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

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Summary

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 parts of Iraq and Syria since 2013, threatening the wider region. 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 forerunners of the Islamic State were 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 taken control of some eastern provinces of Syria torn by the civil war. In 2014, Islamic State-led forces, supported by groups linked to ousted Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and some Sunni Arabs, advanced along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Iraq, 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 murdered hostages, including U.S. citizens. Islamic State offensives in Iraq's Anbar province and against Kurdish enclaves continue. The group's tactics have drawn international ire, and raised U.S. attention to Iraq's political problems and to the war in Syria.

On September 10, 2014, 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. President Obama has ruled out deploying ground combat forces to Iraq or Syria, but 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.

In December 2014, the 113th Congress provided new authorities and funds for efforts to combat the Islamic State organization in Syria and Iraq in the FY2015 national defense authorization (P.L. 113-291) and consolidated appropriations acts (P.L. 113-235). The 114th Congress is now considering the Administration's FY2016 budget requests and its proposal for authorization for the use of military force against the Islamic State.

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 taken control of some provinces in eastern Syria. The Islamic State's tactics have drawn the ire of the international community, and raised new U.S. attention to Iraq's political problems and to the civil war in Syria.

Although the Islamic State organization is considered a direct threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East, it is unclear whether it currently poses direct threats to U.S. homeland security. In November 2014, National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) Director Nicholas Rasmussen said in congressional testimony that "the [ISIL] threat beyond the Middle East is real, although thus far limited in sophistication. However, if left unchecked, over time we can expect ISIL's capabilities to mature, and the threat to the United States homeland ultimately to increase."¹ Rasmussen recently estimated that more than 20,000 foreign fighters from as many as 90 countries, including more than 3400 Westerners, may have travelled to Syria since 2011 in a trend that U.S. officials have described as "unprecedented."² According to U.S. officials, approximately 150 U.S. citizens have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria to support armed groups there since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, and approximately 12 Americans were believed by U.S. officials to have been fighting there as of September 2014.

A U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) spokesperson estimated in September 2014 that the Islamic State 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 then remained in Syria. As of early 2015, U.S. officials estimate that coalition air strikes and ground operations have killed thousands of IS personnel since August 2014. However thousands of recruits also reportedly have joined the organization over that period.

Statements and media materials released by the Islamic State reflect an uncompromising, exclusionary worldview and a relentless ambition. Statements by IS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and IS spokesman Abu Mohammed al Adnani feature sectarian calls for violence and identify Shiites, non-Muslims, and unsupportive Sunnis as enemies in the group's struggle to revive their vision of "the caliphate." The group describes Iraqi Shiites derogatorily as "rejectionists" and "polytheists" and paints the Iraqi government as a puppet of Iran. Similar ire is aimed at Syrian Alawites and the Assad government, although some sources allege that operatives for the Islamic

¹ Mr. Nicholas J. Rasmussen Acting Director, National Counterterrorism Center, Statement for the Record, Senate Select Intelligence Committee, November 20, 2014. In September 2014, his predecessor Matthew Olsen had said that "we have no credible information that ISIL is planning to attack the U.S.". Olsen also said 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."

² On February 10, U.S. National Counterterrorism Director Nicholas Rasmussen said, "The rate of foreign fighter travel to Syria is unprecedented. It exceeds the rate of travelers who went to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, or Somalia at any point in the last 20 years." Statement of Nicholas J. Rasmussen, Director, U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, before the House Committee on Homeland Security, February 11, 2015.

State and its antecedents have benefitted from evolving financial and security arrangements with Damascus that began during the 2003-2011 U.S. military presence in Iraq.

In July 2012, Al Baghdadi warned U.S. leaders that “the mujahidin have set out to chase the affiliates of your armies that have fled.... You will see them in your own country, God willing. The war with you has just begun.”³ In January 2014, Al Baghdadi threatened the United States directly, saying, “Know, O defender of the Cross, that a proxy war will not help you in the Levant, just as it will not help you in Iraq. Soon, you will be in direct conflict—God permitting—against your will.”⁴ English language propaganda and recruiting material released by the group in connection with its 2014 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. In November 2014, Al Baghdadi argued the Islamic State would continue to expand and welcomed the potential introduction of Western ground forces, saying: “soon, the Jews and Crusaders will be forced to come down to the ground and send their ground forces to their deaths and destruction, by Allah’s permission.”⁵ In January 2015, Adnani urged the group’s supporters “in Europe and the disbelieving West and everywhere else, to target the crusaders in their own lands and wherever they are found.”⁶

Background: The Roots of the Islamic State

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),⁷ 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 2014, Islamic State leaders stated their view that their group “is not and has never been an offshoot of Al Qaeda,”⁸ 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.

For an overview timeline, see **Figure 3** below.

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.

³ U.S. Government Open Source Center (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.

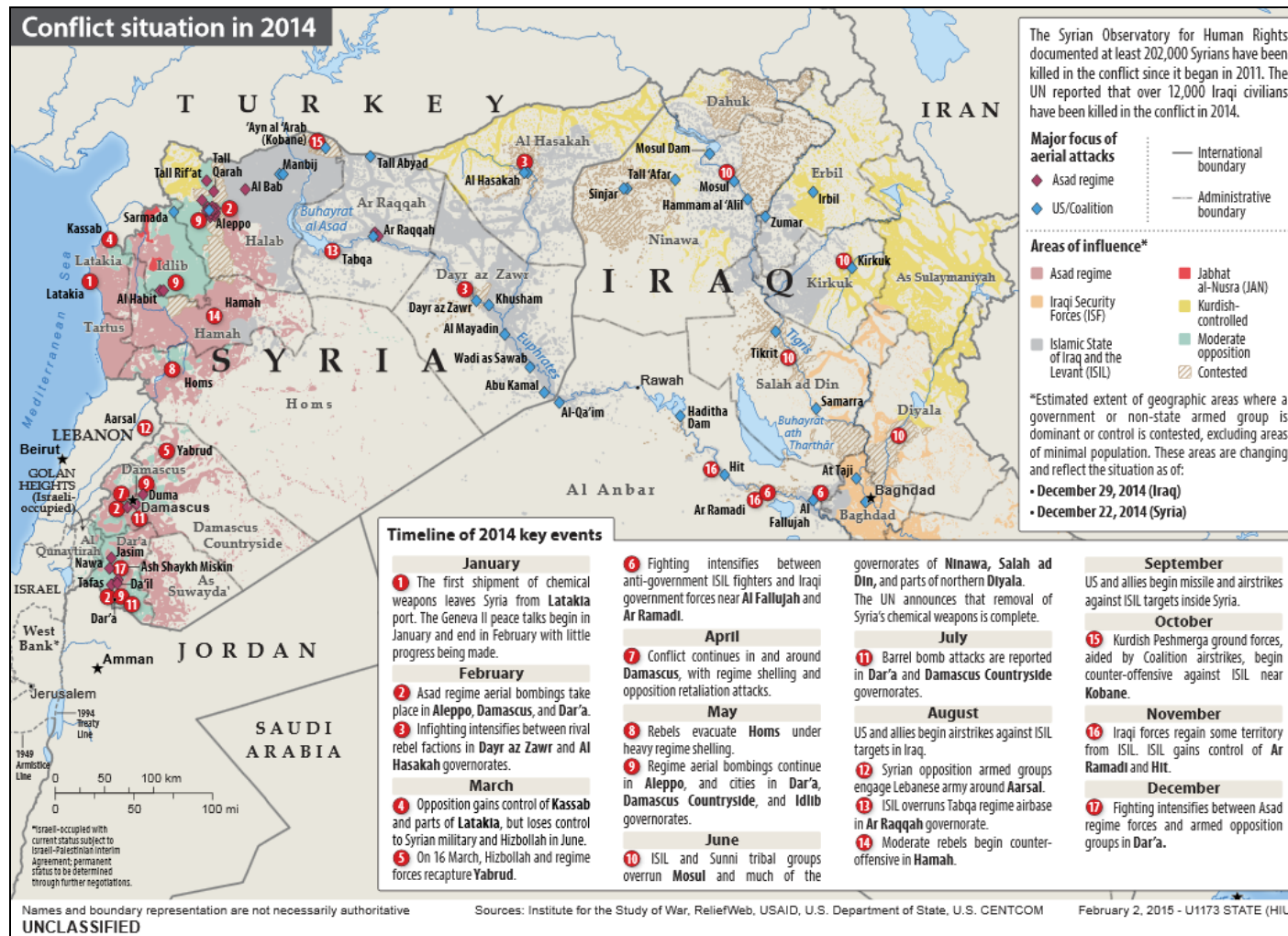
⁵ OSC Report TRR2014111361251279, “ISIL Amir Al-Baghdadi Accepts Pledges of Allegiance, Announces ‘Expansion’ to Saudi Arabia, Yemen,” Twitter, November 13, 2014.

