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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 parts of Iraq and Syria since 2013. It threatens the governments of both countries and potentially several other countries in the region. The emerging international response to the threat is multifaceted and includes coalition military strikes and assistance plans. 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 forerunner of the Islamic State (IS) was part of the insurgency against coalition forces in Iraq, and the organization has in the years since the 2011 U.S. withdrawal from Iraq expanded its control over significant areas of both Iraq and 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. Since early 2014, Islamic State-led forces, supported by groups linked to ousted Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and some Sunni Arabs, have advanced along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, seizing population centers including Mosul, one of Iraq's largest cities. Since then, IS forces have massacred Syrian and Iraqi adversaries, including some civilians, often from ethnic or religious minorities, and executed American journalists. Islamic State fighters also have launched offensives in Iraq's Anbar province and against a key Kurdish enclave in north-central Syria. The Islamic State's tactics have drawn international ire, increasing U.S. attention to Iraq's political problems and to the war in Syria.

On September 10, President Obama announced a series of actions intended to "degrade, and ultimately destroy" the Islamic State organization. The United States is leading and seeking to expand a multilateral coalition that is undertaking direct military action; providing advice, training, and equipment for partner ground forces in Iraq and Syria; gathering and sharing intelligence; and using financial measures against the Islamic State. The objective of these measures is to progressively shrink the geographic and political space, manpower, and financial resources available to the Islamic State organization. U.S. officials refer to their strategy as "Iraq-first" and "ISIL-first," amid criticism by some in Congress that more attention should be paid to the civil war in Syria and more effort should be made to oust Syrian President Bashar al Asad.

The U.S. desire to show progress against the Islamic State and in the recruitment of regional partners raises questions of whether the U.S. mission and commitment might expand. The Administration has ruled out deploying combat forces to either Iraq or Syria, but it has not ruled out providing forward aircraft controllers, additional military advisors, or other related ground-based military assets. Some experts assert that coalition partners inside Iraq and Syria—Iraqi government forces and select Syrian groups—are too weak to defeat the Islamic State and will eventually require help from U.S. combat troops. Several regional coalition members apparently seek an expansion of the U.S.-led mission to include an effort to oust President Asad of Syria.

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 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, then-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 said that the group's "strategic goal is to establish an Islamic caliphate through armed conflict with governments it considers apostate—including Iraq, Syria, and the United States." Olsen further said 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. U.S. officials report that as many as 16,000 foreign fighters from 90 countries have travelled to Syria, including more than 1,000 Europeans, and more than 100 U.S. citizens, with approximately 12 Americans believed to be fighting there as of September 2014.

According to Olsen, 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." A CIA spokesperson provided an updated estimate of the IS organization's size in September 2014, saying the group could muster 20,000 to 31,500 individuals. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey told the Senate Armed Services Committee on September 16 that two-thirds of the Islamic State organization's personnel remain in Syria.

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 Asad 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.

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

² OSC Report GMP20130409405003, "ISI Emir Declares ISI, Al-Nusrah Front: 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant,'" translated from *Ansar al Mujahideen Network*, April 9, 2013.

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 and recruiting material released by the group in connection with its 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 was able to contain an IS-led insurrection in Iraq’s Anbar Province that captured the city of Fallujah and parts of the provincial capital of Ramadi in January 2014. Such forecasts were upended on June 10, 2014, when the Islamic State captured the northern city of Mosul amid mass desertions by ISF officers and personnel. According to one expert, about 60 out of 243 Iraqi army combat battalions could not be

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.

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.

accounted for.⁷ The Islamic State offensive was reportedly joined by Sunni tribal fighters, former members of the late Saddam Hussein's Baath Party and military, and other Sunni residents.⁸ The Sunni support for 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, appeared to reflect broad Sunni dissatisfaction with the government of Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki that was then in power.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. In mid-July, IS members in Mosul expelled remaining Christians there from the city.¹¹

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 stalled the Islamic State advance on the capital.

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.¹² 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.¹³ However, Kurdish leaders subsequently stated that the crisis the KRG faces from the Islamic State organization has caused KRG leaders to shelve the independence effort, at least temporarily. KRG leaders probably view the independence issue primarily as leverage in disputes with Baghdad, such as those over KRG oil exports and revenue-sharing.

The indirect benefits to the Kurds of the Islamic State offensive proved illusory when Islamic State-led forces advanced into territory controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and its *peshmerga* militia fighters in early August. In the face of superior Islamic State firepower,

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.

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

¹³ 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.

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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ By August 8, Islamic State–led fighters had also 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.¹⁶ 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. Subsequently, U.S. and allied efforts have helped the peshmerga reverse some Islamic State gains, and have helped the ISF limit any major IS advances.

Iraq Government Alterations

The Islamic State advance also led to changes in Iraq’s leadership. 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. Even before the Islamic State’s capture of Mosul, several Iraqi factions and some within Prime Minister Maliki’s core coalition opposed a third Maliki term as Prime Minister, despite the strong electoral performance of his “State of Law” bloc. After the Islamic State capture of Mosul, senior Obama Administration officials publicly blamed Maliki for pursuing sectarian politics that generated Sunni support for the Islamic State, and indicated he needed to be replaced.¹⁷

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. On August 11, in line with the constitutional responsibilities of the 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 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 Abbadi to assume the prime ministership. The two powerful security posts of Interior and Defense Minister were not immediately filled, but Abbadi achieved COR confirmation on October 18 of Mohammad Ghabban, who is linked to a Shiite militia organization (Badr Organization), as Interior Minister. That selection could potentially give many Iraqi Sunnis pause as to whether the Abbadi government will prove less sectarian than that of Maliki. The same day, the COR confirmed Khalid al-Ubaydi, a Sunni ex-

¹⁴ Ishaan Tharoor, “Who Are the Yazidis?” *Washington Post*, August 7, 2014.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ UNAMI, Public Information Office, “UN Gravely Concerned About Situation in Northern Iraq; Calls for Urgent Response,” August 7, 2014.

¹⁷ “Kerry Says U.S. Wants Iraqis to Find Inclusive Leadership,” Reuters, June 22, 2014.

military officer during Saddam's rule, as Defense Minister, perhaps partly mitigating the Ghabban nomination.

As part of his outreach to Sunnis, on September 10, 2014, in conjunction with a visit by Secretary of State John Kerry, 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. In early November, Abbadi visited tribal leaders and other notables in overwhelmingly Sunni-inhabited Anbar Province, much of which has been captured by Islamic State forces.

The Situation in Syria¹⁸

Since 2013, Islamic State fighters have used Syria both as a staging ground for attacks in Iraq and as a parallel theater of operations.¹⁹ In early 2014, IS fighters reestablished control in most areas of the northern Syrian province of Raqqah and reasserted themselves 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.²⁰ 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 wide 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, potentially altering the dynamics in both conflicts.

Neither pro-Asad forces nor their opponents appear capable of defeating their adversaries in the short term. However, international intervention to degrade the capabilities of the Islamic State appears to be driving speculation among many parties to the conflict that dramatic changes could soon be possible in the dynamics of what has remained a grinding war of attrition. 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

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ "Syria War Fueling Attacks by al Qaeda in Iraq, Officials Say," *New York Times*, August 15, 2013.

²⁰ "Sunnis Gain as They Battle 2 Governments, and Other Rebels," *New York Times*, June 11, 2014.

stated their conditional willingness to serve as partners with the international community in counterterrorism operations in Syria, a position that reflects their presumed desire to create an image and role for the Asad government as a bulwark against Sunni Islamist extremism.

As discussed in more detail below, current relations among opposition groups in Syria and their varying views on cooperation with the United States create a challenging context for pursuing U.S. objectives. Syrian opposition forces are drawn from a broad ideological spectrum. They migrate in and out of cooperative and antagonistic relationships and pursue a range of goals—short and long term, local, personal, and national. By taking limited military action in Syria for narrowly defined purposes, the Obama Administration appears to be seeking to avoid amplifying internal disputes and rivalries among Syrian groups or creating perceptions that the United States seeks to bolster one group or trend over another. A number of variables shape whether U.S.-led military operations can meet U.S. objectives, and some observers voice strong views for or against the potential expansion of these operations.

One potential practical effect of U.S. operations (particularly strikes on terrorist targets associated with popular, capable Islamist forces) may be that some Syrians grow more polarized in their views about Syria's future and the role of outside forces in building it. Perceived U.S. allies in Syria may be drawn further into conflict with anti-U.S. groups or feel more pressure to collaborate with them. This may amplify violence in some areas and could weaken the opposition's overall ability to place coordinated pressure on the Asad government.

Key developments since September 2014 include:

- **Jabhat al Nusra Targets Rebels.** Since late October, the Al Qaeda-affiliated group Jabhat al Nusra has been conducting offensive operations in northwestern Idlib Province against the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) and *Harakat Hazm* (Steadfastness Movement), two armed opposition groups considered to be elements of the broader Free Syrian Army movement. Both the SRF and Harakat Hazm reportedly have received weaponry from U.S. allies, and Hazm fighters have released video footage showing their use of U.S.-origin anti-tank missile systems since early 2014. The Nusra offensive reportedly has led to the eviction of these groups from their strongholds in central Idlib Province and the defection of some of their fighters.
- **New Revolutionary Command Council.** In late November, more than 70 rebel groups announced the formation of a new Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) to coordinate anti-Asad military operations among its secular and Islamist signatories. The council initiative obtained support from several groups reported to have received U.S. military assistance, as well as from groups like Ahrar al Sham, which the U.S. government has characterized as an extremist group. Members of Ahrar al Sham and other select groups would be prohibited from receiving U.S. assistance authorized under the extended "train and equip" authority in H.R. 3979.
- **New U.S. Strikes on Khorasan Group Targets.** On November 5, U.S. military aircraft launched airstrikes against targets belonging to *Jabhat al Nusra* and the *Ahrar al Sham* Islamic Movement near the Bab al Hawa border crossing with Turkey. The crossing is reportedly a key conduit for external military assistance to the SRF, Hazm, and other "FSA" groups, in addition to a humanitarian access point. A U.S. CENTCOM press release denied the strikes were related to recent Nusra attacks on moderate rebels and stressed that the targets were associated with active terrorist plotting by the Khorasan

Group, an element of Jabhat al Nusra believed to be dedicated to transnational terrorism.²¹ Many observers argued that the U.S. strikes would inevitably be seen in the context of recent Nusra-SRF/FSA infighting, and some predict negative effects on the image of the United States and its supporters in northwestern Syria who see U.S. strikes as targeting powerful anti-Asad forces.

