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Iraq Crisis and U.S. Policy

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Summary

The offensive in northern and central Iraq, led by the Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist group the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, aka ISIS), has raised significant concerns for the United States. These concerns include a possible breakup of Iraq's political and territorial order and the establishment of a potential base for terrorist attacks in the region or even against the U.S. homeland.

The crisis has raised several questions for U.S. policy because it represents the apparent unraveling of a seemingly stable and secure Iraq that was in place when U.S. combat troops departed Iraq at the end of 2011. Some months after the U.S. departure, the uprising in Syria among some elements of the Sunni Arab community there facilitated the reemergence of ISIL in areas of Syria and in its original base in Iraq. After late 2011, the Sunni community grew increasingly restive as Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki marginalized senior Sunni leaders, and the skills and capabilities of the Iraq Security Forces deteriorated. Many Sunnis in Iraq oppose ISIL's tactics and attempts to impose Islamic law, but support it as a vanguard against what they characterize as an oppressive Shiite-dominated national government.

Asserting that ISIL should not be allowed to prevail in Iraq, President Obama on June 19 announced several steps to help the Iraqi government protect Baghdad and reduce the threat to U.S. interests posed by ISIL. The President says additional options are under consideration, but might not be implemented—or be effective if implemented—unless Iraqi leaders can build a political consensus among Iraq's major communities.

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

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

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

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Overview¹

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)-led offensive in June 2014 has raised many questions about the future of Iraq and the region, and has posed U.S. policy challenges. This report analyzes the offensive, its implications, the U.S. response, and related issues. Previous events and developments, which provide background information potentially relevant to understanding the causes of the ISIL-led offensive and the Iraq Security Forces (ISF) collapse in northern Iraq, are analyzed in greater detail in CRS Report RS21968, *Iraq: Politics, Governance, and Human Rights*, by Kenneth Katzman.

ISIL June 2014 Offensive and Iraq Security Force Collapse

Iraq's relatively peaceful April 30, 2014, election had led many observers to assess that the government had contained an ISIL-led insurrection that began in Anbar Province in January 2014, even though the government had been unable to regain control of the city of Fallujah from ISIL-led forces. However, such assessments were upended on June 10, 2014, when ISIL—apparently assisted by large numbers of its fighters moving into Iraq from the Syria theater—launched a major offensive against the northern city of Mosul. ISIL and allied fighters captured the city amid mass surrenders and desertions by Iraq Security Forces (ISF) officers and personnel in and around the city. According to one expert, about 60 out of 243 Iraqi army combat battalions cannot be accounted for, and all or most of their equipment (including U.S.-supplied vehicles and weapons) should be considered lost.² In its seizure of Mosul and subsequent advance, ISIL reportedly had the support of Sunni tribal fighters, former members of the late Saddam Hussein's Baath Party and military, and other Sunni residents.³ This support came despite reservations among many Sunnis about ISIL's intention to impose their version of Islamic law, and reflected apparent broad Sunni dissatisfaction with the Maliki government's perceived monopolization of power.⁴ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee on June 18, 2014 that "ISIL is almost undistinguishable from the other groups [fighting the Maliki government]..."⁵

After taking Mosul, the ISIL-led fighters advanced southward toward Saddam's hometown of Tikrit and other cities, as well as eastward into Diyala Province. In the course of the offensive, ISIL and allied fighters looted banks, freed prisoners, and captured a substantial amount of U.S.-supplied military equipment, such as HMMWVs ("Humvees"), tanks, and armored personnel carriers.⁶ ISIL leaders announced that the offensive would try to advance into Baghdad. They continued to make gains, capturing the city of Tal Afar west of Mosul on June 16 and moving to the outskirts of Baqubah, a city about 38 miles northeast of Baghdad with a mixed population, by June 17. ISIL-led insurgents in Anbar reportedly seized additional cities along the Euphrates River in that province, including Haditha, Hit, and others.

¹ Prepared by Kenneth Katzman.

² Michael Knights in "Iraq's Dire Situation." Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 17, 2014.

³ Tim Arango. "Uneasy Alliance Gives Insurgents an Edge in Iraq." *New York Times*, June 19, 2014.

⁴ "Unlikely Allies Aid Militants in Iraq." *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2014.

⁵ Testimony of Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Martin Dempsey, Senate Armed Services Committee. June 18, 2014.

⁶ Pictures of ISIL and other Sunni rebels with Iraqi armor have been posted on Twitter and other social media outlets.

Sunni militants also surrounded the country's main oil refinery at Baiji, although government forces were continuing to combat the attackers as of June 18. The refinery produces about one third of Iraq's domestic gasoline requirements. Iraq's oil production and most of its export infrastructure has been largely unaffected by the crisis to date, in large part because about 75% of Iraq's oil is produced and exported in Iraq's south, where Sunni insurgents have little traction among the overwhelmingly Shiite population. The northern Iraq oil export route (not including Kurdish-controlled exports, which Baghdad opposes) has been shut since March 2014 as a consequence of earlier fighting.⁷