⁶ OSC Report TRR2015012657315008, “ISIL Spokesman Al-Adnani Announces ‘Wilayah Khurasan,’ Calls For More Lone Wolf Attacks in West,” Twitter, January 26, 2015.

⁷ Al Baghdadi reportedly was arrested and detained by U.S. forces in Iraq.

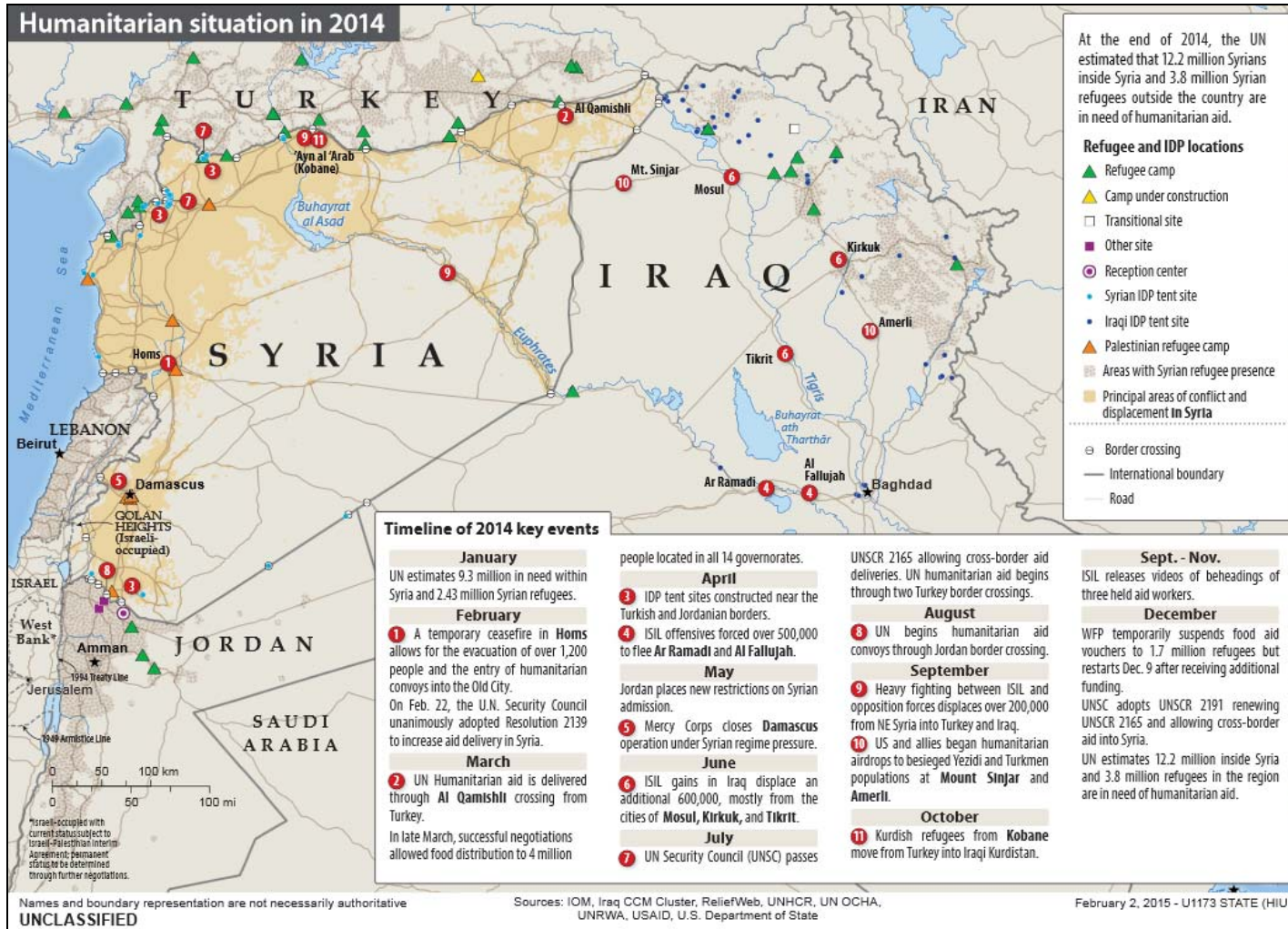
⁸ OSC Report TRN2014051234500562, “Al-Furqan Releases ISIL Al-Adnani’s Message Criticizing Al-Zawahiri, Refusing to Leave Syria,” Twitter, May 11-12, 2014.

Figure I. Syria and Iraq: Conflict and Crisis Map



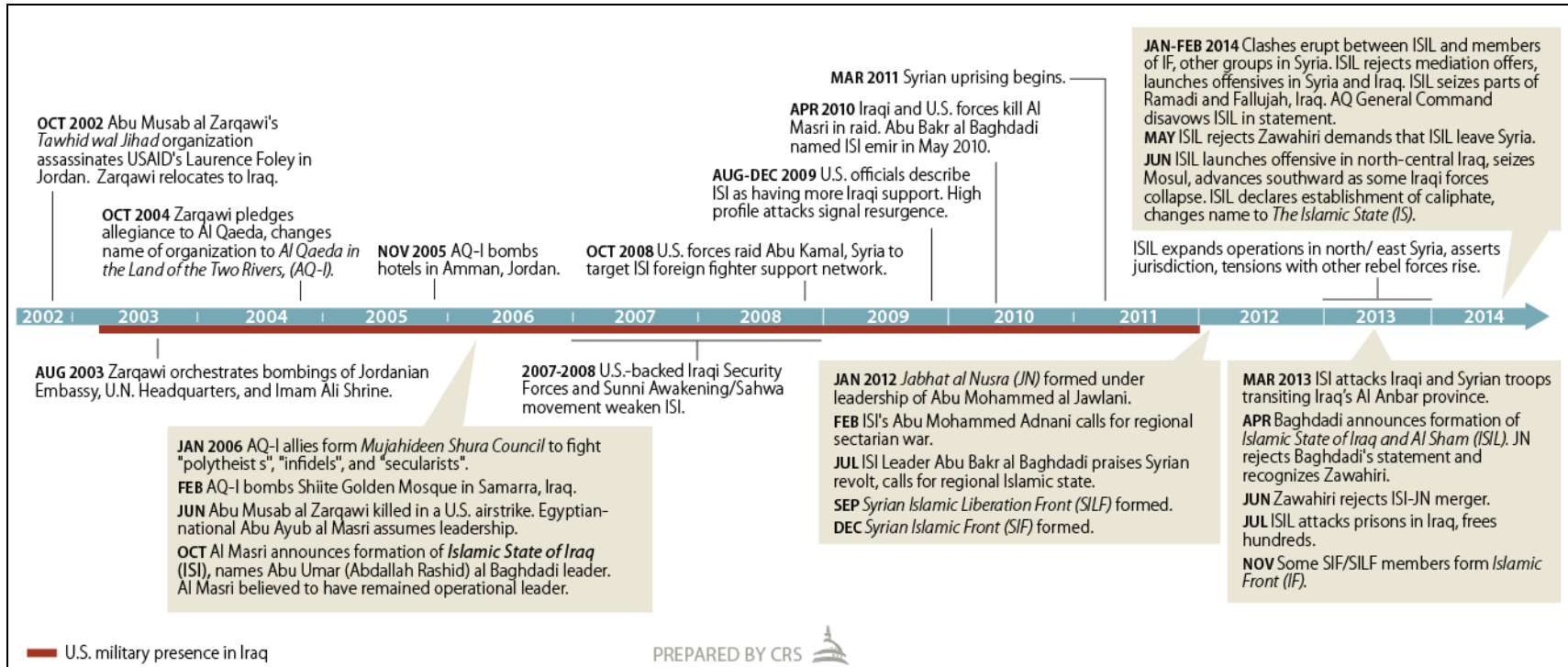
Source: U.S. State Department, Humanitarian Information Unit, Syria Conflict Without Borders: 2014 in Review, February 2, 2015.

