to a new "national guard" force that would protect Sunni-inhabited areas that might be taken back from Islamic State control.

Iranian Involvement in the Iraq Crisis

The Islamic State gains appeared to align the interests of Iran and the United States in Iraq. After the Islamic State capture of Mosul, Secretary of State John Kerry stated that the United States was "open to discussions [with Iran on Iraq] if there's something constructive that can be contributed by Iran."²¹ U.S. diplomats reportedly discussed the situation in Iraq at the margins of June 16-20 talks on Iran's nuclear program, reportedly seeking Iran's cooperation to compel Prime Minister Maliki to share power or be replaced outright.²² The U.S. State Department sought to refute assertions that the bilateral discussion on Iraq could provide Iran additional leverage in the ongoing nuclear talks with the United States and its partner countries.²³

In actions that appear to further U.S. objectives in Iraq, Iran reportedly has been delivering arms and ammunition to Iraq and the *peshmerga*. In early July, Iran returned to Iraq about a dozen of the 100+ Iraqi combat aircraft that were flown to Iran at the start of the 1991 war between Iraq and the United States-led coalition. Iranian pilots apparently also are flying the aircraft: in July 2014 Iran announced that one of its pilots had died in operations in Iraq.²⁴ As noted above, Iranian leaders backed the appointment of Abbadi as Prime Minister-designate, abandoning their longtime ally Maliki.²⁵

Many observers remain skeptical that that the United States could or should cooperate with Iran in Iraq. Iran helped establish many of the Shiite militias that fought the United States during 2003-2011, and Iran reportedly has sent Islamic Revolutionary Guard-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) personnel into Iraq to advise the Shiite militias fighting alongside the ISF. The participation of the militias has increased tensions with Iraq's Sunnis, including those who live in mostly Shiite-inhabited Baghdad and in mixed provinces such as Diyala. Anecdotal reports indicate that some Shiite militia fighters have carried out reprisals against Sunnis who the militias accuse of supporting the Islamic State. Some of the Shiite militiamen who are fighting in Iraq had returned from Syria, where they were helping President Asad against Sunni-led armed rebels.

²¹ Michael Gordon and David Sanger, "U.S. Is Exploring Talks with Iran on Crisis in Iraq," *New York Times*, June 17, 2014.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ "Iran News Agency Reports Death of Iranian Pilot in Iraq," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, July 5, 2014.

²⁵ Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Iran Dramatically Shifts Iraq Policy to Confront Islamic State," Reuters, September 2, 2014.

Situation in Syria²⁶

Since 2013, Islamic State fighters have used Syria both as a staging ground for attacks in Iraq and as a parallel theater of operations.²⁷ In early 2014, IS fighters reestablished control in most areas of the northern Syrian province of Raqqah and reasserted itself to the east in Dayr az Zawr, a province rich in oil and gas resources bordering the Anbar region of Iraq. Since late 2013, the Islamic State has controlled several oilfields in Dayr az Zawr and reportedly has drawn revenue from oil sales to the Syrian government. With the proceeds, the group was able to maintain operational independence from Al Qaeda's leadership and pay competitive salaries to its fighters. The Islamic State derived additional revenue in Syria by imposing taxes on local populations and demanding a percentage of the funds involved in humanitarian and commercial operations in areas under its control.²⁸ The Islamic State also has operated north of Dayr az Zawr in Hasakah province, establishing a connection to Iraq's Nineveh province that it was apparently able to exploit in its eventual advance towards Mosul.

IS gains in Iraq are likely to facilitate the flow of weapons and fighters into eastern Syria to the Islamic State and other groups, both because of the publicity from these gains and because of the supply lines they open. Captured U.S.-origin military equipment provided to Iraqi security forces has appeared in photos reportedly taken in Syria and posted on social media outlets. Anecdotal reporting suggests that the group relies on brutality and intimidation to manage communities under its control, and in some areas partnerships with local armed groups appear to facilitate IS control.

At some point, the Islamic State's expanding theater of conflict could subject it to overextension. IS gains may also motivate the Iraqi and Syrian governments to cooperate more closely in seeking to counter the group. Increased cooperation between Damascus and Baghdad could alter the dynamics in both conflicts. It could also undermine ongoing U.S. efforts to encourage Iraqi leaders to support U.S. efforts to press Asad to step down in favor of a transitional government. Increased Iraqi-Syrian cooperation could also decrease the likelihood that Baghdad would comply with U.S. requests to crack down on Iranian overflights of weapons and equipment to Damascus.

Further IS advances in Iraq could weaken the Syrian's government's ability to hold ground in contested areas, as some Iraqi Shiite militants who had previously fought alongside Asad forces return home to combat the IS.²⁹ In mid-June 2014, Syrian forces conducted air strikes against IS-held areas of Raqqah and Hasakah in coordination with the Iraqi government, according to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.³⁰ Syria later struck IS targets near a border crossing between the two states and continues to conduct airstrikes on IS positions in Raqqah province. IS fighters in late July and early August escalated attacks on government army and air force bases in northeastern Syria, capturing several, seizing armaments, and executing captured Syrian military personnel.³¹

²⁶ Prepared by Carla Humud, Analyst in Middle Eastern and African Affairs. For more information see CRS Report RL33487, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, coordinated by Christopher M. Blanchard.