As ISIL-led forces have advanced, Shiite militias have mobilized to try to help the government stabilize the front and prevent ISIL from reaching Baghdad or the Shiite heartland to its south. Many volunteers apparently answered calls by Iraq's leading Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and other leading Shiite figures to counter the offensive. With support from these militias, the government forces regrouped and appeared to blunt an advance on Baghdad itself. Because Baghdad is about 80% Shiite-inhabited, many observers assessed that it was unlikely that the ISIL-led offensive would capture the city outright.⁸ However, journalists reported that sectarian violence in Baghdad was escalating, as Shiites retaliated against Sunnis for the ISIL-led offensive and Sunnis responded.⁹

As the crisis unfolded, Prime Minister Maliki asked the Council of Representatives (COR, Iraq's elected parliament) to grant him emergency powers and was attempting to work with commanders to mount a counterattack. Iraq's small air force began conducting some air strikes on ISIL positions in Mosul and elsewhere as early as June 12. Maliki also reportedly was resisting calls by the United States and other countries to conduct communications and political outreach toward the Sunni community, preferring instead to focus on countering the offensive militarily.¹⁰ Some assessments indicated that Maliki is benefitting politically as Shiite rivals rally around him, while others asserted that the collapse of the ISF would tarnish Maliki as a failed leader.

As the ISF collapsed in the north, the *peshmerga* (Kurdish militia) of the Kurds' autonomous political entity in northern Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), advanced into Kirkuk, in part to secure control of the city and in part to prevent ISIL from threatening the territory the KRG administers. The Kurds have long sought to control Kirkuk, which they claim is historic Kurdish territory, and to affiliate the province with the KRG. The *peshmerga* reportedly remain in control of Kirkuk city and most of the surrounding province, and some experts assert that the Kurds are unlikely to willingly return control of Kirkuk to the central government.¹¹ Retaining control of Kirkuk, which contains vast oil reserves, could encourage the Kurdish leadership to seek outright independence from Iraq. However, other considerations, such as the potential for Kurdish secession to trigger political and military responses from Maliki, ISIL, and neighboring countries; and possible KRG reluctance to lose its current legal claim to a percentage of Iraq's nationwide oil revenue; might lead the Kurds to continue to defer a decision on formal independence, as they have since achieving autonomy a decade ago.

⁷ Steven Mufson. "Iraq's Biggest Oil Refinery Is on Fire. How Important is That?" *Washington Post*, June 18, 2014

⁸ Author conversations with experts on Iraq. June 10-17, 2014.

⁹ Alissa Rubin and Rod Nordland. "As Sunnis Die in Iraq, a Cycle is Restarting." *New York Times*, June 18, 2014.

¹⁰ Alissa Rubin and Rod Nordland. "Sunnis and Kurds on Sidelines of Iraq's Leader's Military Plans." *New York Times*, June 17, 2014.

¹¹ Author conversations with expert on the Iraqi Kurds. June 14, 2014.

Possible Outcomes

The ISIL-led offensive may result in any of several possible outcomes, depending on internal Iraqi decisions and processes, as well as outside involvement, if any occurs. In the short term, the crisis could produce a change in Iraq's leadership—in part to address stated U.S. concerns that Maliki is largely to blame for the crisis. Elections for the Iraqi Council of Representatives (COR) were held on April 30, 2014, and the COR could choose to replace Maliki as Prime Minister. The new COR is mandated to meet within two weeks of the certification of the vote, which occurred on June 16. The COR selects a President, who then taps the leading elected bloc to nominate a Prime Minister, the position that holds executive authority. Maliki's coalition won far more seats in the April 30 election than did any other bloc, but the crisis could cause the COR to turn to another Shiite leader to be Prime Minister. Longtime anti-Saddam activist Ahmad Chalabi is reportedly campaigning for the post,¹² but other candidates include one said to be favored by the United States—Adel Abdul Mahdi of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq. Maliki's chances of securing a third term were dealt a serious setback on June 20 with the statement by Ayatollah Sistani that the major factions should form “an effective government that enjoys broad national support, avoids past mistakes, and opens new horizons toward a better future for all Iraqis.”¹³ The statement was widely interpreted as Sistani's withdrawing support for another Maliki term.

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

- **An ISIL-led seizure or siege of Baghdad.** Either of these developments could cause the Maliki government to fall and more potently enable ISIL to attempt the establishment of the Islamic state that it has long said it seeks. The outright seizure of Baghdad is considered unlikely, as noted above, but a siege is possible because of the significant Sunni population in towns just north and west of the city. This outcome could prompt large-scale Iranian intervention to reverse ISIL gains, and would raise the likelihood of U.S. intervention toward that same objective.
- **De-facto federalism or partition of Iraq.** Another possible outcome could be that ISIL fails to take Baghdad, but the Maliki government, the ISF, and Maliki's Shiite allies are unable to push the insurrection back. That could produce a new, accepted but informal, political structure in which each of the major communities—Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds—administers areas under their de facto political and military control.¹⁴
- **Long-standing civil war.** Another potential outcome is that the situation in Iraq devolves into a long-term outright civil war, in which forces loyal to the various parties—to the Sunni insurrection, the Kurdistan Regional Government, and the Maliki government and its Shiite militia supporters—alternately gain and lose territory in a long struggle for power.
- **A restoration of the pre-2013 situation.** It is possible that the government could rally its forces and, with help from Shiite militias and possibly outside actors,

¹² “As Iraq's Troubles Mount, PM Nouri al-Maliki Shows Few Signs of Changing His Ways.” *New York Times*, June 17, 2014.