- **Kobane.** The United States and its partners have used extensive airstrikes to defend the Kurdish-populated town of Kobane, Syria (also known as Ayn al Arab). The town has been besieged by IS forces since mid-September. The United States on October 19 ordered the air drop of KRG-supplied weapons, ammunition, and medical supplies to Syrian Kurds defending the town.²²
- **Rebel Offensive Gains in South.** Armed opposition groups have consolidated control in southwestern Quneitra and Daraa Provinces in areas adjacent to the borders with Israel and Jordan. Coordinated opposition operations have seen forces from Jabhat al Nusra, the Islamic Front, and various FSA groups including the SRF capture a number of villages and strategic points. This has placed new pressure on the regime's control of the Nasib border crossing with Jordan and the M5 highway running from the Jordanian border north to Damascus. Social media footage suggests that U.S.-origin anti-tank missiles have been used in some related battles in the area.
- **Chemical Weapons.** Sigrid Kaag, who has led the OPCW-UN joint mission for the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons, briefed the UN Security Council in a closed door session on November 5. According to UN Security Council head Gary Quinlan, Kaag reported that an OPCW team traveled to Damascus in early November to begin plans for the destruction of 12 chemical weapons facilities, including seven hangers and five underground tunnels.²³ The OPCW team in Damascus also intends to draw up plans for the destruction of four CW facilities that were not previously disclosed by the Syrian government, including a ricin production facility, according to Quinlan. The OPCW briefed the Security Council on these sites in October. In addition, allegations remain regarding the use of chlorine gas by government forces. 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.

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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ Others resisted the Islamic State's advance, and were

²¹ U.S. Central Command News Release #20141105, "U.S. Military Forces Conduct Airstrikes Against Khorasan Group Terrorist Network in Syria, November 6, 2014.

²² For more information on dynamics involving the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (or PYD, whose militia is known as the YPG), which has spearheaded Kobane's defense, along with the Islamic State, Turkey, and Iraqi Kurds, see CRS Report IN10164, *Turkey-U.S. Cooperation Against the "Islamic State": A Unique Dynamic?*, by Jim Zanotti.

²³ "Security Council hears plan to clear Syria of chemical weapons," *CNN*, November 5, 2014.

²⁴ "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.

²⁵ Institute for the Study of War, "ISIS Advances in Deir ez Zour," July 5, 2014.

crushed. As of early December, Islamic State forces were seeking to capture the Syrian military air field at Dayr az Zawr, which many analysts argued could isolate remaining pro-Asad forces in the area and lead to the fall of the province to the group. U.S. efforts to disrupt IS operations near Abu Kamal or Dayr az Zawr could benefit Syrian military 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.²⁶ In August, YPG forces 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.²⁷ The Islamic State's siege of the Syrian-Turkish border town of Kobane/Ayn al Arab has drawn increasing regional and international attention. More than 150,000 residents of the area have been driven into Turkey by the fighting, and fears that Islamic State forces would massacre the predominantly Kurdish defenders and remaining residents of the town have grown over time. U.S. and coalition airstrikes against the Islamic State in Syria since September 23 have largely focused on "degrading the capacity of (the Islamic State) at its core to project power, to command itself, to sustain itself, to resource itself." Subsequent U.S. and coalition strikes against IS forces near and inside Kobane have destroyed some IS vehicles and personnel, but have not fully reversed the group's gains or broken the siege of the town as of December 8.

U.S. Responses and Options

U.S. Strategy to Combat the Islamic State Organization

At President Obama's direction, elements of the U.S. government are leading a multilateral coalition that seeks to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the Islamic State organization by progressively reducing the geographic and political space, manpower, and financial resources available to it.²⁸ The United States and other members of the coalition are undertaking various measures, including direct military action, support for Iraqi and Syrian partner ground forces, intelligence gathering and sharing, and efforts to restrict flows of foreign fighters and disrupt the Islamic State's finances.²⁹ President Obama and Administration officials have stated their view that the Islamic State's capabilities, intentions, and potential to support transnational terrorist activities require the United States to act.

Retired General John Allen serves as Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, and Brett McGurk, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs (Iraq and Iran), serves as General Allen's deputy senior envoy with the rank of Ambassador. U.S.

²⁶ OSC Report EUR2014090645329482, September 6, 2014.

²⁷ OSC Report EUR2014080850721279, August 8, 2014

²⁸ White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Statement by the President on ISIL," September 10, 2014.

²⁹ The website of the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL identifies five "lines of effort" guiding the coalition's efforts: 1) Providing military support to our partners; 2) Impeding the flow of foreign fighters; 3) Stopping ISIL's financing and funding; 4) Addressing humanitarian crises in the region; and 5) Exposing ISIL's true nature.

Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander General Lloyd Austin is the lead U.S. officer with respect to military operations against the Islamic State and other extremists in Iraq and Syria.

Administration officials have identified areas where they believe progress has been made in implementing U.S. strategy to date,³⁰ but have stated clearly that it may take months, and in some cases years to achieve the full range of U.S. objectives. In October, President Obama said, "We're still at the early stages. As with any military effort, there will be days of progress and there are going to be periods of setback."³¹

Strikes Against IS Targets and U.S. Military Advisory Efforts

U.S. military operations as part of the anti-IS strategy have been termed "Operation Inherent Resolve." U.S. forces have used combat aircraft, armed unmanned aerial vehicles, and sea-launched cruise missiles to conduct several hundred strikes in Iraq since August 8 and in Syria since September 22 with the support of coalition partners. The stated objectives of U.S. strikes have evolved: The initial focus was on stopping the advance of Islamic State forces and reducing threats to American personnel and religious minorities in northern Iraq; now it is supporting defensive and offensive military operations by Iraqi military and Kurdish forces and weakening the Islamic State organization's ability to support its operations in Iraq from its bases inside Syria.

Other U.S. strikes have targeted individuals and locations associated with what U.S. officials describe as "the Khorasan Group," that has reportedly engaged in preparations for transnational terrorist attacks. President Obama has stated that he does not believe the introduction of large-scale U.S. ground forces for combat operations is necessary in order to achieve U.S. objectives. Rather, he has stated that U.S. efforts to reverse Islamic State gains on the ground will pair continued airstrikes with expanded efforts to advise and strengthen local Iraqi and Syrian partner forces. Some U.S. military officials have indicated that they are prepared to recommend the introduction of some ground forces if they believe such forces are required to achieve U.S. objectives.³²

Late 2013 and early 2014 were marked by growing Iraqi and U.S. concern about the strength and intentions of the Islamic State in northern and western Iraq. U.S. officials, with the support of Congress, responded to some Iraqi requests for enhanced support and expedited expanded weapons transfers. However, U.S. efforts and involvement did not change fundamentally until the Islamic State captured Mosul from Iraqi forces in June 2014. President Obama has since authorized the deployment of approximately 3,100 U.S. military personnel to Iraq for the purpose of advising Iraqi forces, gathering intelligence on the Islamic State, and securing U.S. personnel

³⁰ In Iraq, U.S.-led airstrikes halted the Islamic State advance on Irbil and enabled the Kurdish *peshmerga* and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to safely evacuate most of the Yazidi internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Sinjar Mountain. 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. In September, U.S. airstrikes facilitated efforts by the ISF and Shiite militias to break an Islamic State siege of the Shiite Turkmen-inhabited town of Amerli. DOD News release, "Obama Praises Success of Humanitarian Operations in Iraq," August 14, 2014.

³¹ Remarks by President Obama After Meeting with Chiefs of Defense, Joint Base Andrews, October 14, 2014.

³² For example, see testimony of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey, Senate Armed Services Committee. "Hearing on the U.S. Policy Towards Iraq, Syria, and ISIL," September 14, 2014.

and facilities.³³ This total includes the approximately 1,600 personnel present in Iraq as of November and 1,500 additional personnel President Obama authorized to be deployed.

After undertaking a new assessment of Iraqi military forces, U.S. advisers have concluded that only about half of all Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) units are sufficiently capable for U.S. advisers to help them regain captured territory through the provision of further targeted advisory assistance.³⁴ The definition of "capable," according to U.S. officials, includes whether an ISF unit integrates both Sunni and Shiite personnel. Some private assessments by nongovernment observers argue that even fewer ISF units are capable of reversing the Islamic State gains, and underscore the continuing role of Shiite militia groups in defending Iraqi-government held-territory and conducting offensive operations against IS forces.

Training and Equipping Partner Forces

U.S. strategy is implemented differently in Iraq and Syria in light of the different political and military conditions that prevail in each country. In Iraq, the United States has relatively welcoming, organized, and recognized partners on the ground in the form of the ISF and *peshmerga* commanded by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). In Syria, the longstanding U.S. position calling for the departure of Bashar al Asad from power and U.S. concerns about the unity and goals of the armed Syrian opposition presents challenges for U.S. efforts to engage partners on the ground. Iran cooperates closely with and offers support to partner forces in both countries, in pursuit of its own interests.

Iraqi Security Forces

On November 7, the Department of Defense announced that President Obama had authorized the deployment of up to 1,500 U.S. military personnel to "expand our advise and assist mission and initiate a comprehensive training effort for Iraqi forces."³⁵ According to the department, CENTCOM "will establish two expeditionary advise and assist operations centers . . . to provide support for the Iraqis at the brigade headquarters level and above." Department of Defense Press Secretary Rear Admiral John Kirby said in a related press briefing that up to 630 out of 1,500 U.S. personnel would be engaged in this aspect of the mission. In addition, CENTCOM intends to establish "several sites across Iraq" where the remaining 870 U.S. personnel will engage in a more hands-on building partnership capacity/training mission for 12 Iraqi brigades, specifically nine Iraqi army and three *peshmerga* brigades (about 2,500 personnel each), with the support of 700 additional personnel contributed by coalition partners.³⁶ These new advise and assist facilities may be located in Anbar, Irbil, Diyala, and Baghdad Provinces. Training will continue over a period of about 8 to 10 months. The reported intent of the training is to prepare the Iraqi forces to

³³ Of the roughly 1,600 U.S. military personnel in Iraq as of November, more than 700 were advisers that are assessing the ISF and gathering intelligence on the Islamic State, working out of "Joint Operations Centers" in Baghdad (U.S.-ISF) and Irbil (U.S.-*Peshmerga*). Approximately 800 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.

³⁴ Eric Schmitt and Michael Gordon, "U.S. Sees Risks in Assisting a Compromised Iraqi Force," *New York Times*, July 14, 2014.

³⁵ Statement by Rear Admiral John Kirby on the Authorization to Deploy Additional Forces to Iraq, Release No: NR-562-14, November 7, 2014.

³⁶ Denmark pledged to supply 120 trainers on November 7.

go on the offensive against Islamic State strongholds in Iraq as early as the spring of 2015, although U.S. officials stress that the counter-offensive is being planned by Iraqi forces and will be carried out on the Iraqis' timetable.³⁷ DOD leaders have emphasized that U.S. personnel will not accompany Iraqi forces in combat settings as part of the planned expansion of the advisory and training mission. However, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey acknowledged in November 2014 that as the campaign against the Islamic State progresses and more complex operations are required by Iraqi Security Forces, he could recommend that U.S. personnel accompany Iraqi forces.³⁸ Participant Iraqi brigades are in the process of being identified and site surveys are ongoing.

The Administration has requested authority and \$1.618 billion in FY2015 Overseas Contingency Operation funding for an "Iraq Train and Equip Fund" to support the expanded training mission—part of a broader \$5.6 billion request for the anti-IS mission for FY2015.³⁹ The Administration funding request stipulated that 40% of the requested U.S. train and equip funds would not be eligible to be expended unless foreign contributions equal to 40% of the \$1.618 billion are contributed (of which half that contributed amount would come from the Iraqi government). The current version of the FY2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA, H.R. 3979) would include this cost-sharing provision, but would also limit the availability of funds for newly authorized Iraq training program to 25% until the Administration submits required program and strategy reports to Congress. H.R. 3979 also would require 90-day progress reporting.