²⁷ "Syria War Fueling Attacks by al Qaeda in Iraq, Officials Say," *New York Times*, August 15, 2013.

²⁸ "Sunni Fighters Gain as They Battle 2 Governments, and Other Rebels," *New York Times*, June 11, 2014.

²⁹ "Seeing Their Gains at Risk, Shiites Flock to Join Militias," *New York Times*, June 13, 2014.

³⁰ "Syria Pounds ISIS Bases in Coordination with Iraq," *Daily Star*, June 15, 2014.

³¹ Institute for the Study of War, "Syria Update: July 26-August 7, 2014."

It is unclear what impact IS gains in Iraq would have outside of northeastern Syria. At least half of Syria-based IS fighters are Syrian or Iraqi tribesmen, according to a Syrian IS defector.³² Like other segments of the Syrian opposition, Syrian tribes have at times been reluctant to expand hostilities against government forces beyond their own local areas.³³ The Islamic State to date has concentrated its forces in Syria's northeast, and has largely avoided regular confrontations in the country's main urban areas in Syria's western half. In early August, Syrian rebels who recently pledged allegiance to the Islamic State clashed with Lebanese Armed Forces for control of the Lebanese town of Arsal, 13 km west of the Syrian border. However, some observers note that there is no indication that the group coordinated its attack in advance with IS leadership.³⁴

Some ongoing IS operations in Syria are focused in Dayr az Zawr, as the group fights to consolidate its supply lines to the city of Abu Kamal, a key node along the Syria-Iraq border. Press and social media reports suggest that IS, by mid-July, had seized large sectors of the provincial capital of Dayr az-Zawr, although some neighborhoods remain contested by the regime and other rebel groups.³⁵ Following the IS declaration of a caliphate, many local and tribal rebel forces surrendered to the group and withdrew from their positions, further expanding the IS presence in the Dayr az-Zawr countryside.³⁶ Any Iraqi or U.S. efforts to disrupt or sever IS supply lines through Abu Kamal or between Dayr az Zawr and Mosul could benefit Syrian military and Nusra Front forces also operating in the area. Islamic State fighters also remain engaged in operations against Syrian armed forces southwest of Raqqah and against a range of armed Syrian opposition groups to the northeast of Aleppo.

Syrian Kurdish fighters from the People's Protection Units (known as the YPG) continue to clash with IS fighters along the border with Iraq and Turkey.³⁷ YPG forces in early August established security corridors along the Iraqi border, enabling some refugees fleeing IS violence in Iraq to cross into Kurdish-held areas of Syria, according to a Syrian Kurdish aid worker.³⁸

U.S. Responses and Options

At the NATO summit in Wales during September 4-5, 2014, the Administration began to unveil a comprehensive strategy for its efforts to defeat the Islamic State organization. President Obama elaborated on the evolving strategy in a speech on September 10, 2014. In summary, the United States seeks to lead and build a multilateral coalition to try to progressively reduce the geographic and political space, manpower, and financial resources available to the Islamic State. The Administration apparently expects different members of the coalition to employ varying means to counter the Islamic State, including but not necessarily limited to direct military action, support for partner ground forces in Iraq and Syria, intelligence gathering and sharing, and financial measures. Many of the actions announced by President

³² "Sunni Fighters Gain as They Battle 2 Governments and Other Rebels," *New York Times*, June 11, 2014.

³³ "The Tribal Factor in Syria's Rebellion: A Survey of Armed Tribal Groups in Syria." The Jamestown Foundation, June 27, 2013.

³⁴ Institute for the Study of War, "The Battle for Arsal," August 7, 2013.

³⁵ "Syria's Allies Are Stretched by Widening War," *Wall Street Journal*, July 14, 2014; "Resistance Emerges as ISIS Consolidates in Deir az Zour," July 15, 2014.

³⁶ Institute for the Study of War, "ISIS Advances in Deir ez Zour," July 5, 2014.

³⁷ OSC Report EUR2014090645329482, September 6, 2014.

³⁸ OSC Report EUR2014080850721279, August 8, 2014

Obama are already under way in Iraq and, to a lesser extent, in Syria. Among the major points President Obama announced are the following:³⁹

- The U.S. intelligence community believes that thousands of foreigners have joined the Islamic State organization in Iraq and Syria and that these fighters could try to return to their home countries and carry out deadly attacks.
- The United States has not detected specific Islamic State plotting against the U.S. homeland, but the group's leaders have threatened the United States and its allies.
- The strategy will not involve deployment of U.S. combat troops, but will rely on strengthening local partners who are fighting Islamic State forces on the ground.
- The United States will expand airstrikes in Iraq to help the ISF and the Kurdish peshmerga advance against IS-led forces, and might begin to strike IS targets in Syria.
- The United States will increase support for Iraqi and Kurdish forces in Iraq by providing an additional 475 advisers (beyond the 300 already deployed), and will support Iraqi efforts to establish a "national guard" to help Iraqi Sunni Arabs defend themselves from the Islamic State.
- President Obama reiterated an Administration request for Congress to give the Administration authority to train and equip vetted Syrian rebel forces. This issue is discussed in detail below.
- The United States will not coordinate any actions in Syria with the Asad regime "that terrorizes its own people" and "will never regain the legitimacy it has lost."
- Working with international partners, the United States will seek to prevent Islamic State terrorist attacks by increasing efforts to cut off Islamic State finances; improving intelligence on the group; strengthening anti-terrorism defenses; countering the Islamic State's "warped ideology"; and stemming "the flow of foreign fighters into and out of the Middle East."
- The U.S.-led coalition will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to those displaced by Islamic State offensives, including Sunni and Shiite Muslims and Christians and members of other religious minorities.