¹³ “Top Shiite Cleric Deals Blow to Al Maliki Leadership.” *USA Today*, June 20, 2014.

¹⁴ <http://www.timesofisrael.com/as-fighting-nears-baghdad-un-warns-of-iraq-break-up/>

recapture the mostly Sunni-inhabited territory gained by the ISIL-led offensives. That could calm the current crisis but might not necessarily quiet Sunni unrest over the longer term.

U.S. Response

The aspect of the crisis that reportedly has most surprised and concerned Administration and international officials has been the ISF's collapse in the face of the ISIL offensive in the north and central part of Iraq. Some observers have suggested that the ISF's collapse appeared to threaten the legacy of the U.S. military intervention in and withdrawal from Iraq. President Obama and other U.S. officials attributed the collapse largely to the failure of Iraqi leaders, particularly Maliki, to build an inclusive government that would hold the allegiance of ISF personnel and Sunni citizens.

Citing the legacy of the U.S. intervention in Iraq and the potential ISIL threat to U.S. interests, President Obama stated on June 13, 2014, that the Iraqi government "needs additional support to break the momentum of extremist groups and bolster the capabilities of Iraqi security forces."¹⁵ He said that he had requested that his national security team prepare a range of options, and implementation of some of them were announced by the President on June 19, 2014.

Among the options being implemented and still under consideration, potentially relevant factors for Congress include:

- *Achieving a change of leadership in Iraq.* President Obama's June 13 statement, and statements of other U.S. officials, implied support for the replacement of Maliki by another leader who might seek to act in a more inclusive manner across ethnic and sectarian lines. However, it is not clear whether Administration officials are actively working to persuade Iraqi factions to rally around an alternative choice for Prime Minister.¹⁶ It is uncertain whether the United States, working with other regional actors possibly including Iran, could compel Iraqi factions to replace Maliki, in light of the relative success of his supporters in the April 30 election.
- *Achieving a change in Iraqi policy.* An aspect of policy announced by President Obama in a June 19, 2014 statement on Iraq is to work with other regional actors to compel the Maliki government to share power with Kurdish and Sunni leaders. However, this component of policy is considered by many experts to be a longer-term strategy that would not necessarily produce results soon enough to reverse the immediate threat posed by the ISIL-led offensive.
- *U.S. combat troop deployment.* President Obama has ruled out this option saying, "We will not be sending U.S. troops back into combat in Iraq."¹⁷ There may be several reasons for ruling out this option, including the apparent view within the Administration that U.S. troops could not fix the political problems that in their view have been primarily responsible for the success of the ISIL-led insurrection.

¹⁵ White House. "Statement by the President on Iraq." June 13, 2014.

¹⁶ Author conversations with Iraq experts. June 10-16, 2014.

¹⁷ White House, op. cit.

- *Airstrikes.* The Administration says it is considering an Iraqi request to carry out airstrikes against ISIL bases and other locations in Iraq.¹⁸ Such strikes could be carried out by combat aircraft or by unmanned aerial vehicles. However, many analysts have noted that ISIL has few clearly discernible targets that would not risk causing Iraqi civilian casualties. It is also not clear that airstrikes alone could defeat the ISIL-led insurrection. Former top U.S. commander in Iraq General David Petraeus expressed an additional pitfall to significant airstrikes, saying: “This cannot be the United States being the air force for [Shiite] militias or a [Shiite] on Sunni Arab fight.”¹⁹ Press reports as of June 18 indicated that the Administration was leaning against a broad package of intensive airstrikes, but is still considering undertaking targeted strikes against clearly discernible ISIL targets using unmanned aerial vehicles—a strategy similar to that employed against high value targets in Yemen and Pakistan.²⁰
- *Arms Deliveries.* An option is to sell Iraq additional military equipment, such as tanks and armored vehicles, to replace those lost in the ISIL-led offensive. Another option is to accelerate deliveries of arms already purchased by Iraq, including F-16 aircraft and Apache attack helicopters. However, the capture of U.S.-supplied weaponry by ISIL in the June offensive raises the potential that new and more sophisticated U.S. weapons could fall into the hands of ISIL. Moreover, U.S. officials and Members of Congress have previously expressed concerns about the potential for the Iraqi government to use sophisticated air assets against protesters and civilian opponents rather than ISIL targets.²¹
- *Advice, Training, and Intelligence Sharing.* In his June 19 statement, President Obama announced that he was sending up to 300 U.S. advisers and trainers to Iraq to help organize the ISF defenses and counter-offensives or to help in targeting airstrikes.²² Press reports indicate that these will be Special Operations Forces.²³ However, like the other stipulated options, a closer U.S. relationship with the ISF on the ground risks portraying the United States as aligned with an overwhelmingly Shiite Iraqi military against Iraqi Sunnis. Addressing that potential drawback, President Obama stated on June 19, 2014 that the advisers will not engage in combat and the United States “will not pursue military actions that support one sect inside of Iraq at the expense of another.” Still, some commentators argued that sending forces as advisers creates a potential for expanding U.S. involvement beyond what President Obama announced.²⁴

¹⁸ Michael Gordon and Eric Schmitt. “Iraq Is Said to Seek U.S. Strikes on Insurgents.” *New York Times*, June 12, 2014.

