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

**Christopher M. Blanchard**

Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

**Carla E. Humud**

Analyst in Middle Eastern and African Affairs

**Kenneth Katzman**

Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

**Matthew C. Weed**

Analyst in Foreign Policy Legislation

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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 attempts to make further gains 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 Iraqi security forces, Kurds, and Shiite militia forces might be able to seriously degrade the Islamic State in Iraq with existing levels of coalition help, but questions remain over whether operations by these forces and post-conflict settlements will create conditions leading to the group's lasting defeat. The ground-based component of U.S. strategy in Syria is far more uncertain. 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 113<sup>th</sup> 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 114<sup>th</sup> 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, Security, and U.S. Policy*, 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."<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> According to U.S. officials, approximately 180 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.

In February 2015 congressional testimony, U.S. Director for National Intelligence James Clapper reconfirmed the intelligence community's estimate that the Islamic State can muster "somewhere in the range between 20 and 32,000 fighters" but noted that there has been "substantial attrition" and the group has been turning to conscription in some areas. 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, and U.S. officials have stated that uncertainty about casualty-to-replacement ratios for the Islamic State may persist until new information about IS recruiting and conscription, as well as flows of foreign fighters to the conflict zone, can be more fully reconciled with intelligence about ongoing battlefield attrition.

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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."

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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 Asad government, although some sources allege that operatives for the Islamic State and its antecedents have benefitted from evolving financial and security arrangements with Damascus that 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup> English language statements released in connection with the 2014 executions of U.S. citizens suggest the group seeks 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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup>

### 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). Zarqawi took advantage of Sunni animosity toward U.S. forces and feelings of Sunni disenfranchisement at the hands of Shiites and Kurds to carry out a uniquely sectarian agenda that differed from Al Qaeda’s in important ways. 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) and Taha Subhi Falaha (aka Abu Mohammed al Adnani)—both former U.S. detainees—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 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. Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri sought to remind IS leaders of previous pledges of loyalty to Al Qaeda made by deceased IS figures, but IS leaders rejected his claims, and Al Qaeda’s general command issued a statement disavowing the Islamic State in early 2014. Islamic State leaders declared that their group “is not and has never been an offshoot of Al Qaeda,”<sup>7</sup> and said, given that they view themselves as a sovereign political entity, they have given leaders of the Al Qaeda organization deference rather than pledges of obedience. For an overview timeline, see **Figure 3** below.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Government Open Source Center (OSC) Report GMP20120721586002, “Islamic State of Iraq Amir Calls on Sunni Tribes to ‘Repent,’” July 21, 2012.