Figure 2. Syria and Iraq: Humanitarian Situation Map



Source: U.S. State Department, Humanitarian Information Unit, Syria Conflict Without Borders: 2014 in Review, February 2, 2015.

Figure 3. Timeline: The Roots of the Islamic State



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

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 accounted for.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.¹² 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.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ However,

⁹ Michael Knights in "Iraq's Dire Situation," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 17, 2014.

¹⁰ Tim Arango, "Uneasy Alliance Gives Insurgents an Edge in Iraq," *New York Times*, June 19, 2014.

¹¹ "Unlikely Allies Aid Militants in Iraq," *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2014.

¹² Mitchell Prothero, "Iraqi Army Remains on Defensive as Extent of June Debacle Becomes Clearer," McLatchey Wire Service, July 14, 2014.

¹³ Alissa Rubin, "ISIS Expels Last Iraqi Christians from Mosul," *New York Times*, July 19, 2014.

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

¹⁵ For more information on the Kurds and the potential for the Iraqi Kurds to declare independence, see CRS Insight (continued...)

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, 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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. Recent U.S. assessments of the 60-country coalition’s campaign against the Islamic State organization suggest that U.S. officials believe that air strikes and Iraqi and Kurdish ground operations have halted the IS fighters’ momentum and have placed them in a largely defensive posture. According to the Department of Defense, hundreds if not thousands of IS personnel have been killed, and “hundreds and hundreds” of vehicles, artillery positions, and checkpoints have been destroyed.¹⁹

Most recently, intense U.S. and coalition airstrikes have facilitated Kurdish *peshmerga* efforts to retake areas in the northwestern Sinjar region in December and January, and enabled some *peshmerga* units to advance to within ten miles of Mosul. Lt. Gen. Terry, overall commander of Operation Inherent Resolve, stated in mid-December that the ISF had retaken some key towns in Anbar Province including Karma and Haditha.²⁰ Backed by Shiite militias, the ISF claimed on January 26 to have also recaptured all major cities in towns of Diyala Province, north of Baghdad.²¹

(...continued)

IN10105, *The Kurds and Possible Iraqi Kurdish Independence*, by Jim Zanotti and Kenneth Katzman.

¹⁶ Ishaan Tharoor, “Who Are the Yazidis?” *Washington Post*, August 7, 2014.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ UNAMI, Public Information Office, “UN Gravely Concerned About Situation in Northern Iraq; Calls for Urgent Response,” August 7, 2014.

¹⁹ Department of Defense Press Briefing by Rear Admiral John Kirby, January 6, 2014.

²⁰ Paul McLeary, “1,000 82nd Airborne Troops Iraq-Bound in January.” *Defense News*, December 19, 2014.

²¹ <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/01/26/Iraq-forces-liberate-Diyala-province-from-ISIS-officer-.html>

U.S. military personnel have warned that the potential for new IS offensives remains, and fighting involving IS forces is ongoing in northern and western Iraq. The ISF recaptured the town of Baiji in late 2014, but reportedly subsequently lost it to the Islamic State, suggesting that ISF gains are not necessarily permanent. Recent IS attacks against border security personnel on the Saudi-Iraqi border and mortar attacks on Iraqi facilities hosting U.S. advisors may reflect IS leaders' goals for targeting foreign supporters of the Iraqi government and broadening their campaign to neighboring countries. Iran has launched airstrikes on Islamic State positions in eastern Iraq and reached a new defense cooperation agreement with the Baghdad government in late December. Iranian military personnel, including senior Revolutionary Guard Corps officers, continue to directly advise and assist Iraqi Shiite militia groups engaged in fighting with the Islamic State.

Related Changes in Iraq's Government

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.²²

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

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

The Situation in Syria

Since 2013, Islamic State fighters have used Syria both as a staging ground for attacks in Iraq and as a parallel theater of operations.²³ 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.²⁴ 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.

The Islamic State also has operated north of Dayr az Zawr in Al Hasakah province, establishing a connection to Iraq's Nineveh province that it was apparently able to exploit in its eventual advance towards Mosul. 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. Strikes on IS forces in the vicinity of the Syria-Turkey border town of Kobane continue, as do coalition strikes against IS personnel, vehicles, and facilities in other areas of northern and eastern Syria. However, as in Iraq, the IS forces largely retain their key strongholds.

With regard to Syria's broader civil conflict, 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 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.

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.

²³ "Syria War Fueling Attacks by al Qaeda in Iraq, Officials Say," *New York Times*, August 15, 2013.

²⁴ "Sunni Fighters Gain as They Battle 2 Governments, and Other Rebels," *New York Times*, June 11, 2014.

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 December 2014 include:

- **Islamic State Seeks Ransom, Prisoner Swap for Hostages, Executes Them.** Islamic State personnel released videos reportedly showing the execution of two Japanese nationals after the group sought a ransom payment and offered to trade one of the Japanese nationals and a captured Jordanian pilot [Lt. Muath al Kasasbeh] for an Iraqi woman [Sajida al Rishawi] imprisoned in Jordan in relation to Al Qaeda in Iraq's 2005 suicide bombings in Amman. Jordanian officials signaled their willingness to consider a prisoner swap, but demanded proof that Lt. Al Kasasbeh was alive. After a video showing the execution of the second Japanese national, Jordan renewed its offer to release Al Rishawi. After the Islamic State released a video showing Al Kasasbeh being burned alive, Jordan pledged a forceful response and executed two convicted Al Qaeda terrorists.
- **Kurdish fighters retake Kobane.** In late January, Kurdish fighters backed by coalition airstrikes reportedly pushed IS militants out of the remaining areas of the Kurdish town of Kobane in northern Syria. Fighting for control of the town, which borders Turkey, had been ongoing since September 2014.²⁵ IS forces remain in control of surrounding regions.
- **U.S. targets IS leaders.** As of late January, U.S. and coalition airstrikes in Iraq and Syria had killed 50 percent of the Islamic State's top leadership, according to Secretary of State John Kerry.²⁶ U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Stuart Jones in a January interview with *Al Arabiya* estimated that airstrikes had killed more than 6,000 IS fighters in Syria and Iraq.²⁷
- **Syrian government strikes Islamic State.** The Asad government has continued operations against IS forces in northeastern Syria. On January 22, Syrian aircraft conducted strikes against an ISIL position north of the city of Ar Raqqa, killing four ISIL militants.²⁸ Kurdish and Syrian government forces continue to clash with IS militants in the eastern border province of Al Hasakah.²⁹

²⁵ OSC Report IML2015012330825913, January 23, 2015.