¹⁹ Nico Hines. “Petraeus: U.S. Must Not Become the Shia Militia’s Air Force.” *The Daily Beast*, June 18, 2014.

²⁰ Mark Landler and Eric Schmitt. “Obama Is Said to Consider Selective Airstrikes on Sunni Militants.” *New York Times*, June 18, 2014.

²¹ Josh Rogin. “Congress to Iraq’s Maliki: No Arms for a Civil War.” *Daily Beast*, January 8, 2014.

²² “Text of Obama’s Remarks on Iraq.” Federal News Service, June 19, 2014.

²³ “Obama to Make Case for Sending Special Forces to Iraq.” CBS News, June 17, 2014.

²⁴ “Text of Obama’s Remarks on Iraq.” op. cit.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)²⁵

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also referred to as 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 group's ideological and organizational roots lie in the forces built and led by the late Abu Musab al Zarqawi in Iraq from 2002 through 2006—*Tawhid wal Jihad* (Monotheism and Jihad) and Al Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers (aka Al Qaeda in Iraq, or AQ-I). Following Zarqawi's death at the hands of U.S. forces in June 2006, AQ-I leaders repackaged the group as a coalition known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). ISI 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),²⁶ 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, ISIL leaders have stated their view that "the ISIL is not and has never been an offshoot of Al Qaeda,"²⁷ 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, Al Baghdadi announced his intent to merge his forces in Iraq and Syria with those of the Syria-based *Jabhat al Nusra* (Support Front), under the name ISIL. Nusra Front and Al Qaeda leaders rejected the merger, underscoring growing tensions among Sunni extremists in the region. These tensions have played out in fighting among Sunni extremist groups within Syria. In July 2013, ISIL attacked prisons at Abu Ghraib and Taji in Iraq, reportedly freeing several hundred detained members and shaking international confidence in Iraq's security forces. ISIL continued a fierce wave of attacks across northern, western, and central Iraq, while in Syria the group consolidated control over the city and province of Raqqa and expanded its presence in northwestern areas then controlled by other rebel forces. Late 2013 saw the Iraqi government seeking expanded counterterrorism and military assistance from the United States, ostensibly to meet the growing ISIL threat. Inside Syria, ISIL alienated its rebel counterparts further, and an anti-ISIL campaign erupted there in early 2014, expelling the group from some areas it had controlled and unleashing a cycle of ongoing infighting. In Syria, ISIL remains strongest in Raqqa, Dayr az Zawr, and Hasakah. ISIL's attempts to assert control over the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi in Iraq's Al Anbar province and its June 2014 offensive in northern Iraq underscored the group's lethality and ability to conduct combat operations and manage partnerships with local groups in multiple areas over large geographic distances. The durability of ISIL's partnerships are questionable: ISIL's remains at violent odds with Islamist and secular armed groups in Syria, and tribal, Islamist, and Baathist armed groups in Iraq have a history of opposing ISIL's previous incarnations.

Statements and media materials released by ISIL reflect an uncompromising, exclusionary worldview and a relentless ambition. Statements by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and ISIL's spokesman Abu Mohammed al Adnani feature sectarian calls for violence and identify Shiites, non-Muslims, and unsupportive Sunnis as enemies in the group's struggle to establish "the Islamic State" and to revive their vision of "the caliphate."²⁸ The group describes Iraqi Shiites derogatorily as "rejectionists" and "polytheists" and paints the Iraqi government of Nuri al Maliki as a puppet of Iran. Similar ire is aimed at Syrian Alawites and the Asad government, although some sources allege that ISIL operatives have benefitted from evolving financial and security arrangements with Damascus dating back to the time of the U.S. presence in Iraq.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iraq Brett McGurk told the House Foreign Affairs Committee in February 2014 that ISIL's objective is "to cause the collapse of the Iraqi state and carve out a zone of governing control in the western regions of Iraq and eastern Syria." ISIL has since built upon what McGurk described then as its "unprecedented" resources in terms of funds, weapons and personnel. Several leading representatives of the U.S. intelligence community have stated that ISIL maintains training camps in Iraq and Syria, has the intent to attack the United States, and is reportedly recruiting and training individuals to do so. In January 2014, Al Baghdadi threatened the United States directly, saying, "Know, O defender of the Cross, that a proxy war will not help you in the Levant, just as it will not help you in Iraq. Soon, you will be in direct conflict —God permitting—against your will."²⁹

²⁵ Prepared by Christopher Blanchard, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs.