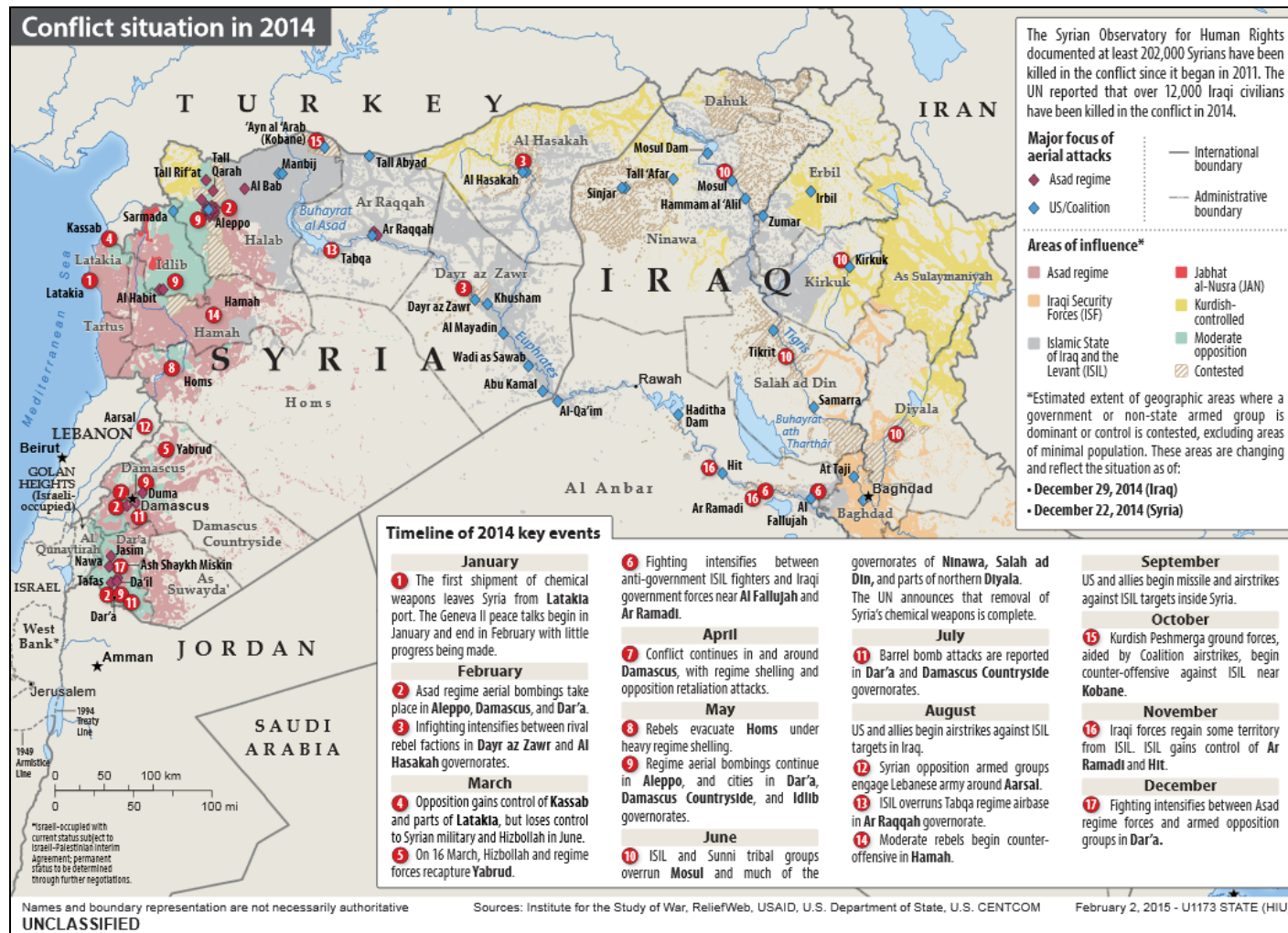
<sup>4</sup> OSC Report TRR2014011980831299, “Al-Furqan Establishment Releases Audio Statement by ISIL Emir Condemning ‘War’ Against Group,” translated from *Al Minbar al I’lami Jihadist Forum*, January 19, 2014.