The success of the strategy could largely depend on the participation of other actors. A ten-country "core coalition" announced during the NATO summit consists of the United States, Britain, France, Australia, Canada, Germany, Turkey, Italy, Poland, and Denmark. On September 11, numerous Arab states announced support for the strategy. According to the Administration and many outside experts, the strategy depends heavily on cooperation from the Arab countries to delegitimize the Islamic State's ideology, cut off its finances, and provide intelligence on its recruitment patterns and leaders. Apparently pursuing its own interests, Iran has been generally cooperating with U.S. policy in Iraq, but the United States has ruled out any formally bringing Iran into any U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition. It remains to be seen how Iran may respond to any expanded U.S. efforts to provide support or training to Syrian opposition groups, which Iran may view as a threat to its interests. In Syria, the United States and Iran have generally been on opposite sides: the United States supports Asad's ouster in favor of a transition regime, whereas Iran is materially supporting Asad's remaining in power.

³⁹ White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Statement by the President on ISIL," September 10, 2014.

Actions in Iraq

1. The U.S. strategy builds on existing action undertaken in Iraq. Citing the legacy of the U.S. intervention in Iraq and the potential Islamic State threat to U.S. interests, President Obama stated on June 13, 2014, that the Iraqi government “needs additional support to break the momentum of extremist groups and bolster the capabilities of Iraqi security forces.”⁴⁰ The following represent possible U.S. options to address the ongoing situation in Iraq, and information on whether and to what extent they have been employed.
 - *Advice, Training, and Intelligence Gathering.* In a June 19 statement, President Obama announced that he had authorized sending up to 300 U.S. military personnel to serve as advisers and to assess the ISF and gather intelligence on the Islamic State. As noted above, on September 10 he authorized an additional 475 advisers to help the ISF and peshmerga organize ground advances. An additional 820 military personnel have been sent to help secure the U.S. Embassy and other U.S. facilities in Baghdad and Irbil, to protect evacuation routes such as the international airport in Baghdad, and to operate surveillance aircraft. This total includes 350 military personnel authorized on September 2, 2014, to deploy for these purposes. The advisers have formed “Joint Operations Centers” in Baghdad (U.S.-ISF) and Irbil (U.S.-*peshmerga*) and began assessing the ISF. Their first assessment reportedly concluded that only about half of all ISF units are sufficiently capable for U.S. advisers to help them regain captured territory, were the President to decide on such an expanded mission.⁴¹
 - *Airstrikes.* Citing as an objective stopping the advance on Irbil and reducing the threat to American diplomats and advisers there, on August 7, 2014, President Obama authorized targeted airstrikes against Islamic State positions that pose a threat to U.S. personnel or facilities or to alleviate humanitarian suffering caused by the Islamic State. Since August 8, U.S. combat aircraft and armed unmanned aerial vehicles have conducted over 150 strikes against Islamic State heavy weaponry, checkpoints, and other positions. The strikes blunted the Islamic State advance on Irbil and, on August 14, 2014, President Obama announced that the strikes had succeeded in breaking the siege of Sinjar and in allowing the *peshmerga* and ISF to safely evacuate most of the Yazidi internally displaced persons (IDPs) there.⁴² Additional strikes helped *peshmerga* and ISF forces drive Islamic State fighters from Mosul Dam, which the Islamic State purportedly could have used to flood large parts of Iraq. As noted above, the President on September 10 announced that strikes would “go beyond protecting our own people and humanitarian missions so that we’re hitting ISIL targets as Iraqi forces go on the offensive.”
 - *Weapons Sales.* Since the Islamic State-led capture of Mosul in June, the United States has announced sales of over 5,000 additional HELLFIRE air-to-surface missiles to Baghdad. Deliveries of U.S.-made F-16s and Apaches, purchased in 2011 and 2012, are in their early stages. After the Islamic State move toward Irbil, the Administration reportedly began supplying mostly lighter weaponry and ammunition directly to the *peshmerga*, through the Central Intelligence Agency.⁴³ That channel is a means of adapting to a general policy that requires all U.S. Foreign Military Sales (FMS, run by the

⁴⁰ White House, “Statement by the President on Iraq,” June 13, 2014.

⁴¹ Eric Schmitt and Michael Gordon, “U.S. Sees Risks in Assisting a Compromised Iraqi Force,” *New York Times*, July 14, 2014.

⁴² DoD News release, “Obama Praises Success of Humanitarian Operations in Iraq,” August 14, 2014.

⁴³ Craig Whitlock and Greg Jaffe, “U.S. Directly Arms Kurdish Forces,” *Washington Post*, August 12, 2014.

Defense Department) to be provided to a country's central government. U.S. military officials have said that the *peshmerga* require heavy and long range weapons to be able to counter the Islamic State's use of captured U.S. weapons,⁴⁴ but have not specified which systems might be eventually provided to the Kurds. Several other countries, such as Britain, Germany, and France, have announced they would send weaponry to the *peshmerga*.