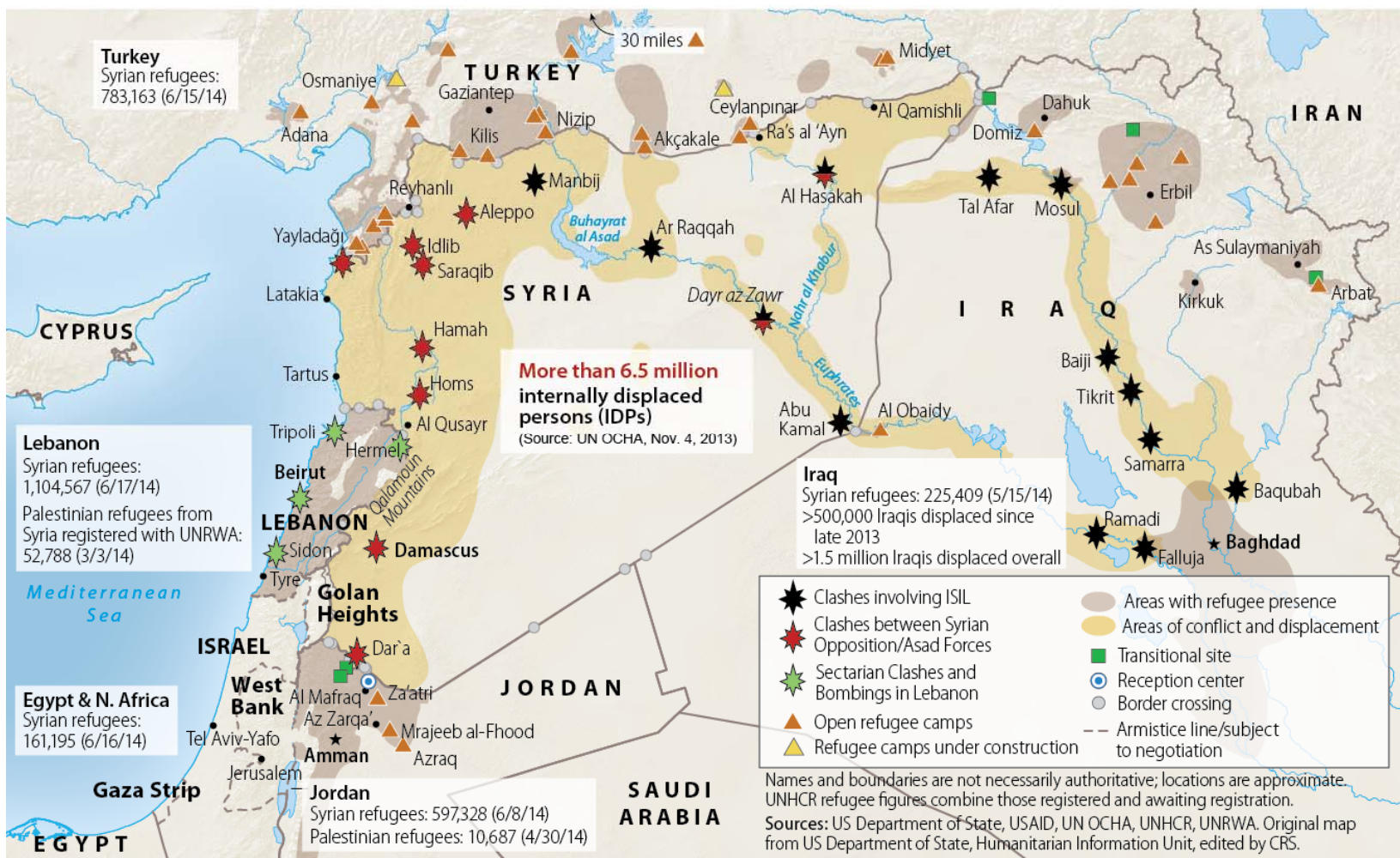
²⁶ Al Baghdadi was arrested and detained by U.S. forces in Iraq at Camp Bucca, until his release in 2009.

²⁷ OSC Report TRN2014051234500562, "Al-Furqan Releases ISIL Al-Adnani's Message Criticizing Al-Zawahiri, Refusing To Leave Syria," Twitter, May 11-2, 2014.

²⁸ OSC Report GMP20130409405003, "ISI Emir Declares ISI, Al-Nusra Front: 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant,'" Translated from *Ansar al Mujahideen Network*, April 9, 2013.