Under H.R. 3979, the Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State, would be authorized:

to provide assistance, including training, equipment, logistics support, supplies, and services, stipends, facility and infrastructure repair and renovation, and sustainment, to military and other security forces of or associated with the Government of Iraq, including Kurdish and tribal security forces or other local security forces, with a national security mission, through December 31, 2016, for the following purposes:

- (1) Defending Iraq, its people, allies, and partner nations from the threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and groups supporting ISIL.
- (2) Securing the territory of Iraq.

The United States also has undertaken new efforts to equip existing Iraqi forces. 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.

³⁷ Michael Gordon and Eric Schmitt. "Iraqis Prepare ISIS Offensive, With U.S. Help," *New York Times*, November 3, 2014.

³⁸ Gen. Dempsey told the House Armed Services Committee on November 13, "I'm not predicting, at this point, that I would recommend that those [Iraqi] forces in Mosul and along the border would need to be accompanied by U.S. forces, but we're certainly considering it."

³⁹ Office of Management and Budget, memorandum from Shaun Donovan, Director of OMB, November 10, 2014, p12.

Iraqi and Syrian Kurds

In addition to support for the ISF, the Administration also reportedly has begun supplying mostly lighter weaponry and ammunition directly to the security forces (*peshmerga*) of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), through the Central Intelligence Agency.⁴⁰ A number of European countries, such as Britain, Germany, and France, also have been supplying weaponry to the *peshmerga*. The central government in Baghdad and the KRG have had deep differences over territory, the exportation of oil, Kurdish ambitions for independence, and other issues. However, the threat posed by the Islamic State has led the two to make common cause, and since the crisis began, the ISF has permitted the United States to transfer some of the ISF's weapons to the *peshmerga*.⁴¹

On December 2, the KRG and Baghdad signed a partial reconciliation agreement under which the KRG would provide up to 550,000 barrels⁴² per day of oil to Iraqi state authorities in exchange for a restoration of the KRG's 17% share of national revenues (which will amount to about \$600 million per month at current oil prices.)⁴³ In addition, Baghdad will provide the KRG with approximately \$100 million per month to pay for *peshmerga* salaries and weapons purchases. Baghdad reportedly also agreed to facilitate the transfer of some U.S. weapons to the *peshmerga*.⁴⁴ The agreement is to be part of the 2015 Iraqi budget, which is subject to approval by the Iraqi parliament.

Kurdish and U.S. officials have said that, as part of a long-term strategy to drive IS forces back, the *peshmerga* will require heavy and long range weapons—in part to counter the Islamic State's use of captured U.S. weapons.⁴⁵ Providing these weapons, however, could incur opposition from Baghdad on the grounds that a more potent arsenal might enable the KRG and *peshmerga* to retain control of the disputed territory of Kirkuk, which the *peshmerga* seized as the ISF collapsed in June. The Turkish government also may protest the provision of such weaponry.

As noted above, the Administration has sought authorization and funding to support an expanded train and equip mission for Iraqi security forces, including the *peshmerga*. The FY2015 NDAA currently under consideration would authorize such assistance (Section 1236), and the joint explanatory statement prepared by House and Senate Defense committee leaders states:

We note the significant contribution that Kurdish security forces have made to countering ISIL's advance. We understand that the administration's plan includes assistance to train and equip 3 brigades of Kurdish *peshmerga*. Accordingly, we expect that a significant portion of the assistance under this authority will be provided to meet the requirements of the Kurdish

⁴⁰ That channel is a means of adapting to U.S. law and policy that requires all U.S. Foreign Military Sales (FMS, run by the Defense Department) to be provided to a country's central government, and not to sub-national forces. Craig Whitlock and Greg Jaffe, "U.S. Directly Arms Kurdish Forces," *Washington Post*, August 12, 2014.

⁴¹ The *peshmerga*, with U.S. assistance, have retransferred some weapons and ammunition to Syrian Kurdish forces battling Islamic State fighters in Syria. U.S. Central Command news release. "U.S. Resupplies Kurdish Forces Fighting ISIL Near Kobani." October 20, 2014.

⁴² 300,000 from the Kirkuk fields now controlled by the KRG and 250,000 barrels from fields in the KRG itself. It appears that the KRG would be able to itself export any amounts over the 250,000 barrels per day that it is required, under the December deal, to transfer to Baghdad's control.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Tim Arango. "Iraq Government Reaches Accord with the Kurds." *New York Times*, December 3, 2014.

⁴⁵ Press briefing by the Director of Operations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lt. Gen. William Mayville. August 11, 2014.

security forces and urge the Secretary of Defense to ensure that such assistance is delivered in a timely manner to such forces. We further expect the Secretary of Defense to keep the congressional defense committees fully informed as this plan is developed and implemented, including any arrangements to ensure that such assistance for Kurdish security forces is promptly delivered to those forces.

Iraqi National Guard and Other Local Forces

The United States has endorsed Iraqi efforts to establish a "national guard" to help Iraqi Sunni Arabs defend themselves from the Islamic State. Press reports citing unidentified U.S. officials suggest that "two to three brigades or as many as 15,000 troops" could be recruited and trained for such an effort.⁴⁶ The national guard force, which reportedly will report to the governments of each province, is intended primarily to secure territory that is recaptured from the Islamic State. According to Department of Defense Press Secretary Rear Admiral John Kirby, the planned expansion of the advisory and training missions for the ISF will not initially support the creation of national guard forces, but related infrastructure and personnel could support such a mission in the future if requested by the government of Iraq and authorized by President Obama.⁴⁷

The Administration's FY2015 OCO authority and funding request notes that requested funds would be used "to provide material support to tribal elements allied with Iraqi forces." The current version of the FY2015 NDAA under consideration would authorize the provision of assistance to security forces "of or associated with the Government of Iraq," as well as "tribal security forces or other local security forces, with a national security mission." According to the defense authorizing committee leaders who drafted the bill, their version of the authorization was amended to specifically:

add local security forces with a national security mission to the list of forces authorized to receive assistance under this section. We believe that, for purposes of this section, local security forces should include local forces that are committed to protecting highly vulnerable ethnic and religious minority communities in the Nineveh Plain and elsewhere from the ISIL threat.

Sunni communities remain suspicious of the ISF, which is dominated by Shiite Muslims, seeing it to some extent as an occupation force. U.S. strategy presumes that having Sunni forces secure Sunni communities would ease this sectarian-based suspicion. Questions remain regarding the willingness of Sunnis to counter the Islamic State in the way many took U.S.-aided action against IS precursor Al Qaeda in Iraq in 2007 (the so-called *sahwa*, or awakening). This may depend largely on whether Prime Minister Haydar al Abadi and other top Shiite leaders in the central government demonstrate a willingness to share power with or devolve local authority to Sunnis, Kurds, and other minorities. Islamic State forces continue to intimidate Sunni Arab communities and deter potential adversaries through mass killings of tribally-organized fighters.

⁴⁶ Gopal Ratnam, "Washington wants NATO allies to help retrain the Iraqi military," *Foreign Policy*, October 16, 2014.

⁴⁷ Press Briefing by Rear Admiral John Kirby on the Authorization to Deploy Additional Forces to Iraq, November 7, 2014.

Support for Vetted Syrians

Engagement with Syrians in combatting the Islamic State presents similar challenges. President Obama said on November 5 that the United States seeks to isolate and reduce the areas where ISIL can operate in Syria in support of the top U.S. priority of rolling back IS gains in Iraq. To date, the Syrian government and Syrian military appear to be acquiescent observers rather than active partners in U.S. efforts to combat the Islamic State inside Syria. U.S. officials have notified the Syrian government of certain strikes, but President Obama has said that the United States will not coordinate its actions in Syria with the Asad regime, which he has said “terrorizes its own people” and “will never regain the legitimacy it has lost.”⁴⁸ U.S. strategy seeks a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Syria and believes that President Asad and some of his supporters must leave office as part of such a settlement. Congress and the Administration have provided nonlethal aid and reportedly provided lethal support to some opposition groups in Syria. By all accounts, Syrian opposition forces remain divided in their goals, varied in their cohesiveness, and limited in their capabilities.

In September, Congress endorsed President Obama’s request for authority to train and equip vetted Syrians, in part to develop a partner force for U.S. operations against the Islamic State and other terrorist groups in Syria.⁴⁹ The current version of the FY2015 NDAA under consideration in Congress (H.R. 3979) would amend and extend this authority through December 31, 2016. The bill and its accompanying explanatory statement further specify the types of assistance to be provided, and would expand reporting requirements, include human rights and rule of law commitment vetting requirements, authorize the provision of assistance to third countries for the purposes of the program, and create a broad waiver authority for the President relative to the assistance program, subject to a 30-day congressional notification period.

Some Syrian opposition members and their U.S. supporters have criticized the Administration’s announced plans to train and equip an initial force of 5,400 vetted Syrians as insufficient in size. Others disagree strategically with the president and may believe that U.S.-backed forces should be trained for offensive operations against the Syrian government. For further discussion of these critiques and policy options under consideration, see “Defining the Way Forward in Syria” below.

Disrupting IS Financing

On October 23, Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen identified three components of U.S. policy aimed at reducing the financial resources available to the Islamic State.⁵⁰ Broadly speaking, the U.S. government and its partners seek to disrupt IS revenue streams, limit the group’s access to formal financial systems, and impose sanctions on the group’s senior leadership and financial facilitators.

⁴⁸ White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the President on ISIL,” September 10, 2014.

⁴⁹ The FY2015 continuing resolution (H.J.Res. 124, P.L. 113-164) authorizes the Department of Defense through December 11, 2014, or until the passage of a FY2015 defense authorization act to provide overt assistance, including training, equipment, supplies, and sustainment, to vetted members of the Syrian opposition and other vetted Syrians for select purposes. For more on this program and related legislation, see CRS Report R43727, *Proposed Train and Equip Authorities for Syria: In Brief*, by Christopher M. Blanchard and Amy Belasco.

⁵⁰ Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen, Remarks at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 23, 2014.

Disrupting revenue streams. Cohen stated that the United States seeks to disrupt the group's revenue streams by targeting those who refine, transport, handle, or sell IS oil. The United States is also working with regional partners to identify cross-border smuggling routes and persons involved in smuggling networks. The United States has urged United Nations (UN) member states to help cut off resources to the Islamic State, and the UN Security Council in September passed resolution 2178 to combat the flow of money and foreign fighters to the Islamic State and the Al Qaeda-affiliated *Jabhat al Nusra* (Support Front).

In addition to financial and political measures, the United States is also employing military means to target IS funding streams. Since August 2014, U.S. military strikes against the Islamic State have targeted oil facilities, including collection points and mobile refineries. In late September and early October, the United States struck at least 12 out of an estimated 15-20 IS-held modular oil refineries in eastern Syria and rendered them inoperable, according to the Defense Department spokesperson.⁵¹ The Defense Department estimates that each refinery had the capacity to produce 300 to 500 barrels a day of refined petroleum. The International Energy Agency in mid-October reported that U.S. and coalition strikes in Iraq and Syria had reduced the Islamic State's ability to produce, refine, and smuggle oil.⁵²

Restricting access to the financial system. Cohen noted that the United States aims to restrict the Islamic State's access to the international financial system and to limit its ability to move, store, and use funds it acquires locally. In particular, the United States plans to work with Iraqi authorities, banks' headquarters, and the international financial community to prevent the Islamic State from using local bank branches in areas under its control.