²⁶ Secretary Kerry said "50 percent of the top command has been eliminated." Remarks by Secretary of State John Kerry at a joint press conference with UK Foreign Secretary Hammond and Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi, January 22, 2015.

²⁷ U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Stuart Jones in an interview with *Al Arabiya*, January 22, 2015.

²⁸ OSC Report IML2015012330825913, January 23, 2015.

²⁹ OSC Report IMN2015012234427747, January 22, 2015.

- **IS seeks new ground.** Some observers suggest that the Islamic State is increasing its activities in central Syria and the Damascus suburbs, as a result of the increased battlefield pressure it faces from coalition strikes in Syria's northeast.³⁰ While IS expansion depends in part on securing defections from other rebel groups, the group has not succeeded in winning support from mainstream rebel coalitions and faces challenges from the Nusra Front, an Al Qaeda affiliate active in southern Syria. Some reports suggest IS has sent emissaries to the southern province of Suwayda but has not yet been successful in establishing a presence there.

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.³¹ 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.³² Administration officials have described U.S. policy in Syria and Iraq as being driven by "ISIL-first" and "Iraq-first" approaches. Administration officials have identified areas where they believe progress has been made in implementing U.S. strategy to date,³³ 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."³⁴

President Obama said on November 5, 2014, 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 aggrieved observers rather than active partners in U.S. efforts to combat the Islamic State inside Syria. In September 2014, U.S. officials reportedly warned the Syrian government of impending strikes on its territory, but President Obama has said that the United States will not coordinate its actions in Syria with the Assad regime, which he has said "terrorizes its own people" and "will never regain

³⁰ "The Islamic State Eyes Expansion in Damascus," Institute for the Study of War, January 21, 2015.

³¹ White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Statement by the President on ISIL," September 10, 2014.

³² 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.

³³ 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.

³⁴ Remarks by President Obama After Meeting with Chiefs of Defense, Joint Base Andrews, October 14, 2014.

the legitimacy it has lost.”³⁵ In January 2015, President Asad said in an interview that he was open to cooperation with coalition forces but suggested that Syria had not granted “permission” for the ongoing coalition military strikes in Syria.³⁶ U.S. strategy seeks a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Syria and argues 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 in the form of weaponry and funding 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.

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. military operations as part of the anti-IS strategy have been termed “Operation Inherent Resolve.” U.S. 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. Ambassador Robert Bradtke serves as the State Department Bureau of Counterterrorism Senior Advisor for Partner Engagement on Syria Foreign Fighters. Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen leads efforts to disrupt IS finances. Major General Michael Nagata, Commander, Special Operations Command—Central, is leading the new congressionally-authorized program to train and equip vetted members of Syria’s opposition and other vetted Syrians.

Experts and officials are debating the effectiveness of the strategy. The Administration has argued that the strategy will need time—measured in many months if not years, instead of 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 requires U.S. or other ground combat troops and expansion of the mission to include pressuring Asad to accept a political solution.

Military Strikes Against IS Targets

U.S. forces have used combat aircraft, armed unmanned aerial vehicles, and sea-launched cruise missiles to conduct more than two thousand strikes in Iraq since August 8, 2014, and in Syria since September 22, 2014, with the support of coalition partners. The stated objectives of U.S. strikes have evolved as circumstances have changed and some goals have been achieved: 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.³⁷

³⁵ White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the President on ISIL,” September 10, 2014.

³⁶ *Reuters*, “Assad seeks agreement over U.S. air strikes in Syria,” January 26, 2015.

³⁷ According to the Defense Intelligence Agency, “The Khorasan Group is a cadre of experienced al-Qa’ida operatives that works closely with and relies upon al-Nusrah Front to provide personnel and space for training facilities in (continued...)”

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.³⁸ Some Members of Congress have suggested U.S. military ground forces may be required to achieve short-term objectives and protect long-term national security interests.

"Train and Equip" Assistance

Iraqi Security Forces

President Obama has 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 and facilities.³⁹ Of the total, about two thirds are advisers and trainers for the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the peshmerga, and the rest support these forces and provide protection for U.S. civilian and military personnel in country.⁴⁰ On December 18, Lt. General James Terry, commander, Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve said, "We anticipate coalition contributions that should produce at least an additional 1,500 personnel" in support of U.S. efforts.⁴¹

The U.S. and partner deployments are intended to address severe weaknesses in Iraq's ground forces. After undertaking an 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.⁴² The definition of "capable," according to U.S. officials, includes whether an ISF unit

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northwestern Syria. The group is primarily focused on transnational terrorist attack plotting. Coalition airstrikes in Syria probably killed a number of senior al-Nusra Front and Khorasan Group operatives, but the group almost certainly has maintained some capability to continue plotting against Western interests." Joint Statement, House Armed Services Committee, February 3, 2015.

³⁸ 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.

³⁹ Of the roughly 1,600 U.S. military personnel in Iraq as of November, more than 700 were advisers tasked with 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.

⁴⁰ In December 2014, the Department of Defense authorized the deployment of 1,000 members of the Third Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division from Fort Bragg, NC, along with 300 enabling personnel drawn from various Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps units.⁴⁰ As of early January, these forces were expected to arrive in Iraq over "the next 4 to 6 weeks" and will join approximately 500 U.S. military personnel currently in Iraq who are providing advisory support to Iraqi forces and preparing logistically for the arrival of the larger training and advisory force. DOD Press Briefing by Rear Admiral John Kirby, January 6, 2014; and, Paul McLeary, "U.S. troops under mortar fire in Iraq," January 5, 2015.

⁴¹ DOD Press Briefing by Lieutenant General James Terry, commander, CJTF-Operation Inherent Resolve, December 18, 2014.

⁴² Eric Schmitt and Michael Gordon, "U.S. Sees Risks in Assisting a Compromised Iraqi Force," *New York Times*, July 14, 2014.

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.

Over the coming months, U.S. and coalition personnel are expected to implement joint Iraqi-coalition plans for the training of 12 Iraqi brigades [nine Iraqi Security Force (ISF) brigades and three Kurdish *peshmerga* brigades]—a total of about 25,000 personnel. Congress authorized and provided \$1.6 billion in funding for U.S. efforts in this regard in the FY2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA, H.R. 3979, P.L. 113-291) and FY2015 appropriations act (H.R. 83, P.L. 113-235). The funding provision (Iraq Train and Equip Fund in Division C of P.L. 113-235) stipulates that 40% of the requested U.S. train and equip funds are 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 FY2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA, Section 1236 of P.L. 113-291) includes this cost-sharing provision, and also limits the availability of funds for newly authorized Iraq training program to 25% until the Administration submits required program and strategy reports to Congress. It also requires 90-day progress reporting.

Under the FY2015 NDAA, the Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State, is 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.

U.S. advisors are expected to continue to support Iraqi commanders at regional brigade and division headquarters engaged in the fight against the Islamic State organization. In parallel, new U.S. military trainers plan to provide training to smaller Iraqi military and Kurdish *peshmerga* units. Training is expected to begin in February 2015 and continue over a period of about 8 to 10 months. The training is to take place at military facilities in Baghdad, Irbil, Taji (north of Baghdad) and Al Asad in Anbar Province; additional training sites in and south of Baghdad reportedly will begin operations soon.

U.S. military personnel in Iraq are currently not tasked with providing advisory or training support to Iraqi personnel in combat settings or with engaging directly in combat against hostile entities other than for force protection purposes. 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.⁴³

⁴³ 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. (continued...)"