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

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

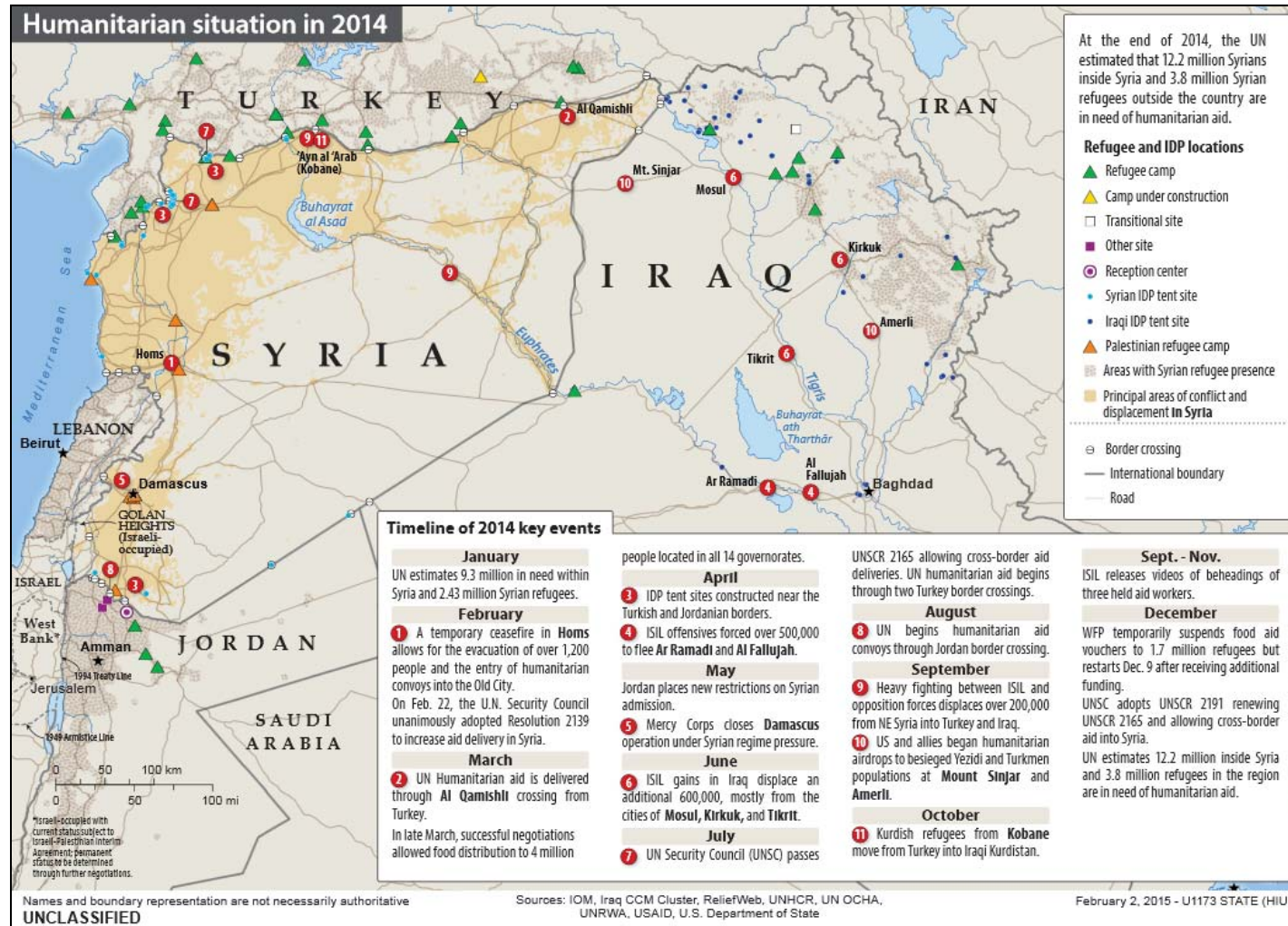
<sup>7</sup> OSC Report TRN2014051234500562, “Al-Furqan Releases ISIL Al-Adnani’s Message Criticizing Al-Zawahiri, Refusing to Leave Syria,” Twitter, May 11-12, 2014.

**Figure I. Syria and Iraq: Conflict and Crisis Map**



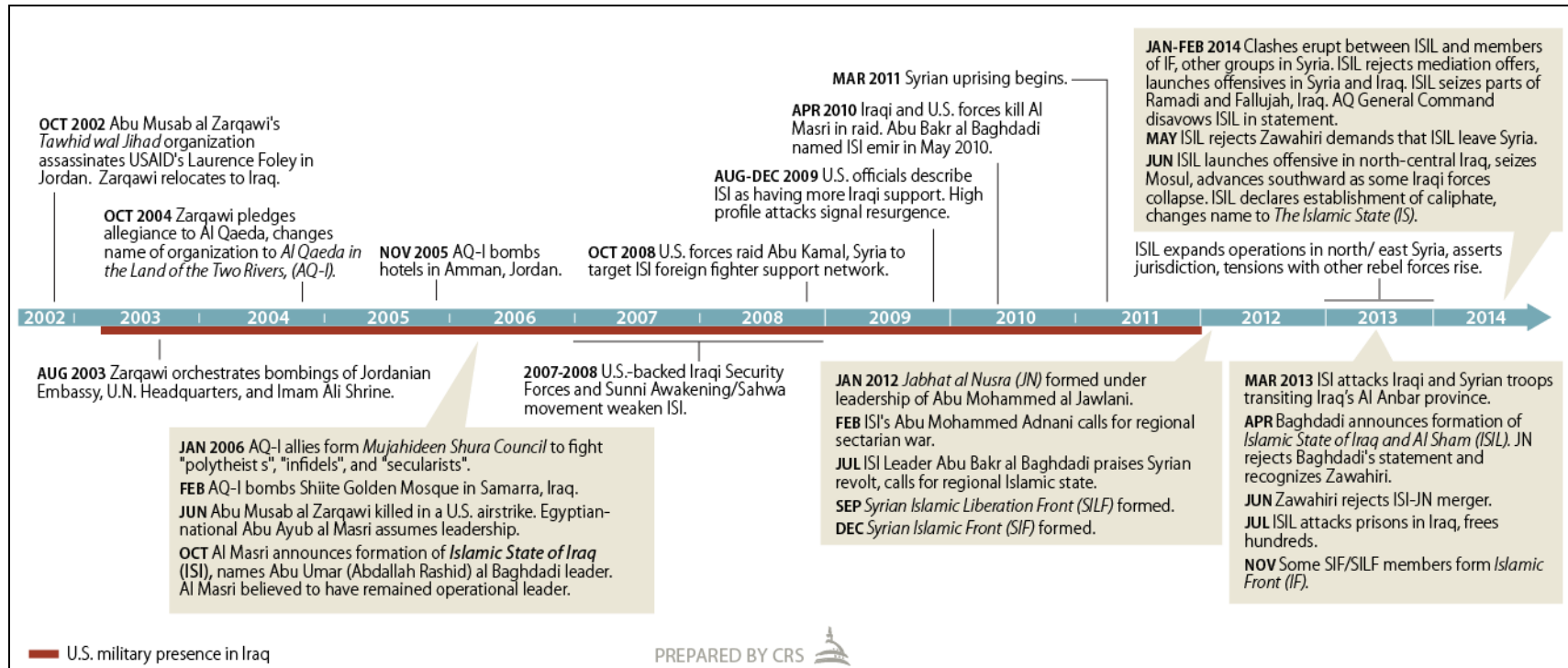
**Source:** U.S. State Department, Humanitarian Information Unit, Syria Conflict Without Borders: 2014 in Review, February 2, 2015.