Financial sanctions. The United States also plans to impose sanctions against IS officials and their external financial backers. On September 24, the Department of the Treasury designated twelve individuals for their role in soliciting funds, procuring military equipment, and recruiting foreign fighters, two of whom are based in Syria and are associated with the Islamic State.⁵³

Restricting Flows of Foreign Fighters

U.S. officials from the intelligence community, State Department, and other agencies concerned with domestic security continue to assess, monitor, and respond to threats posed by foreign fighters active in Iraq and Syria. Diplomatic and intelligence efforts focus on coordinating with source, transit, and returnee destination countries to strengthen shared responses and preventive measures.⁵⁴ In March 2014, the State Department named Ambassador Robert Bradtke as "senior adviser for partner engagement on Syria foreign fighters." According to a department spokesperson, "Since then, Ambassador Bradtke has led a comprehensive effort, including marshalling representatives from a number of U.S. departments and agencies, to encourage key European, North African, and Middle Eastern partners to prioritize the threat, address vulnerabilities, and adapt to – and prevent – foreign fighters."⁵⁵ In December, Ambassador

⁵¹ Department of Defense Press Briefing by Rear Adm. Kirby in the Pentagon Briefing Room, September 30, 2014, and October 3, 2014.

⁵² International Energy Agency, Oil Market Report, October 14, 2014.

⁵³ U.S. Treasury Department, Treasury Designates Twelve Foreign Terrorist Fighter Facilitators, September 24, 2014.

⁵⁴ See White House, Fact Sheet: Comprehensive U.S. Government Approach to Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Syria and the Broader Region, September 24, 2014.

⁵⁵ State Department Spokesperson Jen Psaki, Daily Press Briefing, Washington, D.C., August 27, 2014.

Bradtke told Congress that “The intelligence community estimates that since January 2012, over 16,000 foreign fighters have travelled to Syria from more than ninety countries, including the United States.”⁵⁶

In August 2014, the U.S. government supported the adoption of UN 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 called 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.

President Obama led a session of the United Nations Security Council on September 24 focused on strengthening international responses to the threat posed by foreign fighters travelling to conflict zones, especially in Syria and Iraq. The session concluded with the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2178, which requires Member States, consistent with international law, to prevent the “recruiting, organizing, transporting or equipping of individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning of, or participation in terrorist acts.” In December 2014, Ambassador Bradtke said, “Several countries have already enacted or proposed legislation to permit [prosecution for foreign fighter facilitation]; other countries have stepped up their enforcement of existing laws. We continue to urge partners to meet their obligations under UNSCR 2178, and are offering assistance to partners who may need help in doing so.”⁵⁷

What Has the Strategy Achieved to Date?

Experts and officials are debating the effectiveness of the strategy. The Administration has argued that the strategy will time—measured in many months, not weeks—to reach its objectives. It asserts that there are distinct achievements, to date. Administration critics argue that the strategy lacks effective partners who can advance against Islamic State-held territory on the ground and suffers from a basic contradiction in not confronting the regime of President Asad of Syria. These critics assert that achieving stated Administration objectives require U.S. or other ground combat troops and expansion of the mission to include pressuring Asad to accept a political solution.

Administration officials assert that the accomplishments of the strategy to date include

- In Iraq, U.S.-led airstrikes halted the Islamic State advance on Irbil and enabled the *peshmerga* and ISF to safely evacuate most of the Yazidi internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Sinjar Mountain.⁵⁸ In October, *peshmerga* forces recaptured the town of Zumar and the border crossing into Syria at Rabia, among other gains.

⁵⁶ Ambassador Robert Bradtke, State Department Bureau of Counterterrorism Senior Advisor for Partner Engagement on Syria Foreign Fighters, Testimony before House Foreign Affairs Subcommittees on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade, and the Middle East and North Africa, December 2, 2014.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ DOD News release, “Obama Praises Success of Humanitarian Operations in Iraq,” August 14, 2014.

- In September, U.S. airstrikes 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. Also that month, U.S. airstrikes facilitated efforts by the ISF and Shiite militias to break an Islamic State siege of the Shiite-inhabited town of Amerli.
- With intensive airstrikes and the airdrop of supplies and weaponry to defenders in October, the United States and its partners helped prevent the predominantly Kurdish-inhabited Syrian town of Kobane/Ayn al Arab from capture by Islamic State forces. Still, that town remains an active battle site and the outcome is uncertain.
- In October, the ISF recaptured the town of Jurf al-Sakhar, 40 miles south of Baghdad, and have made some gains in Diyala Province, helping secure ISF supply lines to northern Iraq. In November, the ISF claimed to have recaptured most of the town of Baiji, potentially positioning the force to relieve the IS siege of the large refinery outside the town.
- In November, DOD announced that a U.S. strike had targeted IS leadership in Iraq, although it is not clear whether any senior IS leaders were killed or wounded.

The November 7 announcement of an expanded training and advisory mission for Iraqi forces appeared to reflect Administration optimism that additional U.S. inputs—coupled with the success in replacing Prime Minister Maliki with a more inclusive successor—could produce results. Others interpreted the announcement as an indication that the Administration assesses that Iraqi forces remain highly deficient and require substantially more help. In comments related to the November 7 announcement, President Obama stated:

What it [the expanded train and equip mission] signals is a new phase. What we knew was that phase one was getting an Iraqi government that was inclusive and credible, and we now have done that. And so now what we've done is rather than just try to halt ISIL's momentum, we're now in a position to start going on some offense. The airstrikes have been very effective in degrading ISIL's capabilities and slowing the advance that they were making. Now what we need is ground troops, Iraqi ground troops, that can start pushing them back.⁵⁹

Critics of the Administration strategy note some setbacks to the strategy as follows:

- That Islamic State forces have continued to gain control over territory in Iraq's Al Anbar province, including in October seizing the town of Al Hit and capturing or encroaching on several ISF military bases in the province. Secretary of Defense Hagel told journalists in October that "Anbar Province is in trouble. We know that."⁶⁰
- Islamic State gains in Anbar have positioned Islamic State forces to approach Baghdad and to undermine security in the city—as well as the crucial Baghdad

⁵⁹ President Obama's comments on CBS "Face the Nation," as quoted in Eric Schmitt. "Obstacles Limit Targets and Pace of Strikes on ISIS," *New York Times*, November 10, 2014.

⁶⁰ Kirk Semple and Eric Schmitt. "Islamic State Keeps Up Pressure Near Baghdad as Iraqi Troops Stumble," *New York Times*, October 18, 2014.

International Airport—through mortar barrages and infiltration by suicide and other bombers. Experts say this encroachment might hinder ISF efforts to take the offensive rather than react to Islamic State maneuvers. Others assert that the ISF, while supported by Shiite militias and unlikely to lose Baghdad entirely, might yet lose parts of the city.⁶¹

- There has been little evidence, to date, of a significant Iraqi Sunni shift to oppose Islamic State forces directly or to comprehensively assist ISF units in anti-IS operations. Many Sunnis continue to distrust the Baghdad government and its reliance on Shiite militias. Others Sunnis apparently have been cowed by IS massacres of Sunni tribalists and other Sunnis opposed to IS rule. In October, Islamic State fighters reportedly killed more than 300 members of the Albu Nimr tribe for resisting IS advances in western Iraq.

International Coalition

The outcomes of U.S. strategy might depend on the participation of other actors, both state and non-state. U.S. officials have recruited a coalition of countries to help defeat the Islamic State, in large part to build international legitimacy for a military campaign and enlist Sunni help with co-religionists in Iraq and Syria. The Administration has sought—and received—a range of support from international partners, including participation in airstrikes, assisting and training Iraqi government and Iraqi Kurdish forces, arming and training moderate Syrian rebels, increasing intelligence sharing, committing to curb the flow of fighters and resources to the Islamic State, and providing financial support.⁶²

The State Department lists 60 countries as members of the “Coalition to Degrade and Defeat ISIL.” Many of the countries participating have been involved since 2012 in response to the evolving conflict in Syria. The participation of the various coalition members and summaries of some of their contributions are cited below.⁶³

Those in the coalition that are participating in military operations in Iraq and Syria face significant challenges. Past attempts at coordination have exposed rifts among regional countries, prompting situations in which the common goal of supporting the Syrian opposition was not enough to overcome other, competing priorities among ostensibly partner states.⁶⁴ Relations

⁶¹ Eric Schmitt and Michael Gordon, “U.S. Sees Risks in Assisting a Compromised Iraqi Force,” *New York Times*, July 14, 2014.

⁶² For a summary of significant foreign contributions to the effort against the Islamic State, see Justine Drennan. “Who Has Contributed the Most in the Coalition Against the Islamic State.” *Foreign Policy*, October 14, 2014. http://complex.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/10/14/whos_contributed_the_most_in_the_coalition_against_the_islamic_state?wp_login_redirect=0

⁶³ In February 2012, the Administration helped organize the Friends of Syria Group, a coalition of Western and regional countries that met periodically to discuss ways to support the Syrian opposition, increase pressure on the Asad government, and encourage a negotiated settlement between the two sides. The group last met in Saudi Arabia in late August. The Friends of Syria “Core Group,” also known as the London 11, includes the United States, Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, and the United Kingdom.

⁶⁴ Sunni Arab Gulf states have faced internal divisions—Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and UAE in March 2014 withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar, accusing Doha of pursuing policies at odds with other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. At a meeting of the GCC Foreign Ministers Council in late August 2014, some officials claimed to have made progress in resolving outstanding issues among member states. See “Saudi, UAE and Bahrain Envoys’ Return ‘At Any Time,’” *Gulf Times*, August 31, 2014.

between Iraq's government and the Sunni Arab Gulf states have been consistently strained in the post-Saddam Hussein period, in part because Iraq's government has been dominated by Shiite factions politically close to Iran. Sunni Arab militaries have to date limited their airstrikes to Syria in part because strikes in Iraq might be seen by their populations as empowering Shiite elements in Iraq. The partner countries participating in airstrikes in Syria, according to CENTCOM, are: Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Qatar reportedly participated in some of the first coalition strikes in Syria in September. To date, Western and other non-Middle Eastern allies of the United States, such as Australia, Britain, and France, are undertaking airstrikes in Iraq, and not in Syria—perhaps reflecting a hesitancy among Western allies to be drawn into involvement in Syria's civil war in any way.

In Syria, Sunni coalition partners might assess that the U.S. focus on the Islamic State might not be contributing to the Sunni partner primary objectives of weakening the Assad regime and its supporters (Iran, Hezbollah, Russia). U.S. partners will likely base their calculations of the costs and benefits of their military operations in Syria and/or Iraq on their perceptions of various factors such as the urgency of acting directly, the soundness of U.S. strategy, the level of U.S. commitment, and potential progress toward political solutions (particularly in Iraq) that are more inclusive of Sunni Arabs or less conducive to Iranian strategic goals.

The following sections will discuss the role that selected partner countries are playing in the coalition, and examine factors that could potentially constrain their participation.