U.S. officials and military officers have stated their willingness to further assist Iraqi security forces in training and equipping Iraqi tribesmen in predominantly Sunni Arab areas of western and northwestern Iraq for the campaign against the Islamic State. However, U.S. officials have emphasized that any such efforts would be Iraqi-designed and led, and that the provision of such assistance awaits the conclusion of further discussion with Iraqi leaders. Iraq's cabinet has approved draft legislation to authorize the creation of provincially-aligned National Guard forces and the Council of Representatives is expected to consider the draft in the coming weeks. The Administration's FY2015 OCO authority and funding request noted that requested funds would be used "to provide material support to tribal elements allied with Iraqi forces." The FY2015 NDAA (Section 1236 of P.L. 113-291) authorizes 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."⁴⁴ Thus far, only a small unit of about 250 Sunni tribal fighters has been trained by U.S. forces and is operating in Anbar Province.⁴⁵

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. Deliveries of 250 U.S.-donated Mine Resistant Armor Protected Vehicles (MRAPs) are ongoing. In December 2014, U.S. officials also proposed sales to Iraq that may be worth nearly \$3 billion for 1,000 M1151AI Up-Armored High Mobility Multi-Purpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs) and 175 M1A1 tanks with spare parts, communications, and ammunition. Iraqi Shiite militia groups continue to post images on social media purporting to show their fighters using U.S.-origin combat systems.

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.⁴⁶ 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*.⁴⁷

(...continued)

forces, but we're certainly considering it."

⁴⁴ 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.

⁴⁵ Tim Arango. "U.S. Troops, Back in Iraq, Train a Force to Fight ISIS." *New York Times*, December 31, 2014.

⁴⁶ 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.

⁴⁷ 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 (continued...)"

On December 2, the KRG and Baghdad signed a partial reconciliation agreement under which the KRG would provide up to 550,000 barrels⁴⁸ per day of oil to Iraqi state authorities in exchange for a restoration of the KRG's 17% share of national revenues (which would amount to about \$600 million per month at December 2014 oil prices).⁴⁹ In addition, Baghdad agreed to 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*.⁵⁰ The KRG revenue share of 17% is reflected in the 2015 budget approved by the national parliament in January 2015.

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.⁵¹ 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 sought authorization and funding to support an expanded train and equip mission for Iraqi security forces, including the *peshmerga*. The FY2015 NDAA and appropriations act authorize such assistance (Section 1236 of P.L. 113-291), and the NDAA 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 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.

State Department appropriations for FY2015 assistance to Iraq also are eligible for assistance to the Kurdistan Regional Government (Section 7041(c) of Division J, P.L. 113-235).

Support for Vetted Syrians

In January 2015, Pentagon spokesman Rear Admiral John Kirby announced the planned deployment of several hundred U.S. military training personnel and a similar number of support personnel as part of a new program to train and equip vetted Syrians beginning in the spring. Congress authorized such training and assistance in the FY2015 NDAA (H.R. 3979, P.L. 113-291) and FY2015 appropriations act (H.R. 83, P.L. 113-235). Initial funding for the program was

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ISIL Near Kobani." October 20, 2014.

⁴⁸ 300,000 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.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Tim Arango. "Iraq Government Reaches Accord with the Kurds." *New York Times*, December 3, 2014.

⁵¹ Press briefing by the Director of Operations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lt. Gen. William Mayville. August 11, 2014.

approved by congressional defense committees in December 2014 under authority originally provided by Congress in the FY2015 continuing appropriations resolution of September 2014 (H.J.Res. 124, P.L. 113-164).⁵² According to Kirby, U.S. officials are now engaging with different Syrian groups in order to identify potential recruits for the program. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have agreed to host related program activities, and U.S. officials expect to use intelligence provided by partner countries to assist in vetting participants. Bilateral consultations continue with leaders in each country.

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 in the first year of a planned 3-year program 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

The United States is pursuing a policy to reduce the financial resources available to the Islamic State focuses on disrupting IS revenue streams, limiting the group's access to formal financial systems, and imposing sanctions on the group's senior leadership and financial facilitators.⁵³

Disrupting revenue streams. Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen stated in late 2014 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 (U.N.) member states to help cut off resources to the Islamic State, and the U.N. 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). However, observers have stated that while some countries in the region have passed legislation aimed at curbing the flow of funds to terrorist groups, these laws are often not implemented or enforced. Moreover, foreign donations comprise only a small portion of the Islamic State's income.⁵⁴

In addition to financial and political measures, the United States is also employing military means to target IS funding streams. Beginning in August 2014, U.S. military strikes against the Islamic

⁵² 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. Congress amended and extended this authority in the FY2015 NDAA (Section 1209 of P.L. 113-291) and FY2015 appropriations act (Section 9016 of P.L. 113-235). The NDAA and its accompanying explanatory statement further specify the types of assistance to be provided, and 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. For more on this program and related legislation, see CRS Report R43727, *Train and Equip Authorities for Syria: In Brief*, by Christopher M. Blanchard and Amy Belasco.

⁵³ Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen, Remarks at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 23, 2014.

⁵⁴ "Terrorist Financing and the Islamic State," testimony submitted by Matthew Levitt to the House Committee on Financial Services, November 13, 2014.

State have targeted oil facilities, including collection points and mobile refineries. In a November hearing, Cohen reported that the Islamic State's revenue from oil sales had dropped from one million dollars a day to several million dollars a week.⁵⁵ In January, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry stated that coalition strikes had destroyed nearly 200 oil and gas facilities used by the Islamic State.⁵⁶ The resulting loss of revenue, Kerry stated, was restricting the group's operations and in some cases limiting its ability to pay salaries.

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 works 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. However, Iraqi sources in January stated that the Islamic State had established its own bank in Mosul, which granted loans and accepted deposits.⁵⁷

Financial sanctions. The United States also has imposed sanctions against IS officials and their external financial backers. On September 24, the Department of the Treasury designated 12 individuals for their role in soliciting funds, procuring military equipment, and recruiting foreign fighters, 2 of whom are based in Syria and are associated with the Islamic State.⁵⁸ To date, few members of the Islamic State have been designated by the Department of the Treasury; U.S. officials have said this is in part due to the challenges in identifying individuals with a foothold in the formal financial system.⁵⁹

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 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.⁶⁰ 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."⁶¹

U.S. government estimates discussed in February 2015 press reports suggest that casualty-to-replacement ratios for the Islamic State may be close to equal given continuing flows of foreign

⁵⁵ House Financial Services Committee hearing on Terrorist Financing and the Islamic State, November 13, 2014.

⁵⁶ Remarks by Secretary of State John Kerry at a joint press conference with UK Foreign Secretary Hammond and Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi, January 22, 2015.

⁵⁷ "Islamic State group sets out first budget, worth \$2bn," *Al Araby al Jadeed*, January 4, 2015.

⁵⁸ U.S. Treasury Department, Treasury Designates Twelve Foreign Terrorist Fighter Facilitators, September 24, 2014.

⁵⁹ House Financial Services Committee hearing on Terrorist Financing and the Islamic State, November 13, 2014.

⁶⁰ See White House, Fact Sheet: Comprehensive U.S. Government Approach to Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Syria and the Broader Region, September 24, 2014.

⁶¹ State Department Spokesperson Jen Psaki, Daily Press Briefing, Washington, D.C., August 27, 2014.

fighters to the conflict zone. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Ranking Member Congressman Adam Schiff said in a related interview that:

“the key indicator is how many people continue to join ISIS’s ranks. Because if we can’t stop that, this conflict is going to be never-ending. The bottom line is notwithstanding the demonstrated brutality of ISIS, and maybe because of it, foreign fighters continue to flow to the region. We have not been nearly successful enough in stemming that flow.”⁶²

In August 2014, the U.S. government supported the adoption of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2170, which strengthened international sanctions measures designed to combat the Islamic State, Jabhat al Nusra, and Al Qaeda-affiliated entities. The resolution 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 Bradkete 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.”⁶³

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.⁶⁴

⁶² Tim Mak and Nancy Youssef, “ISIS Ranks Grow as Fast as U.S. Bombs Can Wipe Them Out,” *Daily Beast*, February 3, 2015.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ 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

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.⁶⁵

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.⁶⁶ Relations 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 capture by Islamic State forces of a downed Jordanian pilot in December 2014 also has the potential to shape the calculations of coalition members.