- *Humanitarian Airdrops.* During early August 2014, the U.S. military conducted airdrops of food and water to those trapped on Sinjar Mountain. In late August, the U.S. military airdropped humanitarian aid to the town of Amerli (in eastern Salahuddin Province), inhabited by ethnic Turkmen Shiite Muslims, which was surrounded by ISIS fighters. With help from U.S. airstrikes, the ISF and allied Shiite militiamen broke the siege of the town.
- *Direct U.S. combat deployment.* President Obama has repeatedly ruled out this option.⁴⁵ He has stated that intervention by U.S. combat troops is not capable of fixing the underlying political problems that caused the insurrection.

Options in Syria

Well before the President's September 10 speech on an anti-Islamic State strategy, Administration officials had asserted that countering the Islamic State will require dealing in some way with the group's branch in Syria. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey on 21 August asserted that the group could not be defeated without accounting for its Syrian branch, stating that the group "will have to be addressed on both sides of what is essentially at this point a nonexistent border."⁴⁶ Yet, the Administration apparently faces a dilemma because the Administration has sought to pressure the Asad government into negotiating with opposition groups and fulfilling its pledges with regard to chemical weapons. Confronting Islamic State forces in Syria could produce the unintended consequence of taking military pressure off the Asad regime by weakening one major force arrayed against him.

As noted above, the U.S. strategy against the Islamic State's Syria branch appears to center on supporting moderate rebel forces who are fighting not only the Islamic State but also Syrian government forces. On September 5, President Obama stated,

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.⁴⁷

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—reiterated in the President's September 10 speech—has reinvigorated congressional debate on the subject. The Administration's June 2014 request for FY2015 Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funds included

⁴⁴ Press briefing by the Director of Operations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lt. Gen. William Mayville. August 11, 2014.

⁴⁵ White House, op. cit.

⁴⁶ Department of Defense Press Briefing by Secretary Hagel and General Dempsey, August 21, 2014.

⁴⁷ Remarks by President Obama at NATO Summit Press Conference, September 5, 2014.

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.⁴⁸

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. Some congressional committees already have acted on the President's June 2014 request for funding and authorization for such a mission.

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.

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.

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.⁴⁹ 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.

⁴⁸ Available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget_amendments.

⁴⁹ 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.

Authority for Use of Military Force Against the Islamic State and the War Powers Resolution⁵⁰

Two enacted authorizations for use of military force (AUMFs) remain current law, but it is unclear whether either could be seen to authorize ongoing and planned U.S. military strikes against the Islamic State organization. The 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF; P.L. 107-40) targets those who perpetrated and supported the 9/11 terror attacks, identified as Al Qaeda and the Taliban, but the executive branch has interpreted the authorization to include targeting forces that are co-belligerent with these two groups, so-called "associated forces." The Islamic State organization, whose antecedents had links to Al Qaeda, might fall within the definition of an associated force, but a public split between the Islamic State and Al Qaeda in early 2014 calls this association into question. The 2002 Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq (AUMF-I; P.L. 107-243) authorizes force in part to "defend the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq...." The original authorization focused on the Saddam Hussein regime (since toppled) and destruction of suspected weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, threats long extinguished. The recent successes of Islamic State-led forces in Iraq, however, and its ties to former supporters of the Hussein regime, might be seen as falling within the broad AUMF-I authority to counter the "threat posed by Iraq." At the same time, AUMF-I authority would not cover any military operations against Islamic State forces in Syria.

Although these two authorizations are still current law, the President in his notifications to Congress of deployments and airstrikes against the Islamic State, has relied upon his powers as Commander in Chief and Chief Executive under Article II of the Constitution. Article II of the Constitution makes the President Commander in Chief of the U.S. armed forces, and gives the President certain foreign affairs powers. It is debated to what extent Article II authorizes the President to unilaterally use military force, especially given Congress's Article I war powers, including the power to declare war. The President's authority to use force to defend the United States, its personnel, and citizens against ongoing or imminent attack has been generally accepted, while employing such force simply to further foreign policy or general national security goals is more controversial. In Iraq, the President would seem to have substantial authority to use force to defend U.S. personnel, the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, and any other U.S. facilities and property. His notifications of airstrikes, however, have cited as justification furthering U.S. national security and foreign policy interests, and have described uses of force to provide humanitarian assistance, and to aid Iraqi security forces in their fight against the Islamic State. Some, including Members of Congress, argue that these actions fall outside the President's Article II powers and require congressional authorization.

The President's uses of military force are subject to the provisions of the War Powers Resolution (WPR; P.L. 93-148). Since August, President Obama has reported to Congress on four uses of military force in Iraq "consistent with" the WPR. In cases where the President has introduced armed forces into active or imminent hostilities, the WPR requires termination of the use of U.S. armed forces and withdrawal of those forces 60 days after a WPR report is required, unless Congress (1) has declared war or authorized the action; (2) has extended the period by law; or (3) cannot meet due to armed attack. The President can extend the deadline for withdrawal for 30 days if he certifies it is needed to affect a safe withdrawal.