As of December 3, the State Department listed more than 60 countries and organizations as members of the "Coalition to Degrade and Defeat ISIL."⁶⁵ To date, the Administration has sought—and received—a range of support from international partners, including participation in the air campaign against IS forces, financial support, assistance for Iraqi government and Iraqi Kurdish forces, offers of support for efforts to arm and train vetted Syrians, increased intelligence sharing, and actions to curb foreign fighter and financial flows.⁶⁶

NATO and Arab Partners. The NATO alliance as a whole has not committed to a substantive response beyond stating in the September 2014 Wales summit communique that it would consider any future request from the Iraqi government to launch a training and capacity-building mission for Iraqi security forces.⁶⁷ NATO previously conducted a military training mission in Iraq from 2008 to 2011. European countries continue to rule out using ground forces in combat operations in Iraq or Syria.

⁶⁵ As of December 3, coalition members attending a joint strategy meeting included: Republic of Albania, Hungary, Sultanate of Oman, Australia, Republic of Iceland, Republic of Poland, Republic of Austria, Republic of Iraq, Portuguese Republic, Kingdom of Bahrain, Ireland, State of Qatar, Belgium, Italian Republic, Republic of Korea, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Japan, Romania, Republic of Bulgaria, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Canada, Republic of Kosovo, Republic of Serbia, Republic of Croatia, State of Kuwait, Republic of Singapore, Republic of Cyprus, Republic of Latvia, Slovak Republic, Czech Republic, Republic of Lebanon, Republic of Slovenia, Denmark, Republic of Lithuania, Federal Government of Somalia, Arab Republic of Egypt, Luxembourg, Spain, Republic of Estonia, Macedonia, Sweden, European Union, Moldova, Taiwan, Republic of Finland, Montenegro, Republic of Turkey, French Republic, Morocco, United Arab Emirates, Georgia, Kingdom of the Netherlands, Ukraine, Federal Republic of Germany, New Zealand, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Hellenic Republic (Greece), Norway, and the United States of America.

⁶⁶ For a summary of significant foreign contributions to the effort against the Islamic State, see Justine Drennan. "Who Has Contributed the Most in the Coalition Against the Islamic State." *Foreign Policy*, October 14, 2014.

⁶⁷ Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales, NATO Press Release (2014) 120, September 5, 2014.

To date, Western and other non-Middle Eastern allies of the United States, such as Australia, Britain, and France, are undertaking airstrikes in Iraq, but not in Syria. Some Gulf Cooperation Council countries and Jordan are conducting airstrikes against Islamic State targets in Syria, in conjunction with U.S. forces. U.S. forces alone continue to conduct strikes against targets associated with the Khorasan Group, an element of Jabhat al Nusra engaged in transnational terrorist activity, according to U.S. officials. These strikes have targeted facilities shared with Jabhat al Nusra and other Islamist opposition groups, creating tension among opposition forces.

Turkey. Turkish leaders have indicated willingness to consider deeper participation in the anti-IS coalition in the wake of the September 20, 2014, release by the Islamic State of 49 hostages⁶⁸ associated with the Turkish consulate in Mosul, Iraq. Turkey already is reportedly allowing the use of its territory and airspace for humanitarian and logistical purposes, and adopting additional measures to curb the flow of foreign fighters to Syria.⁶⁹ Turkey's parliament voted on October 2, 2014, to approve potential military operations in Syria and Iraq launched from Turkey by Turkish or foreign forces. However, a complicated array of considerations arguably affects Turkish calculations regarding direct military involvement or the furnishing of its territory or airspace for coalition use. This includes Turkey's role to this point in Syria's protracted conflict, as well as Turkish parliamentary elections scheduled for June 2015.⁷⁰

Russia, China, Iran, and Asad. U.N. Security Council permanent members Russia and China are not members of the coalition, but Russia has pledged its support for counterterrorism efforts in Syria, while arguing that coalition members should include the Asad government in their efforts. The coalition includes several countries that have cooperated with the United States in joint efforts to support the Syrian people and Syrian opposition movements during the evolving civil conflict, underscoring the challenges of forging a common set of objectives between coalition members and backers of Asad.⁷¹ Common cause with Asad and his supporters might also entail risks and drive Sunni opponents of Asad and Iran to undermine coalition efforts.

Europe and Other Allies⁷²

On the sidelines of NATO's Wales Summit, held on September 4-5, the United States and United Kingdom (UK) co-chaired a discussion on the Islamic State. NATO member countries France, Germany, Canada, Turkey, Italy, Poland, and Denmark, and observer state Australia, reportedly joined the United States and UK in agreeing to coordinate efforts to fight the group.⁷³ The alliance as a whole did not commit to a substantive response beyond stating in the summit communique that it would consider any future request from the Iraqi government to launch a training and

⁶⁸ The release reportedly occurred in exchange for Turkey's release of 180 Islamic State detainees.

⁶⁹ Murat Yetkin, "Turkey joins anti-ISIL coalition, opens Incirlik for logistics ops," *Hurriyet Daily News* Online, September 10, 2014.

⁷⁰ For a detailed analysis of Turkey's policy and actions on the Islamic State issues, see CRS Report IN10164, *Turkey-U.S. Cooperation Against the "Islamic State": A Unique Dynamic?*, by Jim Zanotti.

⁷¹ In February 2012, the Administration helped organize the Friends of Syria Group, a coalition of Western and regional countries that met periodically to discuss ways to support the Syrian opposition, increase pressure on the Asad government, and encourage a negotiated settlement between the two sides. The Friends of Syria "Core Group," also known as "the London 11," includes the United States, Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, and the United Kingdom. Arab members of the group met in Saudi Arabia in August 2014.

⁷² Prepared by Derek Mix, Analyst in European Affairs.

⁷³ Sam Jones, "NATO States to Form Military Coalition to Fight ISIS," *Financial Times*, September 5, 2014.

capacity-building mission for Iraqi security forces.⁷⁴ NATO previously conducted a military training mission in Iraq from 2008 to 2011.

France hosted a meeting of foreign ministers from 26 countries (including European and Middle Eastern countries as well as Russia and China), the Arab League, European Union, and U.N. on September 15 that produced further pledges to defeat the Islamic State and provide military assistance to the Iraqi government. Subsequently, various European countries announced specific military commitments and involvement in operations. The partner countries participating in airstrikes in Iraq are: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. As noted above, Western partner countries—including Denmark, Germany, Australia, and the United Kingdom—have pledged an estimated 700 total trainers plus additional advisers to assist Iraqi forces. France, Germany, and the UK have been providing weapons to Kurdish forces in Iraq, as well as non-lethal equipment and humanitarian aid.⁷⁵ As in the United States, other Western countries encounter more difficult legal and political questions in relation to military action inside Syria.

Iranian Involvement in the Iraq and Syria Crises

Apparently pursuing its own interests, Iran has been generally cooperating with U.S. policy in Iraq, but the United States has ruled out formally bringing Iran into any U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition. However, on 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 efforts to remain in power. Iran apparently views expanded U.S. efforts to provide support and training to Syrian opposition groups as a threat to its interests.

On Iraq, U.S. diplomats acknowledge that they have discussed the Islamic State crisis at margins of recent talks on Iran's nuclear program. Iran abandoned its longtime ally Maliki⁷⁶ and helped compel him to yield power in favor of Hayder Al Abbadi. The U.S. State Department has consistently refuted 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.⁷⁷ However, President Obama has acknowledged sending a letter in November 2014 to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i, the contents of which have not been released but which was said to focus on the potential for further cooperation against the Islamic State if the issue of Iran's nuclear program were resolved.⁷⁸

In actions that appear to further U.S. objectives in Iraq, Iran reportedly has been delivering arms and ammunition to the ISF 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

⁷⁴ Julian Hale, "NATO Weighs Training Mission to Iraq," *Defense News*, September 12, 2014.

⁷⁵ "Hollande Visits Iraq Ahead of Paris Conference on Fighting Islamic State," *RFI*, September 12, 2014; Noah Barkin, "Defending Arming of Kurds, Merkel Calls Islamic State a Threat to Europe," *Reuters*, September 1, 2014; and UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, "Iraq: UK Government Response," September 13, 2014.

⁷⁶ Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Iran Dramatically Shifts Iraq Policy to Confront Islamic State," *Reuters*, September 2, 2014.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Michael Singh, "What Obama's Letter to Khamenei Says About U.S. Policy Toward Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, November 10, 2014.

2014 Iran announced that one of its pilots had died in operations in Iraq.⁷⁹ Iran reportedly has provided weapons to Syrian Kurds fighting Islamic State forces in northern Syria, and by all accounts continues to provide material support to Syrian government forces.

Many observers remain skeptical that the United States could or should cooperate with Iran in either Iraq or Syria. 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. On Syria, Iran continues to support Asad militarily, thereby countering U.S. efforts to compel Asad to yield power to a transition regime.

Overview of the Current Humanitarian Crisis in Iraq and Syria⁸⁰

The humanitarian situations in both Iraq and Syria have been described as a “mega crisis” in part because displacements and movement of populations are intertwined between the two countries.⁸¹ Taken together, it is estimated that 17.4 million people living in either Iraq or Syria are affected by conflict and in need of humanitarian assistance. In addition, more than 3.2 million Syrians and nearly 0.2 million Iraqis are displaced as refugees. However, the funding streams and operational framework for the international humanitarian response in each country remains distinct, in part a reflection of the unique conditions unfolding in each country.

Iraq

Since January 2014, an urgent humanitarian crisis has unfolded in Iraq, with an estimated 5.2 million people in need of humanitarian and protection assistance. Of these, over 2.1 million people are Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), more than 1.7 million are in communities that are taking in the displaced (host communities), 1.5 million are in areas under the control of armed groups or impacted by the conflict, and 0.2 million are Syrian refugees.⁸² Close to half the newly displaced are thought to be children. Particularly in conflict areas in northern and central Iraq, it is difficult to monitor and track the mass and sometimes multiple displacements. Consequently, the actual number of affected individuals remains fluid and difficult to fully ascertain.

⁷⁹ “Iran News Agency Reports Death of Iranian Pilot in Iraq,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, July 5, 2014.

⁸⁰ Prepared by Rhoda Margesson, Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy.

⁸¹ U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres, “Faced with ‘mega-crisis’, U.N. warns of refugee suffering and security threats,” PBS News Hour, November 20, 2014.

⁸² UNOCHA, Iraq Crisis, Situation Report No. 22 (November 22 – 28, 2014.) 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. According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, there are also over 400,000 Iraqi refugees living in other countries (October 29, 2014.)

As of late October, of the 2.1 million IDPs, an estimated 850,000 are seeking shelter in Iraq's Kurdistan region, mainly in Dohuk governorate, while increased movements to central and southern Iraq are straining the response capacities of host communities in these areas.⁸³ All 18 governorates are hosting families fleeing violence. There are estimated to be over 700,000 displaced in the central region (with almost 400,000 in Anbar Governorate) and 200,000 in the south. The needs of all IDPs in Iraq remain significant, while basic government social services are limited and weak. In addition to winter preparedness, which includes the provision of shelter and winterization kits, there continue to be urgent needs for food, water and sanitation, and health services.⁸⁴ With the large number of displaced children, emergency education support is also a priority for the humanitarian community.