**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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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 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.<sup>11</sup> Islamic State-led fighters 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.<sup>12</sup>

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 and a favorable demographic balance in Baghdad, 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> However,

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Knights in "Iraq's Dire Situation," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 17, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Tim Arango, "Uneasy Alliance Gives Insurgents an Edge in Iraq," *New York Times*, June 19, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> "Unlikely Allies Aid Militants in Iraq," *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Mitchell Prothero, "Iraqi Army Remains on Defensive as Extent of June Debacle Becomes Clearer," McLatchey Wire Service, July 14, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Alissa Rubin, "ISIS Expels Last Iraqi Christians from Mosul," *New York Times*, July 19, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Author conversations with expert on the Iraqi Kurds, June-August 2014.

<sup>14</sup> 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.

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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.

## Conflict Developments in Iraq

Recent U.S. assessments of the 62-country coalition's campaign against the Islamic State organization in Iraq suggest that U.S. officials believe that air strikes and Iraqi and Kurdish ground operations have begun to reverse IS gains. U.S. officials assert that operations have to date killed more than half of the group's Iraq-based leadership.<sup>18</sup> Key developments since February 2015 include:

- **Shiite Militias and Iraqi Security Forces Encircle Tikrit.** Iraqi officials report that a 30,000 man siege force of Shiite militia and regular military troops has achieved some success in an operation to retake the predominantly Sunni town of Tikrit from IS forces. Tikrit lies on the Tigris River in Salahuddin Province northwest of Baghdad. According to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey, the force is comprised of one-third Iraqi Security Forces (5<sup>th</sup> Division) and two-thirds militiamen. Press reports suggest that Iranian advisors are present and that U.S.-designated terrorist organization Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al Haq are playing leading roles in the operation alongside other Shiite militia forces, which Iraqi officials refer to as "popular mobilization" forces. As of March 11, some suburbs north, east, and south of the city had been retaken and Iraqi sources indicated that pro-government forces had taken parts of Tikrit city itself and that IS fighters

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(...continued)

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

<sup>15</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, "Who Are the Yazidis?" *Washington Post*, August 7, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> UNAMI, Public Information Office, "UN Gravely Concerned About Situation in Northern Iraq; Calls for Urgent Response," August 7, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Testimony of Gen. (retired) John Allen before Senate Foreign Relations Committee, February 25, 2015.

might be leaving the city. On March 3, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter and General Dempsey told the Senate Armed Services Committee that Iraq did not request U.S. support for the operation in Tikrit. They also noted some Iraqi Sunni support for the operation, and said the Administration was watching the offensive closely for signs of overt sectarianism or human rights violations.