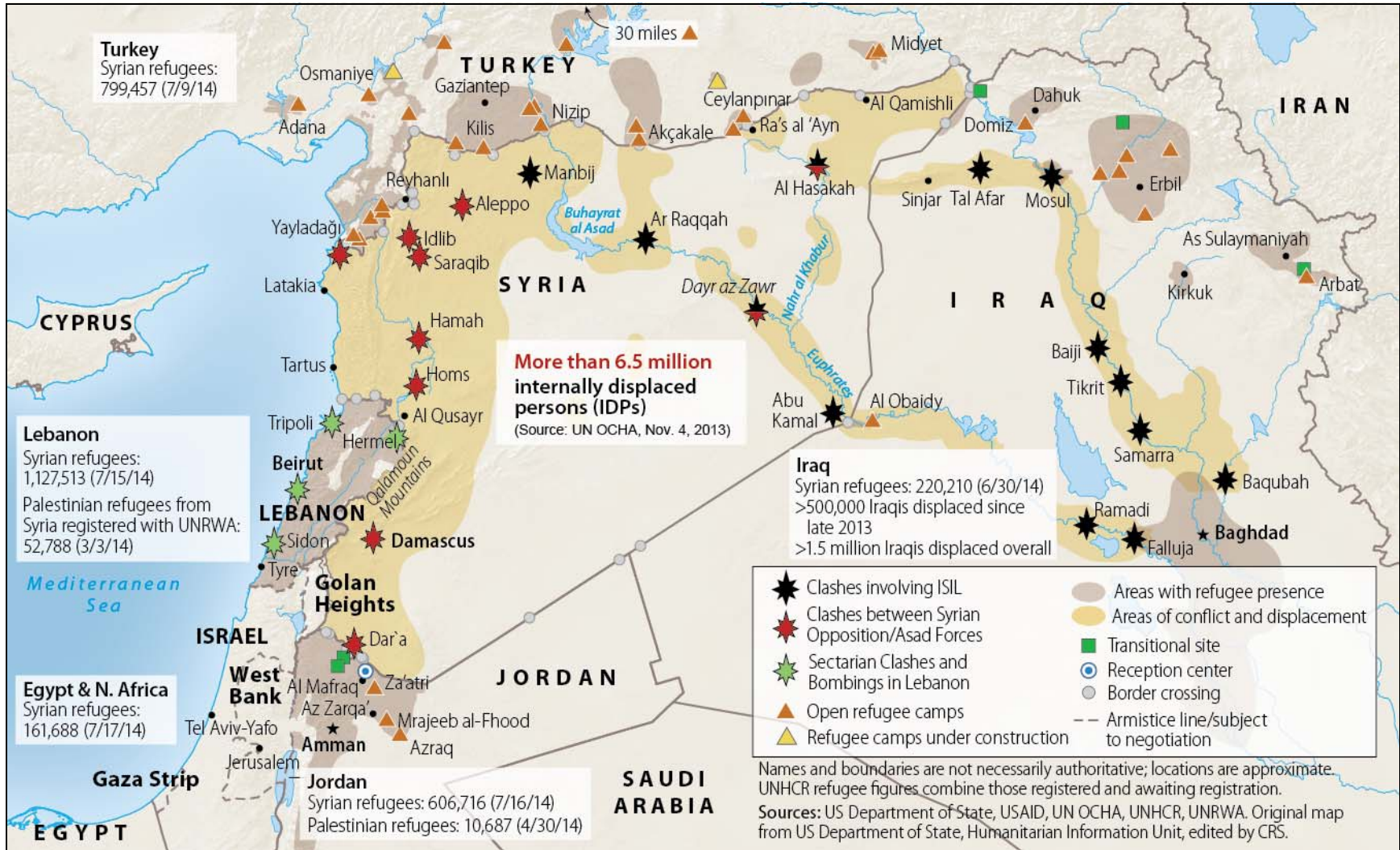
The airstrikes notifications seem likely to concern activities considered hostilities under the WPR, and therefore could be considered to trigger the 60-day withdrawal period. There are questions, however, about whether the 60-day period is currently running, on what date it began, or whether it has reset each

⁵⁰ This section was prepared by Matthew Weed, Analyst in Foreign Policy Legislation.

time one of the reported military operations has ceased. U.S. armed forces conducting airstrikes are likely no longer over Iraqi territory, and the troops that are still in Iraq are not there to engage in hostilities. It is unclear whether these frequent reports are intended simply to ensure that Congress is kept informed of ongoing U.S. action in Iraq or, alternatively, whether it is intended to have some consequence for assessing when and whether the WPR's 60-day deadline for termination of hostilities begins and ends—that is to say, that each of the particular actions reported constitutes a separate military action that is subject to its own 60-day deadline for termination.⁵¹ Such an interpretation, however, would arguably undercut the WPR's goal of ensuring that U.S. forces were not engaged in hostilities against an enemy force for a sustained period of time without congressional authorization.