There are also concerns about the rise in sectarian tensions across the country made worse by the conflict situation and large numbers of IDPs. An estimated 3.6 million Iraqis reside in areas under the control of the IS and other armed groups. Of these, 2.2 million are thought to be trapped in conflict-affected areas. These IDPs lack access to basic services and are considered to be in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.⁸⁵

Syria

The ongoing conflict in Syria has created one of the most pressing humanitarian crises in the world. Three and a half years into the conflict, as of November 2014, an estimated 12.2 million people inside Syria, more than half the population, are in need of humanitarian assistance, of which more than 7.6 million are displaced inside the country.⁸⁶ In addition, more than 3.2 million Syrians are displaced as refugees, with 97% fleeing to countries in the immediate surrounding region, including Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, and other parts of North Africa. According to the United Nations, in 2014, an average of more than 90,000 Syrians per month registered as refugees in countries in the region. The situation is fluid and continues to worsen, while humanitarian needs are immense and increase daily.

Access within Syria is severely constrained by violence and restrictions imposed by the Syrian government on the operations of humanitarian organizations. Several million people are estimated to be living in hard-to-reach areas and some have been besieged by either the Government of Syria or opposition forces at different points in the conflict. Reports of intentional policies of starvation in areas under siege by the government, attacks against civilians and indiscriminate use of heavy weapons, and a weak health infrastructure that is often under deliberate attack illustrate the dire conditions under which civilians are trying to survive. On November 14, 2014, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, which was established on August 22, 2011 by the U.N. Human Rights Council, issued a report, *Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria*. The Commission's mandate is to investigate all alleged violations of international human rights law since March 2011 in Syria. The report describes the

⁸³ In KR-I 18 camps have been established or are in the process of being completed out of a planned 26 camps. As of late October, 2014, Iraq is hosting more than 230,000 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.

⁸⁴ Assessment Capacities Project, "Humanitarian Implications of Violence in Northern and Central Iraq," September 4, 2014.

⁸⁵ UNOCHA, "Iraq Crisis: Situation Report No. 18," October 25-31, 2014.

⁸⁶ UNOCHA, Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Valerie Amos, Security Council Briefing on Syria, November 25, 2014.

systematic atrocities and violations perpetrated by IS, particularly against the civilian populations in Aleppo, Ar-Raqqa, Al-Hassakah, and Dayr Az-Zawr governorates.⁸⁷

The number of registered refugees (or those awaiting registration) in neighboring countries continues to increase. Experts recognize that some Syrians have not registered as refugees, presumably from fear or other reasons, and have chosen instead to blend in with the local population, living in rented accommodations and makeshift shelters, particularly in towns and cities. The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) estimates that more than 80% of Syrian refugees are living outside camps in mostly urban settings. The types of assistance and shelter options available to refugees vary in the countries that are hosting them. Winterization assistance, which includes the provision of shelter and winterization kits, is a key priority.

The added economic, energy, and natural resource pressures of large Syrian refugee populations weigh heavily, particularly in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. The governments of countries hosting refugees have concerns about the potential political implications of allowing displaced populations to remain, especially for a protracted period of time. The impact on many host communities has become overwhelming. Overcrowded schools, inadequate hospital services, impacts on resources such as water, all contribute to the burden for neighboring countries. Urgent priorities include protecting vulnerable refugees from violence and meeting their basic needs. Urban refugees are often invisible and difficult to identify and assist. The United States and the international community have recognized the contribution of those countries hosting refugees and supported their efforts, while encouraging them to keep their borders open to those fleeing conflict in Syria. A conference in Berlin held on October 28, 2014, focused on the further development of a broad regional partnership strategy to address the Syrian refugee situation and impact on host countries.

Overview of the International and U.S. Humanitarian Response

Iraq

National and international humanitarian efforts have been severely constrained in providing assistance and protection to IDPs and others affected by the conflict due to ongoing fighting. In August 2014, the United Nations declared a "Level 3 Emergency" for Iraq to help facilitate mobilization of resources for the humanitarian response.⁸⁸ With the Level 3 declaration, U.N. and humanitarian partners continue to increase staffing and resources, and they are calling for guarantees of safe and unhindered access of humanitarian staff and in the distribution of relief supplies. As of October 10, 2014, 36 international actors, including the U.N. system, Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are

⁸⁷ Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, "Rule of Terror: Living Under ISIS in Syria," November 14, 2014, at http://www.ohchr.org/documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/HRC_CRP_ISIS_14Nov2014.pdf

⁸⁸ 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.

involved in the humanitarian operation. There are also approximately 70 national NGOs registered with the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI) that are engaged in the relief effort.

The U.N. Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) is facilitating the humanitarian response by the U.N. Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and some partner organizations, as well as supporting the coordination efforts of the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA).⁸⁹ UNOCHA launched a revised Strategic Response Plan (SRP) for Iraq in June, requesting \$312.1 million in international funding to include humanitarian support for the significantly increased caseload of IDPs and a wider geographical focus.⁹⁰ The SRP was revised in October 2014 and expanded to cover 2014 and 2015. It identifies total requirements of \$2.2 billion for this period, of which \$653.6 million in funding had been received as of early December. Additional bilateral and other contributions and pledges made outside the SRP total \$231 million.

In August 2014, USAID deployed a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) to help coordinate U.S. humanitarian efforts in responding to the needs of newly displaced populations. Total U.S. government humanitarian funding to Iraq in FY2014 and FY2015 (as of November 21, 2014) is more than \$208.2 million, which includes U.S. airdrops in support of Iraqi humanitarian efforts.⁹¹

Systematic violations of human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL) have reportedly been widespread by all parties to the conflict, including IS. UNOCHA estimates that 20,000 civilians have been killed or injured across Iraq in 2014.⁹² The U.N. Secretary-General issued a statement on August 7, 2014, condemning the attacks in Iraq and the impact on vulnerable minority communities.⁹³ The members of the U.N. Security Council also issued a statement about attacks directed against a civilian population and urged the parties to enable humanitarian access and the delivery of assistance.⁹⁴ Amid increasing reports of killings and kidnappings and gross abuses of human rights, on October 31, the members of the Security Council again expressed outrage and stressed accountability, noting that some of these acts may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ On December 2, 2014, the U.N. Secretary-General appointed Lisa Grande of the United States as Deputy Special Representative of UNAMI. She will also serve as the U.N. Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq.

⁹⁰ A subset of the SRP for Iraq, "Iraq: Immediate Response Plan (IRP) for the IDP Crisis in the KR-I: 15 September – 15 November 2014) represented a joint effort by the Kurdistan Regional Government and U.N. humanitarian agencies to address urgent humanitarian response priorities ahead of the winter season in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. According to UNOCHA, as of November 21, the Kurdistan Regional Government has proposed that a similar operational plan with information about needs and shortfalls through to March 2015, IRP2, be developed.

⁹¹ USAID, "Iraq—Complex Emergency," Fact Sheet #2, Fiscal Year (FY) 2015, November 21, 2014.

⁹² UNOCHA, 2014/2015 Iraq Strategic Response Plan, October 2014.

⁹³ 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.

⁹⁴ U.N. Security Council, Press Statement on Iraq, SC/11515, IK/683, August 7, 2014.

⁹⁵ U.N. Security Council, Press Statement on Iraq, SC/11625, IK/694, October 31, 2014.

Syria

The international humanitarian response is massive and complex and struggles to keep pace with urgent developments that have escalated well beyond anticipated needs and continue to do so. Nearly a year ago, in mid-December 2013, the United Nations launched two appeals—taken together its largest appeal in history—requesting \$6.5 billion in contributions to meet the ongoing humanitarian needs in Syria and the region. In July 2014, the Syria Regional Response Plan reduced its budget requirements slightly downward to reflect changed refugee population planning figures. Subsequent developments, including fighting in areas such as Kobane along the Turkish border, have led to additional displacements into Turkey of more than 190,000 people and could impact again the planning figures. As of early December, together the appeals are 51% funded. Limited funding for the Syria crisis has had immediate impacts; on December 1, 2014, the World Food Program announced that it was suspending food assistance to more than 1.7 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon for budget reasons.

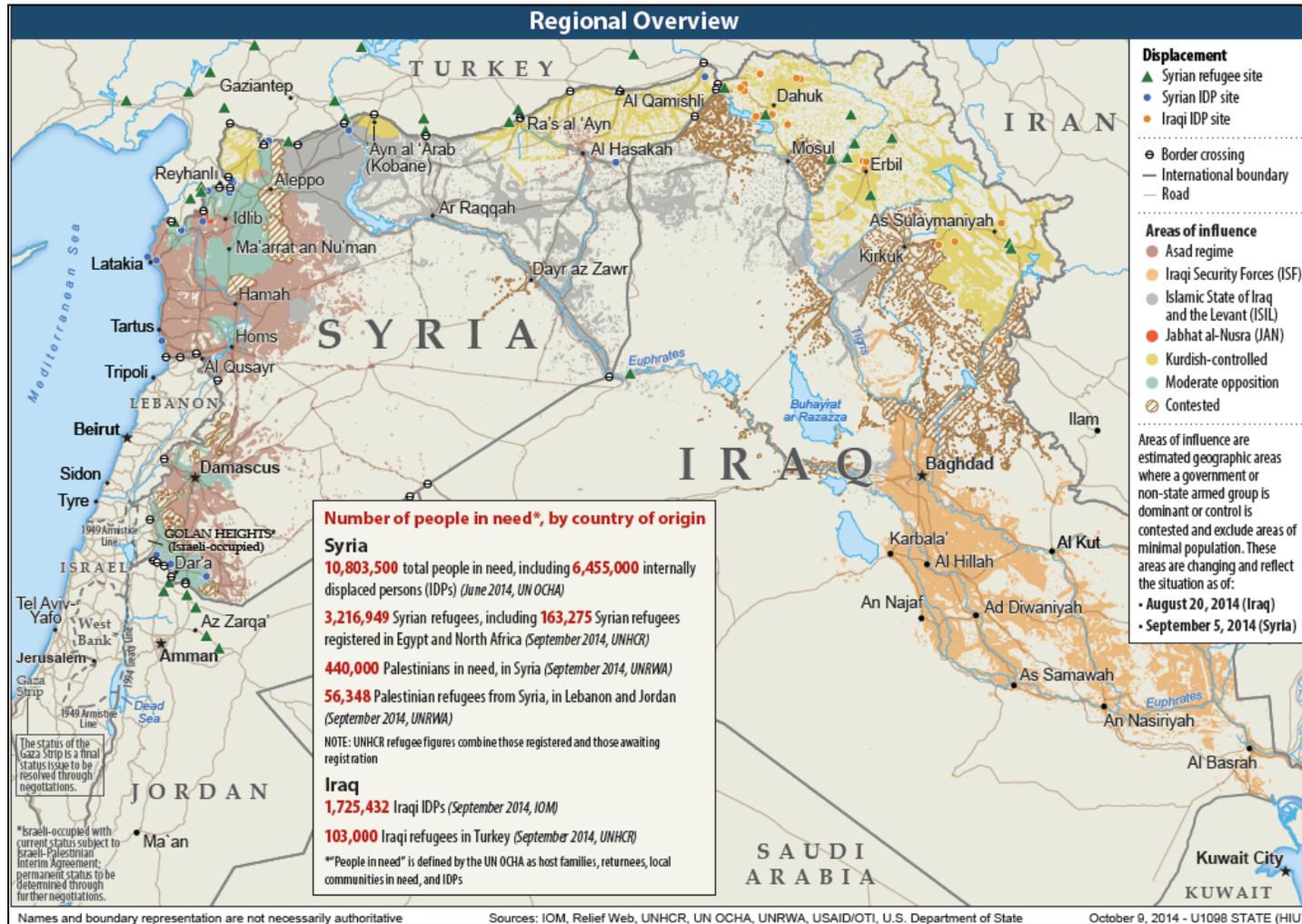
The U.N. Security Council adopted two resolutions in 2014 aimed at increasing humanitarian access and aid delivery in Syria. Resolution 2139 (February 2014) demanded that parties “promptly allow rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access,” and Resolution 2165 (July 2014) authorized United Nations humanitarian agencies and their implementing partners to provide cross-border assistance with notification to (rather than consent of) the Syrian government. U.N. officials reporting under mechanisms established by the resolutions have identified some improvements in humanitarian access and aid delivery in Syria. However, U.N. officials also report that sufficient aid cannot be delivered in hard-to-reach areas, including areas besieged by government forces, some areas under opposition control, and eastern provinces under Islamic State control.⁹⁶ In general, violence, insecurity, government and opposition interference, and resource shortfalls continue to hinder aid delivery.