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."⁶⁷ To date, the Administration has

⁶⁵ 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 Assad 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.

⁶⁶ 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.

⁶⁷ 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, (continued...)

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.⁶⁸

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.⁶⁹ 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, but several have committed troops to advise and train Iraqi forces.

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 hostages⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹ 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 affect 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 2015.⁷²

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

(...continued)

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.

⁶⁸ 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.

⁶⁹ 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.

⁷⁰ The release reportedly occurred in exchange for Turkey's release of 180 Islamic State detainees.

⁷¹ Murat Yetkin, "Turkey joins anti-ISIL coalition, opens Incirlik for logistics ops," *Hurriyet Daily News Online*, September 10, 2014.

⁷² 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.

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.⁷³ 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 Allies⁷⁴

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.⁷⁵ 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 capacity-building mission for Iraqi security forces.⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ As in the United States, other Western countries encounter more difficult legal and political questions in relation to military action inside Syria.

The Humanitarian Crisis in Iraq and Syria⁷⁸

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.⁷⁹

⁷³ 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.

⁷⁴ Prepared by Derek Mix, Analyst in European Affairs.

⁷⁵ Sam Jones, "NATO States to Form Military Coalition to Fight ISIS," *Financial Times*, September 5, 2014.

⁷⁶ Julian Hale, "NATO Weighs Training Mission to Iraq," *Defense News*, September 12, 2014.

⁷⁷ "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.

⁷⁸ Prepared by Rhoda Margesson, Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy, January 2015.

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 3.3 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 remain 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.⁸⁰ 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.

As of late October 2014, of the 2.1 million IDPs, an estimated 850,000 were seeking shelter in Iraq's Kurdistan region, mainly in Dohuk governorate, while increased movements to central and southern Iraq were straining the response capacities of host communities in these areas.⁸¹ 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.⁸² 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.⁸³

(...continued)

⁷⁹ 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.

⁸⁰ 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.)

⁸¹ 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.

⁸² Assessment Capacities Project, "Humanitarian Implications of Violence in Northern and Central Iraq," September 4, 2014.

⁸³ UNOCHA, "Iraq Crisis: Situation Report No. 18," October 25-31, 2014.

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, were in need of humanitarian assistance, of which more than 7.6 million were displaced inside the country.⁸⁴ In addition, more than 3.3 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 systematic atrocities and violations perpetrated by IS, particularly against the civilian populations in Aleppo, Ar Raqqa, Al Hassakah, and Dayr az Zawr governorates.⁸⁵

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, and 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

⁸⁴ UNOCHA, Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Valerie Amos, Security Council Briefing on Syria, November 25, 2014.

⁸⁵ Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, "Rule of Terror: Living Under ISIS in Syria," November 14, 2014

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.

The International and U.S. Humanitarian Response⁸⁶

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.⁸⁷ 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 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).⁸⁸ 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.⁸⁹ 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.

⁸⁶ Prepared by Rhoda Margesson, Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy, January 2015.

⁸⁷ 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.

⁸⁸ 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.

⁸⁹ 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.

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 December 19, 2014) is more than \$213.8 million, which includes U.S. airdrops in support of Iraqi humanitarian efforts.⁹⁰

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 2014.⁹¹ The U.N. Secretary-General issued a statement on August 7, 2014, condemning the attacks in Iraq and the impact on vulnerable minority communities.⁹² 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.⁹³ 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.⁹⁴

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. 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 January, together the appeals are 55% 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

⁹⁰ USAID, “Iraq—Complex Emergency,” Fact Sheet #3, Fiscal Year (FY) 2015, December 19, 2014.

⁹¹ UNOCHA, 2014/2015 Iraq Strategic Response Plan, October 2014.

⁹² United Nations, New York, “Statement Attributable to the Spokesman for the Secretary-General on Attacks on Yezidis and Other Minority Groups in Iraq,” August 7, 2014.

⁹³ U.N. Security Council, Press Statement on Iraq, SC/11515, IK/683, August 7, 2014.

⁹⁴ U.N. Security Council, Press Statement on Iraq, SC/11625, IK/694, October 31, 2014.

Islamic State control.⁹⁵ 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 December 12, 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), \$1 billion of which it planned to use in part "to meet identified regional needs for areas contending with refugees." However, it is not clear what portion of the RSI funding, if any, might have been used specifically for humanitarian responses rather than for broader stabilization purposes in host countries. Congress appropriated an additional \$1.01 billion in Migration and Refugee Assistance and an additional \$505 million in International Disaster Assistance above the President's budget request, and said in the explanatory statement accompanying the FY2015 appropriations act that "a significant portion" of the funds "should address growing humanitarian needs in the Middle East."

Policy Debates and Related Legislative Issues

Authority for Use of Military Force and the War Powers Resolution⁹⁶

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. 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.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Prepared by Matthew Weed, Analyst in Foreign Policy Legislation.

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

⁹⁸ 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.

- **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.⁹⁹ The President’s notifications to Congress of military operations against IS forces and the Khorasan Group of Al Qaeda both state that the 2001 AUMF authorizes such actions.¹⁰⁰ 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.¹⁰¹ 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 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.”¹⁰²

Some in Congress have questioned these assertions, and several Members of Congress introduced legislation in the 113th Congress that would have specifically addressed the President’s continued use of military force in this situation.¹⁰³ 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

⁹⁹ See White House, Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, September 11, 2014.

¹⁰⁰ 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>.

¹⁰¹ 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/>.

¹⁰² 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).

¹⁰³ For a comparison of these proposals, see CRS Report R43760, *A New Authorization for Use of Military Force Against the Islamic State: Comparison of Proposals in Brief*, by Matthew C. Weed.

“to right-size and update whatever authorization Congress provides to suit the current fight, rather than previous fights.”¹⁰⁴ On January 20, President Obama said in his State of the Union address, “I call on this Congress to show the world that we are united in this mission by passing a resolution to authorize the use of force against ISIL.” On February 11, President Obama submitted a proposed AUMF text for congressional consideration (see “President’s February 2015 IS AUMF Proposal” below).

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.

December 2014 Senate Foreign Relations Activities Related to AUMF

In December 2014, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee conducted a hearing and considered legislation concerning a new authorization for use of military force against the Islamic State. After Senator Rand Paul reportedly intended to propose an amendment to S. 2946 prior to the committee’s vote on that bill that would have declared a state of war between the United States and the Islamic State, the committee decided to consider an IS AUMF proposed by Committee Chairman Robert Menendez. Prior to the Committee’s markup of the proposal on December 11, the committee held a hearing on December 9 with Secretary of State John Kerry to discuss the Obama Administration’s views on enactment of a new IS AUMF.

Senator Menendez’s IS AUMF proposal, as amended and reported favorably out of committee on December 13 (S.J.Res. 47 (113th Cong.)), would have authorized 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 have prohibited “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 have repealed the 2002 AUMF and terminated the authorization in the 2001 AUMF three years after enactment of S.J.Res. 47. It stated 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 have terminated three years after enactment, “unless reauthorized.”