- **International Attention to Iran's Role in Iraq Intensifies.** Iran has launched airstrikes on Islamic State positions in eastern Iraq. 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. Senior Obama Administration officials have suggested that Iranian support for Iraqis may be positive insofar as it helps reduce the amount of territory held by IS forces, but also have expressed concern that a resurgence of Iraqi sectarianism and a reliance on irregular forces by leaders in Baghdad could undermine overall U.S. goals for Iraq. Iraqi officials appear to have mixed opinions on Iran's role, while regional observers (particularly Arab Sunnis) have been more outspoken in criticism. For example, on March 5, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al Faisal said during a press availability with Secretary of State John Kerry that "the situation in Tikrit is a prime example of what we're worried about. Iran is taking over the country."
- **IS Casualties Reported; Iraqi and Iraqi Kurdish Forces Advance in North and West.** According to the Department of Defense, several hundred IS personnel have died in coalition airstrikes and Iraqi ground assaults, and "hundreds and hundreds" of vehicles, artillery positions, and checkpoints have been destroyed.<sup>19</sup> U.S. and coalition airstrikes have facilitated Kurdish *peshmerga* efforts to retake areas in the northwestern Sinjar region, and enabled some peshmerga units to advance to within 10 miles of Mosul. As of early March, fighting continued around the town of Sinjar and the highway linking the region west of Mosul to the Syrian border. Iraqi forces retook the Anbar Province town of Al Baghdadi and some surrounding villages from IS forces in early March. The area is close to Al Asad Air base where U.S. military personnel are training members of the ISF's 7<sup>th</sup> Division; the base has come under limited attack by IS forces.
- **IS Forces Appear on the Defensive; Potential for Offensives Remains.** U.S. military personnel have warned that the potential for new IS offensives remains, and fighting involving IS forces is ongoing in many areas of northern and western Iraq. The ISF recaptured the town of Bayji north of Tikrit in late 2014, but subsequently lost it to the Islamic State, suggesting that ISF gains may not necessarily be lasting. Apparent IS losses in Tikrit in March have been paired, for example, with new IS assaults on the Anbar provincial capital of Ramadi. Holding recaptured territory while pressing further into areas held by IS forces may prove challenging, particularly if predominantly Sunni communities oppose the presence and actions of Shiite-led Iraqi security forces or militia groups. 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.

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

## 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.<sup>20</sup>

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. 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 gave 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.

Abbadi has taken some steps as Prime Minister to repair relations with Iraq's Sunnis and with the autonomous KRG. However, the continued government reliance on Shiite militias—coupled with Islamic State intimidation of Iraqi Sunni tribes and urban residents—has undoubtedly contributed to a failure to spark a broad Sunni rebellion against the Islamic State to date.

## 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.<sup>21</sup> 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

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

<sup>21</sup> "Syria War Fueling Attacks by al Qaeda in Iraq, Officials Say," *New York Times*, August 15, 2013.

areas under its control.<sup>22</sup> 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 operates north of Dayr az Zawr in Al Hasakah province, and has sought to maintain its connection to Iraq's Nineveh province, which the group apparently exploited 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 personnel, vehicles, and facilities continue in areas of northern and eastern Syria. However, as in Iraq, the IS forces largely retain their key strongholds.

## **Conflict Developments in Syria**

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. U.S. Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper told Congress on February 26 that "The regime has a clear advantage over the opposition, which is plagued by disunity as well as firepower, manpower and logistical shortfalls. Right now, they're incapable of militarily ousting Assad and will probably remain so in 2015."<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, 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. objectives, and some observers voice strong views for or against an expansion of U.S. 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.

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<sup>22</sup> "Sunni Fighters Gain as They Battle 2 Governments, and Other Rebels," *New York Times*, June 11, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Testimony of DNI James Clapper before the Senate Armed Services Committee, February 26, 2015.

Key developments in Syria since February 2015 include the following.