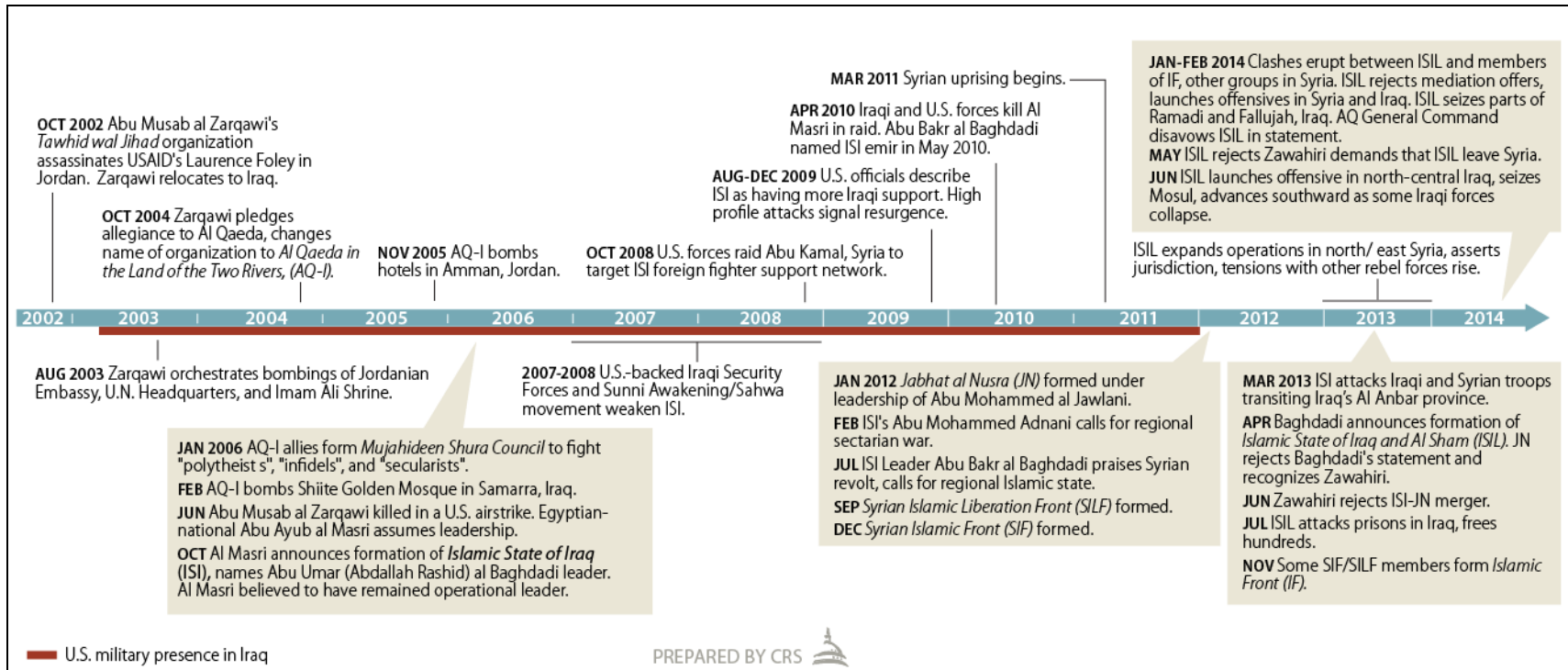
²⁹ OSC Report TRR2014011980831299, "Al-Furqan Establishment Releases Audio Statement by ISIL Emir Condemning 'War' Against Group," Translated from *Al Minbar al 'lami Jihadist Forum*, January 19, 2014.

Figure I. Iraq, Syria, and Regional Unrest



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

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



Syria Dimension³⁰

Since 2013, ISIL fighters have used Syria both as a staging ground for attacks in Iraq and as a parallel theater of operations.³¹ In early 2014, ISIL reestablished control in most areas of the northern Syrian province of Raqqah and reasserted itself to the east in Dayr az Zawr, a province rich in oil and gas resources bordering the Anbar region of Iraq. Since late 2013, ISIL 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. ISIL 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.³² ISIL has also 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.

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

ISIL gains may also motivate the Maliki and Asad governments to cooperate more closely in seeking to counter ISIL. ISIL advances in Iraq could weaken the Syrian's government's ability to hold ground in contested areas, as some Iraqi Shiite militants who had previously fought alongside Asad forces return home to combat ISIL.³³ In mid-June 2014, Syrian forces conducted air strikes against ISIL-held areas of Raqqah and Hasakah in coordination with the Iraqi government, according to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.³⁴ Increased cooperation between Damascus and Baghdad could alter the dynamics in both conflicts. It could undermine ongoing U.S. efforts to encourage Iraqi leaders to press Asad to step down in favor of a transitional government. Increased Iraqi-Syrian cooperation could also decrease the likelihood that Baghdad would comply with U.S. requests to crack down on Iranian overflights of weapons and equipment to Damascus.

It is unclear what impact ISIL gains in Iraq would have outside of eastern Syria. At least half of Syria-based ISIL fighters are Syrian or Iraqi tribesmen, according to a Syrian ISIL defector.³⁵ Like other segments of the Syrian opposition, Syrian tribes have at times been reluctant to expand hostilities against government forces beyond their own local areas.³⁶ ISIL to date has concentrated

³⁰ 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.

³¹ "Syria war fueling attacks by al Qaeda in Iraq, officials say," *New York Times*, August 15, 2013.

³² "Sunni fighters gain as they battle 2 governments, and other rebels," *New York Times*, June 11, 2014.

³³ "Seeing their gains at risk, Shiites flock to join militias," *New York Times*, June 13, 2014.

³⁴ "Syria pounds ISIS bases in coordination with Iraq," *Daily Star*, June 15, 2014.

³⁵ "Sunni Fighters Gain as They Battle 2 Governments and Other Rebels," *New York Times*, June 11, 2014.

³⁶ "The Tribal Factor in Syria's Rebellion: A Survey of Armed Tribal Groups in Syria." The Jamestown Foundation, June 27, 2013.

its forces in Syria's northeast, and has largely avoided regular confrontations in the country's main urban areas in Syria's western half.

Ongoing ISIL operations in Syria are focused in Dayr az Zawr, as the group fights to secure the route to the city of Abu Kamal, a key node along the Syria-Iraq border. A recent press report indicates that "moderate opposition" forces in Dayr az Zawr, aided by the Al Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front, are besieged on different sides of the city by the Syrian military and by ISIL.³⁷ Nusra and ISIL continue to clash inside Syria. Any Iraqi or U.S. efforts to disrupt or sever ISIL supply lines through Abu Kamal or between Dayr az Zawr and Mosul could benefit Syrian military and Nusra Front forces also operating in the area.