At the hearing, Secretary Kerry reiterated President Obama’s earlier-stated position that the Administration supports enactment of a new AUMF targeting the Islamic State, agreeing with the goal of providing specific and limited authority to conduct operations against this organization and its associated forces. The Secretary informed the committee that the Administration supports

¹⁰⁴ President Barack Obama, Press Conference, November 5, 2014.

the three-year sunset of the authorization contained in Senator Menendez's proposal, "subject to provisions for extension" of that authorization. He stated the Administration's view, however, that such authority "should give the President the clear mandate and flexibility he needs to successfully prosecute the armed conflict against [the Islamic State]...." The Administration, according to Secretary Kerry, therefore opposes inclusion of a limitation on the use of ground combat forces, and any geographic restriction limiting operations to Iraq and Syria. With regard to the definition of "associated persons or forces" in Senator Menendez's proposed IS AUMF, Secretary Kerry stated that the Administration would prefer the definition be based on those "fighting alongside" the Islamic State, rather than the current language, which he stated might require a determination of "ideological association or other kind of affiliation."¹⁰⁵

In an interview dated January 23, 2015, General Martin E. Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated that a new IS AUMF should not include a geographic limitation and that it should be crafted to keep all military options "on the table, and then we can debate whether we want to use them." In contrast to Secretary Kerry's statement of support for a sunset provision, General Dempsey said such a provision is not "necessary," stating, "I think the nation should speak of its intent to confront this radical ideological barbaric group and leave that open until we can deal with it."¹⁰⁶

New Authorization Proposals in the 114th Congress

Representative Adam Schiff announced on January 28, 2015 that he will introduce a new IS AUMF resolution, the provisions of which are similar in most respects to his proposal introduced late in the 113th Congress (H.J.Res. 125 (113th Cong.)). Pursuant to this proposal, the President would be authorized to use U.S. Armed Forces against the Islamic State, but limited solely to operations in Iraq and Syria, except for U.S. Armed Forces "engaged in training of indigenous Syrian or regional military forces for the purpose of combating" the Islamic State. The resolution states that the authorization does not include "deployment of ground forces in a combat role," except "special operations forces or other forces that may be deployed in a training, advisory, or intelligence capacity." The resolution would terminate the new authority provided by the resolution, as well as repeal the 2001 AUMF, three years after the resolution's enactment. The proposed resolution would repeal the 2002 immediately upon enactment.

Also on January 28, 2015, Representative Barbara Lee announced that she would introduce a bill that would repeal the 2001 and 2002 AUMFs and require the President to report to Congress on a "comprehensive strategy to degrade and dismantle ISIL," and provide "information on human rights vetting" of U.S.-supported actors in Iraq and Syria.

President's February 2015 IS AUMF Proposal

On February 11, 2015, the President provided Congress with a draft proposal for a new IS AUMF,¹⁰⁷ stating in an accompanying letter that he "can think of no better way for the Congress

¹⁰⁵ Testimony of Secretary of State John Kerry, U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Authorization For The Use of Military Force Against ISIL*, 113th Cong., 2nd sess., December 11, 2014.

¹⁰⁶ Lisa Ferdinando, *Dempsey: Keep All Options on Table for Use of Force Against ISIL*, Department of Defense, DoD News, Defense Media Activity, January 23, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128023>.

¹⁰⁷ Available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/aumf_02112015.pdf.

to join [the President] in supporting our Nation's security than by enacting this legislation, which would show the world we are united in our resolve to counter the threat posed by ISIL."¹⁰⁸ The President's proposal would authorize the use of U.S. Armed Forces that he deems "necessary and appropriate" against the Islamic State and associated persons or forces. In the proposed authorization, "the term 'associated persons or forces' means individuals and organizations fighting for, on behalf of, or alongside ISIL or any closely-related successor entity in hostilities against the United States or its coalition partners." The authorization does not include authority for the use of U.S. Armed Forces for "enduring offensive ground combat operations." The proposal's authorization would terminate three years after enactment, and contains a provision repealing the 2002 AUMF upon enactment. The President would be required to report to Congress at least every six months on actions taken under the proposed IS AUMF.

A number of aspects of the President's proposal could be considered and debated among Members of Congress. First, the President's proposal would prohibit "enduring offensive ground combat operations," instead of specifically prohibiting the use of ground combat forces, or execution of ground combat operations, with exceptions for certain types of units or operations, as some of the previous IS AUMF proposals have. It is not clear what that limitation would mean in practice, although the President's letter states that it is designed to allow the same excepted units and/or operations. Second, the President's proposal does not include any geographical limitation, possibly enabling the use of military force in countries other than Iraq and Syria. Third, the definition of "associated persons or forces," especially the inclusion of the phrase "fighting ... on behalf of ... ISIL," might be considered lacking in precision, leading to confusion in the future interpretation of what constitutes a lawfully targeted entity.

Fourth, the President's proposal, unlike many of the previous IS AUMF proposals, does not provide a purpose or objective for the use of U.S. Armed Forces against the Islamic State in the authorization language itself. This could lead to concerns that the authorization does not sufficiently direct the President's actions or provide a definition of victory, and therefore authorizes military operations without an endpoint. Fifth, although the President states in his letter that he still intends to engage Congress in reforming the 2001 AUMF, his proposal does not contain a provision that repeals or sunsets that measure, unlike most of the IS AUMF proposals previously introduced. Finally, the reporting requirement for is a basic periodic "actions taken" report, and is similar to certain reporting requirements already in place concerning deployed U.S. Armed Forces. This is in contrast to other IS AUMF proposals, which have required information concerning all targeted entities, specific reports on operations and effectiveness of those operations, and the budget effects of operations.

Issues Related to a New Authorization for the Use of Military Force

A number of concerns have arisen around provisions in proposals for a new IS AUMF from the 113th and the current Congresses. With regard to sunset provisions automatically terminating both an IS-specific authorization and the authorization in the 2001 AUMF after three years, some observers and Members have expressed concern that congressionally imposed time limitations send an undesirable signal about U.S. resolve and political will to the Islamic State, Al Qaeda and

¹⁰⁸ President Barack Obama, Letter from the President—Authorization for the Use of United States Armed Forces in connection with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, February 11, 2015. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/11/letter-president-authorization-use-united-states-armed-forces-connection>.

other terrorist groups targeted under the 2001 AUMF. Supporters of time limits argue that a sunset on authority to use military force could be utilized to ensure that the IS and 2001 AUMF authorizations are not interpreted to authorize the use of military force in perpetuity, and in a manner that some perceive as outside the scope and intent of the original authorizations. Given the Obama Administration's continuing reliance on that authorization to conduct the current campaign against the Islamic State, for example, 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. In any case, some argue, automatic terminations of authority might force Congress to reconsider previous AUMFs and their provisions in light of changed circumstances, amending and reauthorizing as Congress sees necessary.

In considering any proposals to limit the authority of an IS AUMF by prohibiting the use of ground forces or constraining operations to a certain geographic area, Congress is weighing competing interests. The limitation on the use of ground forces or prohibiting ground combat operations might, as some argue, significantly restrict the ability of the President and U.S. military leadership to prosecute conflict against the Islamic State in the manner they feel is most effective. Congress might consider such restriction acceptable, however, if it is determined to avoid the involvement of the U.S. Armed Forces in another large-scale ground conflict following so closely upon the end of two such conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A geographic limitation might hinder the President's ability to strike IS and associated forces in countries other than Iraq and Syria, despite these forces' proven ability to cross state borders when it suits their purposes. In addition, as more groups pledge to fight alongside the Islamic State in countries such as Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, it could be reasonably expected that the President would determine that U.S. military operations should expand outside Iraq and Syria in the future. Congress, however, might wish to include such a limitation to prevent a similar geographic expansion of military operations to the President's expansion under the 2001 AUMF's authority to several countries other than Afghanistan.