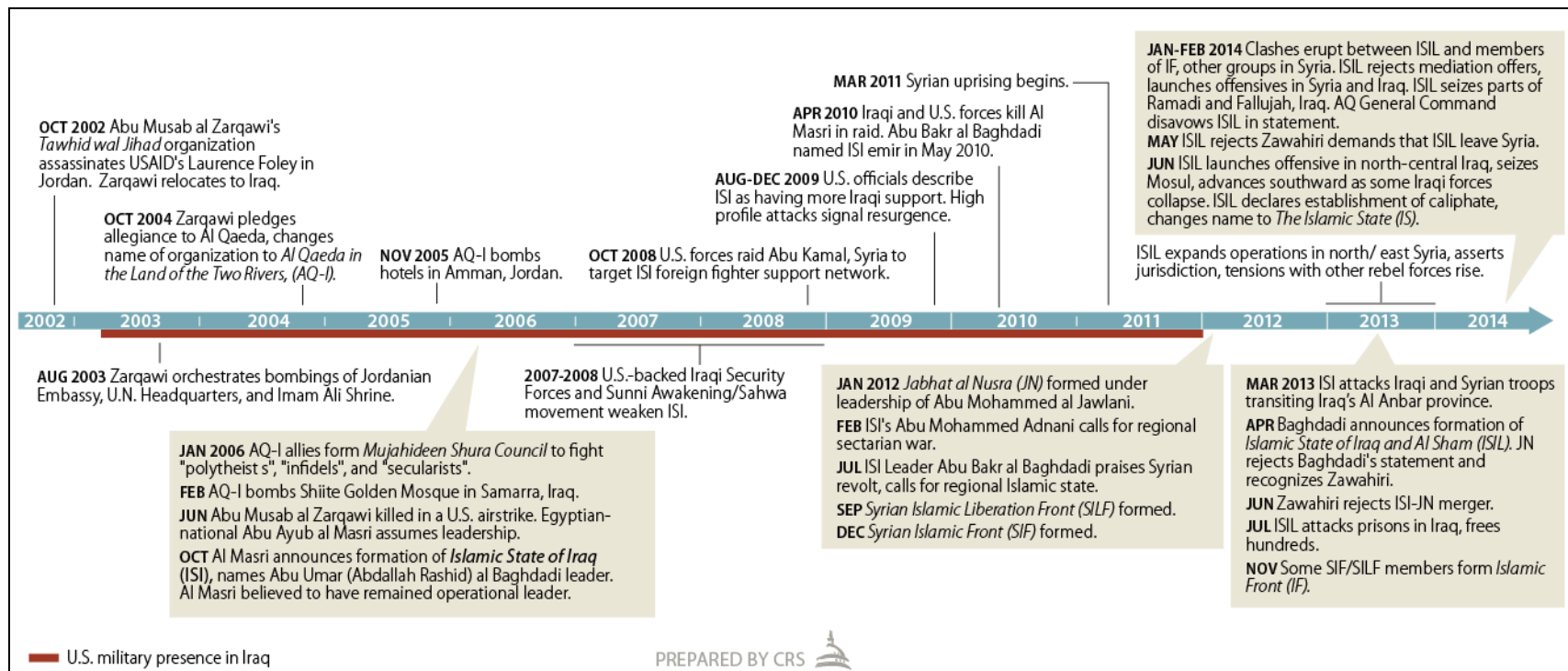
⁵¹ <http://www.lawfareblog.com/2014/09/a-new-tactic-to-avoid-war-powers-resolution-time-limits/>. The term “hostilities” has been a subject of debate in recent years as well. The Obama Administration stated that its airstrikes in Libya in 2011 that occurred after the passing of the WPR's 60-day deadline did not amount to “hostilities” under the WPR because they did not involve sustained fighting or exchanges of fighting with enemy forces, and because no ground troops were involved.

Figure I. Iraq, Syria, and Regional Unrest



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

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



Selected Additional Issues Raised by the Crisis

Humanitarian Impact and Response⁵²

An estimated 1.8 million people have been displaced in Iraq in 2014 creating an urgent humanitarian crisis.⁵³ The actual displacement figures remain fluid and impossible to fully ascertain. Particularly in conflict areas in northern and central Iraq, it is difficult to monitor and track the mass and sometimes multiple displacements. Of the 1.8 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), an estimated 850,000 are seeking shelter in Iraq's Kurdistan region, while increased movements to central and southern Iraq are straining the response capacities of host communities.⁵⁴ There is an immediate need for food, water, shelter, and health services.⁵⁵ There are also increasing concerns about the rise in sectarian tensions across the country made worse by the conflict situation and large numbers of IDPs. Although the needs of all IDPs in Iraq remain significant, civilians trapped in conflict-affected areas, whose access to basic services is curtailed or non-existent, are considered to be in need of lifesaving humanitarian assistance.⁵⁶ Recent situations, such as those involving Sinjar Mountain and the siege of the town of Amerli, where potential major humanitarian and human rights disasters were reportedly largely averted, highlight the plight of IDPs, particularly those who are surrounded by Islamic State forces.

While national and international humanitarian efforts have been severely constrained in providing assistance and protection to these IDPs, on August 13, 2014, the Special Representative of the U.N. Secretary-General for Iraq, Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, announced that the United Nations had declared a "Level 3 Emergency" for Iraq to help facilitate mobilization of resources for the humanitarian response.⁵⁷ With the Level 3 declaration, U.N. and humanitarian partners continue to increase staffing and resources, but they are calling for guarantees of safe and unhindered access of humanitarian staff and in the distribution of relief supplies.

The U.N. Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) is coordinating the humanitarian response by the U.N. Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and some partner organizations and with the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). UNOCHA launched a revised Strategic Response Plan (SRP) for Iraq in June, requesting \$312.1 million in funding to include humanitarian support for the significantly increased caseload of IDPs and a wider geographical

⁵² This section was prepared by Rhoda Margesson, Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy.