Iran Dimension

The rapidity of the ISF collapse appeared to align the interests of Iran and the United States in halting ISIL's advance. Some senior officials of both governments stated that they would be open to working together, at least diplomatically and politically, to reduce the threat posed by the ISIL-led offensive. Secretary of State John Kerry said in an interview that the United States was "open to discussions [with Iran on Iraq] if there's something constructive that can be contributed by Iran."³⁸ U.S. diplomats reportedly discussed the situation in Iraq at the margins of the June 16 start of a previously-scheduled week of talks on Iran's nuclear program, reportedly seeking Iran's cooperation to compel Prime Minister Maliki to share power, or possibly even be replaced outright.³⁹

Yet, many observers remain skeptical that that the United States could or should cooperate with Iran on Iraq. Iran has been a staunch supporter of the Shiite-led government in Iraq and does not necessarily share the U.S. goal of creating a broad-based, inclusive central government. Iran reportedly helped establish many of the Shiite militias that fought the United States during 2003-2011 and which still contribute to sectarian conflict in Iraq. Apparently seeking first and foremost to prevent the fall of Baghdad, Iran reportedly sent Islamic Revolutionary Guard-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) units into Iraq after the fall of Mosul to advise the ISF and help re-organize the Shiite militias to assist in the fighting. The head of the IRGC-QF, Gen. Qasem Soleimani, reportedly visited Baghdad as part of this effort.⁴⁰ As ISIL-led fighters contested the city of Baqubah, which is located in Diyala Province about 80 miles from the Iranian border, Iran threatened airstrikes against any ISIL fighters who approached within 60 miles of Iranian territory.

It is unclear how the Iraq crisis might affect the balance of leverage between Iran and the United States in international diplomacy over Iran's nuclear program. Each country could arguably stand to protect its interests by obtaining help from the other. Some assess that Iran might offer cooperation in Iraq—for example in compelling Maliki to share power—in exchange for U.S. and

³⁷ OSC Report LIN2014061734348841, "Report says Syrian regime forces, Da'ish tighten siege on Dayr az Zawr, food, fuel to run out," Translation from *Al Sharq al Awsat Online*, June 17, 2014.

³⁸ Michael Gordon and David Sanger. "U.S. Is Exploring Talks with Iran on Crisis in Iraq." *New York Times*, June 17, 2014.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/national_world/2014/06/17/iranian-general-in-iraq-to-counter-insurgents.html

partner concessions on the final disposition of Iran's program to enrich uranium.⁴¹ A U.S. State Department spokeswoman said on June 18 that U.S. officials insist on maintaining a firewall between the ongoing nuclear negotiations and the crisis in Iraq.

Selected Additional Issues Raised by the Crisis

The crisis in Iraq has raised a number of additional issues for U.S. and international policy.

Humanitarian Impact and Response⁴²

Approximately 500,000 people have been displaced by fighting in and around Mosul and in areas reaching south towards Baghdad. The actual displacement figures remain fluid and difficult to fully ascertain. Many of those displaced are reportedly fleeing to the relatively secure KRG-controlled region or forming ad hoc camps along its border. Others have scattered elsewhere. This is in addition to the estimated 500,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who fled fighting in Anbar province earlier this year and the nearly 1 million people who sought refuge in Syria between 2003 and 2011, many of whom are thought to remain displaced. An urgent humanitarian crisis is emerging and humanitarian actors are scrambling to meet the needs of IDPs and conflict victims.

Priority needs include shelter, food, clean water, and non-food items. IDPs are residing with relatives and in host communities, mosques, tents, schools, unfinished buildings, and other government facilities. Various reports indicate that access to hospitals is limited, with some not functioning at all. Temporary transit facilities have been set up close to KRG border areas to provide medical assistance and drinking water. Humanitarian organizations are mobilizing teams to assess the situation further where possible and to coordinate a response.

According to the U.N. Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), the KRG policy on establishing IDP camps has yet to be fully determined. Camps in Erbil and Dohuk already exist and the KRG authorities are working to find a way to address the needs of the displaced, including identifying a location for additional camps. However, there are reports that local authorities do not want to allow large numbers of IDPs into their territory. The region is already housing more than 200,000 refugees from Syria.

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

⁴¹ "U.S. is Exploring Talks with Iran on Crisis in Iraq." op. cit.

⁴² This section was prepared by Rhoda Margesson, Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy.