It can be argued that even if such limitations appear later to have a deleterious effect on the U.S. campaign against the Islamic State, either limitation could be removed or modified through subsequent legislative action if the need arises. Such limitations and an overall lack of flexibility in any IS AUMF, however, might be difficult to change legislatively if Members of Congress cannot agree to changes; neither the 2001 nor 2002 AUMF has been amended, for example, despite the stated need for amendments by observers and Members over the lifespan of those two measures.

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 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. 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 and other Arab countries as serving the interests of Iran, further empowering Shiite elements in Iraq, or putting military personnel at unnecessary risk. 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 Assad regime and its supporters (Iran, Hezbollah, Russia).

The capture and murder of Jordanian pilot Lt. Moath al Kasasbeh by the Islamic State in Syria has had tangible effects on coalition operations, with the United Arab Emirates reportedly suspending participation in air strike operations until changes are made in coalition combat search and rescue capabilities. The brutality of IS tactics may deepen the resolve of some regional governments and citizens to support the coalition but may also attract new recruits seeking to support the Islamic State. As of February 3, 2015, coalition partners had carried out approximately 19% of air strikes (427 of 2247 total strikes) against Islamic State targets since August 2014.¹⁰⁹

Next Steps in Iraq

Even though the ISF and *peshmerga* have made some progress in recent months, those gains are in jeopardy and further successes are fraught with obstacles and difficulties. The reported intent of the U.S. training program is to prepare the ISF to go on the offensive against Islamic State strongholds in Iraq as early as the spring of 2015. However, U.S. officials stress that the counter-offensive is being planned by Iraqi forces and will be carried out on the Iraqis' timetable.¹¹⁰ A key objective of any such offensive is the city of Mosul, and U.S. commanders assert that recapturing a city that large, where IS forces are entrenched, will require a major effort. Chief of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Dempsey has said that an offensive on Mosul is one possible operation for which he might recommend to President Obama that U.S. advisers accompany ISF commanders near the front lines. President Obama has not commented on whether he would approve such a recommendation.

¹⁰⁹ Micah Zenko, "UAE Shows the Air War against ISIS Is Almost Entirely on America's Shoulders," *Defense One*, Feb. 4, 2015.

¹¹⁰ Michael Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "Iraqis Prepare ISIS Offensive, With U.S. Help," *New York Times*, November 3, 2014.

The political situation in Iraq also remains unsettled. Despite some of the compromises made by Prime Minister Haydar al Abbadi with the Sunni community, Iraq's Sunnis still appear unwilling 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). Winning Sunni trust may depend largely on whether Prime Minister Abbadi 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.

Sunni communities remain suspicious of Shiite militia groups and the ISF, which is dominated by Shiite Muslims, seeing them to some extent as an occupation force. U.S. strategy presumes that having Sunni forces secure Sunni communities would ease this sectarian-based suspicion. As such, Iraq's Sunnis may place increased scrutiny on whether Abbadi is willing to rein in the Shiite militia groups that have played a significant role in assisting recent ISF gains. Specifically, Sunnis may be looking for indications that Abbadi will forcefully respond to reports that Shiite militia are carrying out extrajudicial killings, such as the killings of more than 70 people in the village of Barwanah in late January 2015. Abbadi condemned the Barwanah killings and reportedly said, "Those who commit killings and aggressions on sanctities, set fire to people's homes and assault their souls and properties in areas liberated from Daesh [ISIL]—those (acts) are no less dangerous than terrorism."

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. As noted above, Abbadi's cabinet has approved draft legislation providing for the recruitment of national guard forces. Legislative consideration of that proposal and the terms of its potential implementation remain to be determined.

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.¹¹¹ Some Syrian political and military opposition forces appear to resent such a narrow focus and some have indicated that 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.

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

¹¹¹ 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.

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. At the same time, 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 Syrian 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. How Asad's departure would immediately change the fortunes of the Islamic State in Syria is less certain. 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 be prioritizing the underlying conflict in Syria. Rather, it 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 weaken the Islamic State to the extent that it forces the group to abandon strategic, lucrative territory that it controls in Iraq. Coalition strikes and U.S.-backed partner forces may also deprive the group of some important Iraq-based leaders and fighters and some of the powerful military equipment it has captured there. However, the "Iraq first" approach may also could so alienate potential Syrian partners that when the United States decides to give priority to the stabilization of Syria it will find itself facing a more skeptical populace. Anti-IS actions in Syria also may create opportunities for other Syria-based Islamist groups and/or empower the Syrian government at the expense of other elements of the Syrian opposition.

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 Maliki¹¹² and helped

¹¹² Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Iran Dramatically Shifts Iraq Policy to Confront Islamic State," Reuters, September 2, (continued...)

compel him to yield power in favor of Haydar 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.¹¹³ 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.¹¹⁴

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 U.S.-led coalition. Iranian pilots apparently also are flying the aircraft: in July 2014 Iran announced that one of its pilots had died in operations in Iraq.¹¹⁵ 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-Quds 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.

FY2016 Budget Requests for Foreign Operations and Defense

On February 2, 2015, the Obama Administration released its preliminary FY2016 budget requests for foreign operations and defense. The Administration is seeking funding to continue the current lines of effort in response to the Islamic State threat, as well as to respond to the challenges posed by the broader conflicts and regional displacements related to Syria and Iraq. Select specific requests include:

- **Iraq and Syria Train and Equip Programs**—The Department of Defense is requesting \$715 million and \$600 million for train and equip programs for Iraqis and Syrians respectively. These requests would fund continuation of programs initiated under authorities and funds first provided in FY2015 Defense authorization and appropriations bills. The monies would be drawn from FY2016 Department of the Army Operations and Maintenance

(...continued)

2014.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Michael Singh. "What Obama's Letter to Khamenei Says About U.S. Policy Toward Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, November 10, 2014.

¹¹⁵ "Iran News Agency Reports Death of Iranian Pilot in Iraq," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, July 5, 2014.

Overseas Contingency Operations (O&M-OCO) funding. The Administration also seeks \$250 million in Foreign Military Financing for Iraq.

- Continued Support to Syrian Opposition Groups**—The State Department is requesting \$65 million in Peacekeeping Operations-OCO (PKO-OCO) funding to provide nonlethal support to vetted, moderate armed opposition groups “to bolster their capacity, cohesion, and credibility” and “to strengthen linkages between armed and civilian actors.” The Administration also is requesting \$160 million in Economic Support Fund-OCO (ESF-OCO) funding to provide nonlethal assistance to other opposition groups and \$10 million in International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE-OCO) funding for justice sector support in opposition-held areas.
- Iraq and Syria-Related Humanitarian Funding**—The Administration is requesting \$1.629 billion in Migration and Refugee Assistance-OCO (MRA-OCO) and International Disaster Assistance-OCO (IDA-OCO) funding to support continuing U.S. contributions to humanitarian relief and host-country support programs related to Syrian and Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons.
- Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF)**—The Administration requests FY2016 CTPF funds to address terrorist safe havens, including in Iraq and Syria; to mitigate foreign fighter flows; and to counter Iranian support for terrorism, including its support for militia forces in Lebanon and Iraq.

Table I. Select Iraq/Syria Related FY2016 Budget Requests for Foreign Operations and Defense
(\$ in millions)

Program/Account	Iraq	Syria	Jordan	Regional	Totals
Train and Equip Programs (DoD)	715	600			1315
INCLE-OCO	11	10			21
PKO-OCO		65			65
FMF-OCO	250		50		300
ESF-OCO	50	160	277.4		487.4
MRA-OCO				819	819
IDA-OCO				810	810
Totals	1026	835	327.4	1629	3817.4
Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF)					
CTPF-State				390	
CTPF-DoD				2100	2490

Sources: FY2016 Congressional Budget Justifications for Defense Operations and Maintenance Funds and State Department Foreign Operations, February 2015.

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