⁵³ In addition, there are reportedly more than 1.1 million Iraqis who were earlier displaced. Many had sought refuge in Syria between 2003 and 2011 and are thought to remain displaced. There are also over 141,000 Iraqi refugees living in other countries, according to the State Department on September 10, 2014. Although this section is focused primarily on the situation in Iraq, displacements and movement of populations in Iraq are intertwined with the conflict in neighboring Syria.

⁵⁴ As of September 2, 2014, Iraq is hosting more than 215,000 refugees from Syria, of which 209,000 are in the Kurdistan region and much smaller numbers are dispersed elsewhere in Iraq, including approximately 4,500 in Anbar province.

⁵⁵ Assessment Capacities Project, "Humanitarian Implications of Violence in Northern and Central Iraq," September 4, 2014.

⁵⁶ UNOCHA, "Iraq IDP Crisis: Situation Report No. 9," August 23-29, 2014; UNOCHA, "Iraq: Displacement—Humanitarian Snapshot," August 28, 2014.

⁵⁷ U.N. Assistance Mission for Iraq, Press Release, "U.N. Declares a 'Level 3 Emergency' for Iraq to Ensure More Effective Humanitarian Response," August 13, 2014.

focus. Total U.S. government humanitarian funding to Iraq in FY2014 (as of September 10, 2014) is more than \$186 million.⁵⁸

The U.N. Secretary-General issued a statement on August 7, 2014, condemning the attacks in Iraq and the impact on vulnerable minority communities.⁵⁹ The members of the U.N. Security Council also issued a statement condemning the situation in Nineveh and urging the international community to provide support to those in need. The Security Council reiterated that widespread or systematic attacks directed against a civilian population because of their ethnic background or political or religious beliefs could constitute a crime against humanity, and further, that all parties must abide by international humanitarian law. It urged the parties to stop human rights violations and enable humanitarian access and the delivery of assistance.⁶⁰

Responses to Threats to U.S. Personnel, Facilities, and Citizens⁶¹

The crisis has prompted the Administration to undertake a number of measures to ensure the safety of its personnel in Iraq, including direct military action, relocation of personnel, and deployment of additional protective assets. The Department of State has also repeatedly warned U.S. citizens unaffiliated with the U.S. government of the threats to their security.

President Obama affirmed on August 9 that the protection of American diplomats and military personnel in the city of Irbil was among the principal justifications for conducting targeted airstrikes against ISIL in the area. He also asserted that the United States would "take action" in response to any further threat to U.S. facilities or personnel.⁶²

A number of diplomatic personnel had previously been moved to the Consulate General in Irbil from the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. On June 15, the Department of State announced that while the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad would remain open, a number of personnel would be "temporarily relocated" to Consulate Generals in Basrah and Irbil as well as to Department of State facilities in Amman, Jordan. The relocations were reportedly carried out by non-military means. The announcement stated that a "substantial majority of the U.S. Embassy presence in Iraq" would remain in place and that, with an expected addition of security personnel, the Embassy would be "fully equipped" to carry out "its national security mission."⁶³ On August 10, the Iraq Travel Warning was updated to announce that "a limited number" of additional staff had been relocated from the Embassy in Baghdad and the Consulate General in Erbil to the Consulate General in Basrah as well as to Department of State facilities in Amman, Jordan.⁶⁴ Despite these measures,

⁵⁸ U.S. Department of State, "United States Announces Additional Humanitarian Assistance for Iraq Crisis," Fact Sheet, September 10, 2014; USAID, "Iraq—Complex Emergency," Fact Sheet #3, Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, August 28, 2014.

⁵⁹ United Nations, New York, "Statement Attributable to the Spokesman for the Secretary-General on Attacks on Yazidis and Other Minority Groups in Iraq," August 7, 2014.

⁶⁰ U.N. Security Council, Press Statement on Iraq, SC/11515, IK/683, August 7, 2014.

⁶¹ Prepared by Alex Tiersky, Analyst in Foreign Affairs. For more information on this issue, see CRS Insight IN10090, *Crisis in Iraq: Securing U.S. Citizens, Personnel, and Facilities*, by Alex Tiersky. This section was last updated on August 15, 2014.

⁶² The White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Statement by the President on Iraq," press release, August 9, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/09/statement-president-iraq>.

⁶³ Department of State Spokesperson, "Press Statement: Iraq," press release, June 15, 2014.

⁶⁴ Department of State, "Iraq Travel Warning," updated August 10, 2014, <http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/> (continued...)

President Obama on August 9 affirmed that “we’re not moving our embassy anytime soon. We’re not moving our consulate anytime soon.”⁶⁵

Military assets and personnel have played a key role in securing U.S. diplomatic facilities and personnel in Iraq. News reports suggested that roughly 200 Marine Corps guards and contractors were in place at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad prior to the crisis to protect the Embassy.⁶⁶ Since the crisis began, the White House has announced three deployments to reinforce that number. On June 16, the White House informed Congress that up to approximately 275 U.S. military personnel were being dispatched to Iraq to assist with the temporary relocation of diplomatic personnel, a deployment undertaken with the consent of the Government of Iraq.⁶⁷ On June 30, the White House announced the deployment of up to an additional 200 U.S. Armed Forces personnel to provide increased security to the U.S. Embassy and its support facilities, as well as to reinforce the Baghdad International Airport. According to the White House notification to Congress, provided “consistent with” the War Powers Act, the deployed forces would be accompanied by helicopters and unmanned drones. The force “is deploying for the purpose of protecting U.S. citizens and property, if necessary, and is equipped for combat,” according to the statement, and may/will “remain in Iraq until the security situation becomes such that it is no longer needed.”⁶⁸ The Department of Defense had also previously confirmed that it “has airlift assets at the ready should State Department request them, as per normal interagency support arrangements.”⁶⁹ On September 2, 2014, the Administration announced that an additional 350 U.S. military personnel would deploy to Iraq for similar purposes.