Responses to Threats to U.S. Personnel, Facilities and Citizens⁴³

On June 15, the Department of State announced that while the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad would remain open, a number of personnel would be “temporarily relocated” to Consulate Generals in Basrah and Erbil as well as to Department of State facilities in Amman, Jordan. The relocations were reportedly being carried out by non-military means. The announcement stated that a “substantial majority of the U.S. Embassy presence in Iraq” would remain in place and that, with an expected addition of security personnel, the Embassy would be “fully equipped” to carry out “its national security mission.”⁴⁴

Military assets have been deployed to assist with the relocations of Embassy staff and to bolster security at the U.S. diplomatic sites. On June 15, reports suggested 50 U.S. Marines had arrived at the Embassy in response to a Department of State request, in order to bolster security.⁴⁵ The Marines were in addition to the reported 200 Marine Corps guards and contractors already in place to protect the Embassy.⁴⁶ On June 16 the White House informed Congress that up to approximately 275 U.S. military personnel were being dispatched to Iraq to assist with the temporary relocation of personnel, a deployment undertaken with the consent of the Government of Iraq.⁴⁷ The Department of Defense also confirmed that it “has airlift assets at the ready should State Department request them, as per normal interagency support arrangements.”⁴⁸

The State Department posted on June 16 an “Emergency Message for U.S. Citizens: Announcement of Relocation of U.S. Embassy Staff,” which urged “U.S. citizens to avoid travel to Iraq because of current safety and security concerns” and advised those concerned about their safety to “make plans to depart by commercial means.” The statement emphasized that the Embassy should not be contacted with requests for assistance with travel arrangements, and that the Embassy “does not offer ‘protection’ services to individuals who feel unsafe.” While the Embassy remained open, the statement said, Embassy services for U.S. citizens throughout Iraq would be limited due to the security environment.⁴⁹

On June 12, the Department of State confirmed that a number of U.S. citizen contract employees to the Iraqi Government, who were performing services in connection to the U.S. Foreign Military Sales Program in Iraq, were “temporarily relocated” by their companies due to security concerns.⁵⁰

⁴³ Prepared by Alex Tiersky, Analyst in Foreign Affairs. For more information on this issue, see: CRS Report IN10090, *Crisis in Iraq: Securing U.S. Citizens, Personnel, and Facilities*, by Alex Tiersky.

⁴⁴ Department of State Spokesperson, “Press Statement: Iraq,” press release, June 15, 2014.

⁴⁵ Karen DeYoung, “Security boosted at U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, some personnel are relocated,” *The Washington Post*, June 15, 2014.

⁴⁶ Dan Lamothe, “U.S. companies pulling contractors from Iraqi bases as security crumbles,” *The Washington Post*, June 12, 2014.

⁴⁷ The White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the Press Secretary on the War Powers Resolution Report for Iraq,” press release, June 16, 2014.

⁴⁸ “DOD Provides Security Help for Baghdad Diplomatic Facilities,” *American Forces Press Service*, June 15, 2014.

⁴⁹ Department of State, “Emergency Message for U.S. Citizens: Announcement of Relocation of U.S. Embassy Staff,” press release, June 16, 2014, <http://iraq.usembassy.gov/em-06162014.html>.

⁵⁰ Department of State Deputy Spokesperson, Daily Press Briefing, June 12, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/06/227573.htm#IRAQ>.

Possible Questions for Congressional Consideration⁵¹

The following represent possible questions that Members of Congress and staff might ask Administration officials or outside experts regarding the situation in Iraq:

What are the current operational and tactical threats to U.S. interests and personnel in Iraq? Does the Administration believe those threats are imminent, and, if so, what does “imminent” mean in this context? How reliant is the United States on the cooperation of the Iraqi government and its security forces to mitigate those threats? Can the U.S. government mitigate those threats effectively using available resources and authorities? Why or why not? If not, what additional resources or authorities may be required?

How, if at all, should recent developments in Iraq shape congressional consideration of pending authorization and appropriations legislation for defense and foreign assistance? Should the United States legislatively condition the provision of future foreign or military assistance to Iraq on the achievement of the conditions identified by President Obama in his June 13 remarks at the White House or considered in strategic planning since then?

What are the humanitarian implications of the crisis, and what actions is the Administration taking in support of international efforts to help refugees and internally displaced persons? How might the crisis affect Administration requests to Congress for authorization and appropriations legislation for FY2015?

What is the operational status of the increased security support approved by Congress for Iraq since late 2013? How have Iraqi forces used increased U.S. material support, advice, and/or any shared intelligence over this period? Would additional authorities or approvals be needed to augment or expand such support? Please describe the nature of current military advisory efforts in Iraq. How might those efforts be adapted to address the current crisis? Would expanded advisory efforts require the introduction of combat-equipped U.S. military personnel?

To what extent are ISIL’s recent military advances a reflection of its organizational capabilities? To what extent do recent developments stem from a lack of capability or organizational shortcomings in Iraq’s security forces? To what extent have other armed groups facilitated or taken advantage of ISIL’s advance? Please assess the range of Iraqi Sunni views of ISIL and other armed anti-government groups. How likely is ISIL to face resistance from Iraqi Sunnis in areas it now controls?

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

⁵¹ Prepared by Christopher Blanchard and Jim Zanotti, Specialists in Middle Eastern Affairs.

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

What kind of role might Iraq's Kurds play in this crisis? Are they likely to be of help in actively countering ISIL in areas outside of Kurdistan Regional Government administrative control? Why or why not? Are Kurdish efforts to control Kirkuk and its energy resources more likely to strengthen or to weaken the security situation in that area and in Iraq generally? What actions are ISIL and the Iraqi government likely to take vis-à-vis Kurdish forces and authorities? Are the Kurds likely to attempt formal secession from Iraq in the near future as a result of the current crisis? How should these considerations affect U.S. policy toward the KRG?

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

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

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