The United States is the largest donor of humanitarian assistance and is part of the massive, international humanitarian operation in parts of Syria and in neighboring countries. Beginning in FY2012, through November 24, 2014, the United States has allocated more than \$3 billion to meet humanitarian needs using existing funding from global humanitarian accounts and some reprogrammed funding. U.S. humanitarian policy is guided by concerns about humanitarian access and protection within Syria; the large refugee flows out of the country that strain the resources of neighboring countries (and could negatively impact the overall stability of the region); and a protracted and escalating humanitarian emergency.

The Administration’s original FY2015 budget request sought \$1.1 billion in humanitarian assistance for Syria and the region. The President’s June 2014 request for FY2015 Overseas Contingency Operations for Defense also included a request for a \$1.5 billion Syria Regional Stabilization Initiative (RSI). According to the Administration, if appropriated, \$1 billion of the funds for the initiative would be used “to manage the growing spillover effects of the Syrian conflict,” and “to meet identified regional needs for areas contending with refugees.” However, it is not clear what portion of the RSI funding, if any, might be used specifically for humanitarian responses rather than for broader stabilization purposes in host countries.

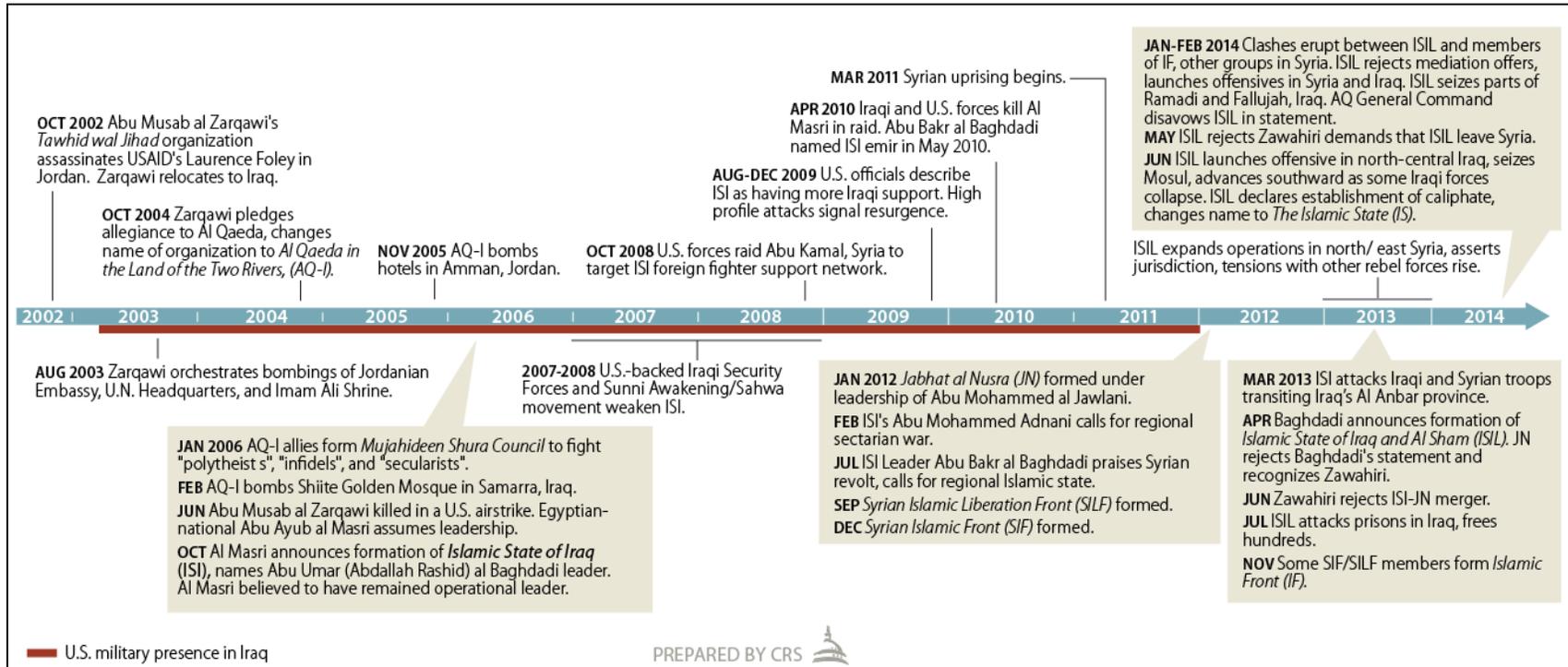
⁹⁶ Ibid.

Figure I. Syria and Iraq: Conflict and Crisis Map



Source: U.S. State Department, Humanitarian Information Unit, Syria Region: Conflicts without Boundaries, October 9, 2014.

Figure 2. Timeline: The Roots of the Islamic State



Source: Prepared by CRS using U.S. Government Open Source Center reporting and other open sources.

Policy Debates and Related Legislative Issues

Authority for Use of Military Force and the War Powers Resolution⁹⁷

The Obama Administration has asserted that the President has authority under existing constitutional and statutory authority to conduct the current military campaign against the Islamic State and other groups in Iraq and Syria. Some in Congress have questioned this assertion, and several Members of Congress have introduced legislation that would specifically address the President's continued use of military force in this situation. On November 5, President Obama said he intended to engage Congress on a new authorization for the use of military force (AUMF) and said his goal is "to right-size and update whatever authorization Congress provides to suit the current fight, rather than previous fights."⁹⁸

The President's uses of military force are subject to the provisions of the War Powers Resolution (WPR; P.L. 93-148). 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 60-day 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 that it is needed to affect a safe withdrawal.

The Obama Administration has stated that two enacted authorizations for use of military force authorize ongoing U.S. military strikes against the Islamic State and other groups in Iraq and Syria:⁹⁹

- **The 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (P.L. 107-40)** targets those who perpetrated and supported the 9/11 terrorist attacks, identified as Al Qaeda and the Taliban. The executive branch has interpreted this 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 Obama Administration has stated that the Islamic State's long ties to Al Qaeda, its continuing connection to and support from elements within Al Qaeda, and the similarity of its brutal tactics and its desire to establish an Islamic caliphate to those of Al Qaeda make the Islamic State a lawful target under the 2001 AUMF.¹⁰⁰ The President's notifications to Congress of military operations against IS forces and the Khorasan Group of Al Qaeda both state that

⁹⁷ Prepared by Matthew Weed, Analyst in Foreign Policy Legislation.

⁹⁸ President Barack Obama, Press Conference, November 5, 2014.

⁹⁹ In his previous notifications to Congress of deployments and airstrikes against the Islamic State, however, the President stated that he was taking military action based upon his powers as commander in chief and chief executive under Article II of the Constitution.

¹⁰⁰ See White House, Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, September 11, 2014.

the 2001 AUMF authorizes such actions.¹⁰¹ Alternatively, it has been argued recently that the Islamic State might be considered not as an associated force of Al Qaeda but instead as a former part of Al Qaeda that has now splintered from the original group.¹⁰² Under this interpretation, the Islamic State would fall among the original targets of the 2001 AUMF, and its associated forces could also be targeted, potentially expanding the number of lawfully targeted co-belligerent groups operating in Iraq, Syria, or elsewhere.

- **The 2002 Authorization for Use of Military Force against Iraq (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 former Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein and the destruction of suspected weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The recent successes of Islamic State–led forces in Iraq, however, and their ties to former supporters of the Hussein regime, might be seen as falling within the broad 2002 AUMF authority to counter the “threat posed by Iraq.” The Obama Administration, however, might consider 2002 AUMF authority to extend to countering threats *to Iraq* as well, whether those threats exist within Iraq or are located elsewhere. In the President’s September 23, 2014, notification to Congress concerning airstrikes against IS forces in Iraq and Syria, the President cited the 2002 AUMF alongside the 2001 AUMF as authorizing strikes against IS forces. Such strikes are described largely in the context of assisting Iraqi forces and “at the request of the Government of Iraq.”¹⁰³

Although the President has stated that he possesses 2001 and 2002 AUMF authority for his decision to conduct recent and future military actions against the Islamic State and other groups in Iraq and Syria, Congress could determine that these authorizations do not apply. Many observers and Members have argued that the 2001 and 2002 AUMFs are outdated and that their authorities no longer apply to the current challenges posed both by the Islamic State and by the global threat to the United States from terrorism in general.

If Congress determines that the existing AUMFs do not apply, it might assert that the President, pursuant to the War Powers Resolution, must (1) withdraw U.S. Armed Forces from and (2) terminate hostilities in Iraq and Syria within 60 days from the date when congressional notification of such actions was required unless Congress enacts a new AUMF. Several Members of Congress have called for a new AUMF specifically targeting the Islamic State and other groups in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere, and a number of legislative proposals were introduced in September 2014.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Letter from President Barack Obama to Speaker of the House of Representatives and President Pro Tempore of the Senate (War Powers Resolution Regarding Iraq), September 23, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/23/letter-president-war-powers-resolution-regarding-iraq>; Letter from President Barack Obama to Speaker of the House of Representatives and President Pro Tempore of the Senate (War Powers Resolution Regarding Syria), September 23, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/23/letter-president-war-powers-resolution-regarding-syria>.

¹⁰² See Marty Lederman, “Tentative First Reactions to the 2001 AUMF Theory [updated],” Just Security, September 11, 2014, at <http://justsecurity.org/14804/first-reactions-2001-aumf-theory/>.

¹⁰³ See Letter from President Barack Obama to Speaker of the House of Representatives and President Pro Tempore of the Senate (War Powers Resolution Regarding Iraq).

¹⁰⁴ For a comparison of these proposals, see CRS Report R43760, *A New Authorization for Use of Military Force Against the Islamic State: Comparison of Current Proposals in Brief*, by Matthew C. Weed.

December 2014 Senate Foreign Relations Consideration

More recently on December 4, 2014, Senator Rand Paul reportedly intended to propose an amendment to S. 2946, then under consideration by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, that declares a state of war between the United States and the Islamic State. The provisions in the amendment are substantially similar to those contained in S.J.Res. 46, which also contains this war declaration and authorizes the President to “use the Armed Forces of the United States to protect the people and facilities of the United States in Iraq and Syria against the threats posed thereto” by such organization. The resolution states that such authorization does not extend to any other organization, affiliated with the Islamic State or otherwise. It also prohibits the use of “ground combat forces” under the authorization except for rescue of U.S. armed forces or U.S. citizens, operations against “high-value targets,” and intelligence gathering. The proposed resolution also includes provisions repealing the 2002 AUMF upon enactment, repealing the 2001 AUMF one year after enactment, and stating that the 2001 AUMF does not authorize the use of military force against the Islamic State. The new authorization would itself expire one year after enactment.