The State Department has also communicated with U.S. citizens in Iraq about threats to their safety. It posted on June 16 an “Emergency Message for U.S. Citizens: Announcement of Relocation of U.S. Embassy Staff,” which urged “U.S. citizens to avoid travel to Iraq because of current safety and security concerns” and advised those concerned about their safety to “make plans to depart by commercial means.” The statement emphasized that the Embassy should not be contacted with requests for assistance with travel arrangements, and that the Embassy “does not offer ‘protection’ services to individuals who feel unsafe.” While the Embassy remained open, the statement said, Embassy services for U.S. citizens throughout Iraq would be limited due to the security environment.⁷⁰

A number of U.S. citizens working in various other capacities in Iraq have also been evacuated in response to the crisis. For example, on June 12, the Department of State confirmed that a number of U.S. citizen contract employees to the Iraqi Government, who were performing services in

(...continued)

[english/alertswarnings/iraq-travel-warning.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/09/statement-president-iraq).

⁶⁵ The White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the President on Iraq,” press release, August 9, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/09/statement-president-iraq>.

⁶⁶ Dan Lamothe, “U.S. companies pulling contractors from Iraqi bases as security crumbles,” *The Washington Post*, June 12, 2014.

⁶⁷ The White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the Press Secretary on the War Powers Resolution Report for Iraq,” press release, June 16, 2014.

⁶⁸ The White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Letter from the President—War Powers Resolution Letter regarding Iraq,” June 30, 2014.

⁶⁹ “DOD Provides Security Help for Baghdad Diplomatic Facilities,” *American Forces Press Service*, June 15, 2014.

⁷⁰ Department of State, “Emergency Message for U.S. Citizens: Announcement of Relocation of U.S. Embassy Staff,” press release, June 16, 2014, <http://iraq.usembassy.gov/em-06162014.html>.

connection with the U.S. Foreign Military Sales Program in Iraq, were “temporarily relocated” by their companies due to security concerns.⁷¹

Possible Questions for Congressional Consideration⁷²

What are overall U.S. priorities in the strategy against the Islamic State organization, and how are these priorities shaping the U.S. response?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy against the Islamic State that have been articulated by President Obama? What factors could hinder the implementation or effectiveness of the strategy?

With respect to Iraq, is it realistic and worthwhile for U.S. officials and lawmakers to act in expectation that Iraq’s government can resolve or manage the country’s sectarian, ethnic, and regional differences?

What are the key considerations for the Administration in any decision to expand anti-Islamic State operations into Syria?

Press reports indicate that the United States has spent over \$500 million on military operations in Iraq from June until the beginning of September. How, if at all, should recent developments in Iraq shape congressional consideration of pending authorization and appropriations legislation for defense and foreign assistance? Should the United States provide more assistance, and/or condition foreign or military assistance to Iraq on reforms or other actions by the national government?

What have been the results of the U.S. military assessment of the ISF by the advisers? What recommendations have the advisers made, if any? What additional actions is the Administration prepared to take, based on their recommendations or reports? Would additional authorities or approvals be needed to augment or expand such support?

To what extent do the Islamic State’s gains reflect its organizational capabilities?

Please assess the range of Iraqi Sunni views of the Islamic State. With respect to Iraq, what effect, if any, has the replacement of Maliki by Haydar al-Abbadi had on Sunni Arab support for the Islamic State? How have jihadist and tribal figures responded to the Islamic State’s declaration of a caliphate in areas under its control?

What options are available for assisting locally organized forces in areas under Islamic State control, or in areas threatened by the Islamic State, who may effectively resist or disrupt the group’s operations? How might such options affect the willingness of the regional governments to continue to cooperate with the United States?

⁷¹ Department of State Deputy Spokesperson, Daily Press Briefing, June 12, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/06/227573.htm#IRAQ>.

⁷² Prepared by Christopher Blanchard and Jim Zanotti, Specialists in Middle Eastern Affairs.

To what extent do the interests of Iran and the United States conflict or coincide, with respect to the Islamic State issue? To what extent, if any, do efforts by Iran to support Iraq's government and Shiite militia forces contradict or support those of the United States? Please answer with respect to Iran's policy of supporting the Assad regime in Syria?

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

To what extent will the governments of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey support anti-Islamic State entities in areas adjacent to their territory?

What might be the broader strategic implications of increased U.S. assistance to the current Iraqi government? What has been the reaction of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to increased U.S. support for the Iraqi government, which the Gulf leaders assert is closely aligned with Iran? How might Iran respond?

How are Kurdish efforts to control Kirkuk and its energy resources likely to affect the security situation in that area generally and in Iraq specifically?

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

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

What are the humanitarian implications of the crisis? Please discuss the situation for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), particularly those displaced in the last several months. What are the most pressing assistance needs and priorities?

What are the challenges for an effective humanitarian response by the international community? How would you assess the international humanitarian operation so far?

What action is the U.S. government taking in support of international humanitarian efforts?

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