Any legislative declaration of war against the Islamic State is likely to be controversial for many reasons. A declaration of war has previously only been enacted with regard to another state, not a non-state actor such as the Islamic State. Some argue that the larger international community’s strategy to delegitimize the Islamic State might be undermined by such a declaration. A declaration of war could have significant consequences under both domestic and international law. U.S. law contains many provisions that are triggered by a formal declaration or other recognition of a state of war involving the United States.¹⁰⁵ Internationally speaking, the declaration of war by the United States might have ramifications for relations with other states and international organizations, including the United Nations, as international practice and a number of international conventions reflect the growing rejection of a recognized right of one state to initiate armed conflict.

Senator Robert Menendez has reportedly¹⁰⁶ recently proposed an AUMF that would authorize the use of U.S. Armed Forces against the Islamic State and “associated persons or forces,” defined as “individuals and organizations fighting for or on behalf of the Islamic State ... or a closely-related successor entity...” The authorization would prohibit “ground combat operations” except for the rescue or protection of U.S. armed forces or U.S. citizens, intelligence gathering, enabling kinetic strikes, operational planning, and providing assistance to forces fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. The AUMF would repeal the 2002 AUMF, and states that the authority contained in the AUMF supersedes any previous authority that could apply to the use of force against the Islamic State. The AUMF’s authority would terminate three years after enactment.

A number of additional concerns could be raised concerning both recent proposals (and other proposals containing similar provisions). Proposals that do not extend the authorization to use military force against groups that might fight alongside the Islamic State, or that confine military

¹⁰⁵ For more information on domestic law implications of a war declaration, see CRS Report RL31133, *Declarations of War and Authorizations for the Use of Military Force: Historical Background and Legal Implications*, by Jennifer K. Elsea and Matthew C. Weed.

¹⁰⁶ See Josh Rogin, “Menendez and Paul Go to War Over Islamic State,” *BloombergView*, December 4, 2014, <http://www.bloombergvie.com/articles/2014-12-04/menendez-and-paul-go-to-war-over-islamic-state> (embedded link to draft resolution: <http://go.bloomberg.com/assets/content/uploads/sites/2/Menendez-2nd-Degree-2-to-Paul-Amendment-1.pdf>).

operations to protection of U.S. armed forces, citizens, and facilities in Iraq and Syria, could be viewed as too narrow for the likely course of military action in the region. As more groups pledge to fight alongside the Islamic State in countries such as Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, broader use of force proposals might inadvertently be interpreted to authorize geographical expansion outside its original intent. Both current proposals, in addition, purport to limit the application of the 2001 AUMF to the current IS crisis, but do not repeal or amend the 2001 AUMF. Given the Obama Administration's continuing reliance on that authorization to conduct the current campaign against the Islamic State, leaving the 2001 AUMF in place without amendment might be a continuing source of confusion and contention concerning presidential authority to use military force against the Islamic State, and in Iraq, Syria, and the Middle East/North Africa region in general.

Ground Combat Deployments?

President Obama has repeatedly ruled out deploying U.S. ground combat troops in Iraq or Syria.¹⁰⁷ He has stated that intervention by U.S. combat troops is not capable of fixing the underlying political problems that caused the insurrection. However, comments by General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on September 14, 2014, and since have presented a potentially more complex picture on this issue.¹⁰⁸ At the hearing and in subsequent press interviews, General Dempsey indicated that he might recommend that U.S. advisers in Iraq work directly with Iraqi and *peshmerga* forces on the battlefield, for example if there were a decision to try to recapture Mosul from Islamic State forces. Still, General Dempsey and other Administration officials have distinguished such "close combat advisory" missions from the introduction of U.S. combat units that would conduct operations against Islamic State forces. President Obama has not indicated whether he would approve such a close combat advisory recommendation, were it to be put forward. Debate outside the Administration centers on the potential efficacy of military operations without U.S. ground forces and larger questions about what circumstances might require the introduction of such forces in the future.

Maintaining and Deepening Coalition Support

Past U.S. efforts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria suggest that U.S. policy makers may face challenges maintaining unity of purpose among coalition members, sustaining coalition material and financial contributions over time, and managing the risks and costs to the United States associated with limited or conditional commitments by coalition members or sudden shifts in coalition membership. Potential partners' calculations about the costs and benefits of participating in coalition efforts might be affected by their views on the urgency of acting directly, the soundness of U.S. strategy, the level of U.S. commitment, and potential progress toward political solutions that are more inclusive of Sunni Arabs or less conducive to their strategic goals.

The subset of the coalition that is attempting to coordinate military operations in Iraq and Syria (the United States, some GCC states, Jordan, the United Kingdom, France, and Australia) appears to face significant challenges. Past attempts at coordination regarding Syria's civil war have

¹⁰⁷ White House, op. cit.

¹⁰⁸ Senate Armed Services Committee. "Hearing on the U.S. Policy Towards Iraq, Syria, and ISIL," September 14, 2014.

exposed rifts among regional countries, prompting situations in which the common goal of supporting the Syrian opposition was not enough to overcome other, competing priorities among ostensibly partner states.¹⁰⁹ Relations between Iraq's government and the Sunni Arab Gulf states have been strained in the post-Saddam Hussein period, in part because Iraq's government has been dominated by Shiite factions politically close to Iran and seen as excluding Sunnis. The shift from the leadership of former Prime Minister Maliki to current Prime Minister Abbadi may not be sufficient to resolve related concerns.

As coalition militaries carry out strikes in Iraq and Syria, such strikes may be seen by the populations of Gulf countries as serving the interests of Iran or further empowering Shiite elements in Iraq. Iraqi government leaders, like their Syrian counterparts, may question the motives of Sunni Arab coalition members, some of whom reportedly have provided support to armed Sunni opposition groups in Syria. In Syria, Sunni Arab coalition partners might disagree on priorities for bolstering various Syrian forces against the Islamic State and the effect such efforts may have on the relative strength of the Asad regime and its supporters (Iran, Hezbollah, Russia).

Defining the Way Forward in Syria

President Obama has stated that U.S. engagement in Syria 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.¹¹⁰ Some Syrian political and military opposition forces appear to resent such a narrow focus and some have indicated they may insist on broader support for their anti-Asad goals as a condition of working with the U.S.-backed coalition against the Islamic State. These parties also question why the United States and coalition partners are willing to act militarily to halt Islamic State atrocities but not protect Syrian civilians from attacks by government forces or opposition groups. On November 5, President Obama reiterated that:¹¹¹

Our focus in Syria is not to solve the entire Syria situation, but, rather, to isolate the areas in which ISIL can operate.

... Now, there is a specific issue about trying to get a moderate opposition in Syria that can serve as a partner with us on the ground. That's always been the hardest piece of -- piece of business to get done.

...what we're trying to do is to find a core group that we can work with, that we have confidence in, that we've vetted, that can help in regaining territory from ISIL and then ultimately serve as a responsible party to sit at the table in eventual political negotiations that are probably some ways off in the future.

¹⁰⁹ Sunni Arab Gulf states have faced divisions among themselves—Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and UAE in March 2014 withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar, accusing Doha of pursuing policies at odds with other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. At a meeting of the GCC Foreign Ministers Council in late August 2014, some officials claimed to have made progress in resolving outstanding issues among member states. See "Saudi, UAE and Bahrain Envoys' Return 'At Any Time,'" *Gulf Times*, August 31, 2014.

¹¹⁰ 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.

¹¹¹ President Barack Obama, News Conference, November 5, 2014.

...Remember, our first focus here is to drive ISIL out of Iraq. And what we're doing in Syria is, first and foremost, in service of reducing ISIL's capacity to resupply and send troops and then run back in over the Syrian border, to eventually reestablish a border between Iraq and Syria so that slowly Iraq regains control of its security and its territory. That is our number one mission. That is our number one focus.

In this context, U.S. strikes against Islamic State targets and other terrorist groups in Syria are illuminating several dilemmas faced by the Administration. On one hand, Syrian opposition forces who have been fighting the Islamic State welcome U.S. and coalition assistance in their campaign, but question why the United States does not take military action against the Asad government or take more robust action to degrade IS capabilities in Syria. The Administration hopes to continue to pressure the Asad government into negotiating with opposition groups and fulfilling its pledges with regard to chemical weapons. However, U.S. officials appear to be managing concerns that a full scale degradation of Islamic State forces in Syria could have unintended consequences. Specifically, U.S. officials may be concerned that a more aggressive campaign against the Islamic State may take military pressure off the Asad regime or create opportunities for other extremist groups such as the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al Nusra to advance.

Some U.S. critics of the Obama Administration's approach to the conflict and terrorism threats in Syria argue that current U.S. strategy lacks effective partners willing or able to advance against Islamic State and/or Al Qaeda-affiliate-held territory on the ground. These critics suggest the United States should either abandon its efforts to support a vetted partner force in Syria or drastically expand the size and scope of those efforts to create a more formidable partner force. Others argue that U.S. strategy is built on faulty assumptions or priorities because it is not based on an inherently confrontational posture toward the regime of President Asad. These critics argue that Asad's departure or demise is the key to resolving the underlying conflict that has created opportunity for extremists to thrive. Still other critics assert that achieving stated Administration objectives will likely require U.S. or other ground combat troops or an expansion of the planned "train and equip" program for vetted Syrians to focus more aggressively on pressuring Asad to accept a negotiated solution.

For the moment, the Administration does not appear to view resolving the underlying conflict in Syria as its top priority and is taking steps in Syria designed to mitigate terrorism threats and advance U.S. goals for stabilizing Iraq. It remains to be seen whether or not this approach will succeed. It could so alienate potential partners in Syria that when the United States decides to give priority to the stabilization of Syria it will find itself bereft of local allies, or will confront stronger Islamist groups and/or an empowered Syrian government.

Possible Questions for Congressional Consideration¹¹²

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

¹¹² Prepared by Christopher Blanchard and Jim Zanotti, Specialists in Middle Eastern Affairs.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy against the Islamic State? What successes and failures of the strategy can you point to, to date? 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?

Please assess the range of Iraqi Sunni views of the Islamic State. With respect to Iraq, what concrete steps has Prime Minister Haydar al-Abadi taken to reduce 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?

With respect to Syria, to what extent, if any, is the long-term success of U.S. strategy dependent on any changes in the composition of the Syrian government? How have various Syrian forces reacted to U.S. and coalition airstrikes since September 2014? How has the Syrian government responded, if at all? How have U.S. actions helped or hurt the Assad government since that time?

How, if at all, should the effort against the Islamic State shape congressional consideration of pending authorization and appropriations legislation for defense and foreign assistance?

To what extent do the Islamic State's gains reflect its organizational capabilities? To what extent do these gains reflect the weaknesses, divisions, or limitations of its adversaries?

To what extent and how is U.S. strategy 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?

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?

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 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 still aligned with Iran? How has Iran responded, if at all?

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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