- **Jabhat al Nusra Routs Opponents, Denies Rift with Al Qaeda, Reportedly Suffers Leadership Blow.** Fighting between the Al Qaeda-linked U.S.-designated terrorist organization Jabhat al Nusra (JN) and the relatively moderate opposition group Harakat Hazm (Steadfastness Movement) culminated in Hazm's defeat and disbandment in early March. Conflict between the groups escalated after Hazm forces reportedly executed a JN commander and other personnel. Hazm's disbandment marked JN's second defeat of an armed opposition group that reportedly had received U.S. weaponry from unknown parties. Hazm forces were widely known for operating U.S.-origin anti-tank guided missile systems prior to their defeat. JN forces seized bases and weapon depots belonging to Hazm west of Aleppo, and some Hazm members reportedly defected to Jabhat al Nusrah or joined other armed groups, including Jabhat al Shamiya (Levant Front), an Islamist coalition. Press reports claim JN military commander Abu Hammam al Shami was injured in an explosion in Idlib province, but the group has denied the reports. Rumors and speculation continue regarding reported splits within the group and its future. One JN source released a statement in March denying any intention to revise the group's relationship with Al Qaeda or to seek the official backing of Qatar or any other Arab Gulf State.
- **Kurdish Fighters Advance beyond Kobane to Banks of Euphrates River.** 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.<sup>24</sup> Kurdish forces have pushed southward and westward to the banks of the Euphrates River, forcing IS personnel to retreat to strongholds across the river northeast of Aleppo. On March 6, pro-Kurdish sources reported that retreating IS fighters had destroyed the bridge spanning the Euphrates River near Jarabalus on the IS-controlled west bank to the PYD-controlled east bank just south of the Turkish border.
- **Fighting with the Islamic State Intensifies in Al Hasakah, IS Forces Seize Assyrian Christians.** Kurdish and Syrian government forces continue to clash with IS militants in the eastern border province of Al Hasakah.<sup>25</sup> IS forces seized more than 250 Assyrian Christian civilians northwest of Hasakah city in late February and have released around 20 following negotiations so far. As of March 8, IS forces reportedly were seeking to advance on Tal Hamees northeast of Hasakah city near the Iraqi border and on Tal Tamr northwest of the city.
- **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.<sup>26</sup> 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 in the south from Jabhat al Nusrah. Social media reports in March suggested that IS forces had seized small areas 30 miles east of Homs and at least one

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<sup>24</sup> OSC Report IML2015012330825913, January 23, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> OSC Report IMN2015012234427747, January 22, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> "The Islamic State Eyes Expansion in Damascus," Institute for the Study of War, January 21, 2015.

town in the Damascus suburbs. Some reports suggest IS has sent emissaries to the southern province of Suwayda but has not yet established a lasting presence there.

- **Pro-Regime Forces Continue Offensive Operations Southwest of Damascus.** Hezbollah fighters and Iranian advisers reportedly were supporting a Syrian government offensive to recapture areas in Rif Damascus, Dara'a and Quneitra Provinces southwest of the capital. Thousands of pro-regime fighters backed by government airstrikes recaptured some villages and hilltops in February 2015, blunting momentum that had been enjoyed by opposition fighters in the region through much of late 2014.

## 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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,<sup>29</sup> 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."<sup>30</sup>

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 Asad regime, which he has said "terrorizes its own people" and "will never regain the legitimacy it has lost."<sup>31</sup> In January 2015, President Asad said in an interview that he was

<sup>27</sup> White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Statement by the President on ISIL," September 10, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> 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.

<sup>29</sup> 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.

<sup>30</sup> Remarks by President Obama After Meeting with Chiefs of Defense, Joint Base Andrews, October 14, 2014.

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

open to cooperation with coalition forces but suggested that Syria had not granted “permission” for the ongoing coalition military strikes in Syria.<sup>32</sup> 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. The Department of the Treasury’s Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence 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. Administration officials have identified areas where they argue progress has been made in implementing U.S. strategy to date,<sup>33</sup> 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.”<sup>34</sup> Administration officials are careful to underscore the contingent nature of success achieved to date. U.S. officials suggest that the biggest threat to sustainable success in the anti-IS campaign may be the potential for renewed intensification of sectarian tension in Iraq.

In recent congressional testimony, U.S. civilian and military leaders have described the Islamic State organization as having assumed a defensive posture in Iraq and Syria in response to counteroffensives by coalition and local forces. On March 3, General Austin described the group as “losing this fight” and reported that anti-IS operations had killed more than 8,500 fighters, destroyed hundreds of vehicles and heavy weapons systems, and significantly degraded IS command and control capabilities.<sup>35</sup> In parallel, U.S. Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper told Congress on February 26 that the Islamic State organization remains “a formidable and brutal threat” and “is increasing its influence outside of Iraq and Syria, seeking to

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<sup>32</sup> *Reuters*, “Assad seeks agreement over U.S. air strikes in Syria,” January 26, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> 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.

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

<sup>35</sup> Testimony of US CENTCOM Commander General Lloyd Austin before the House Armed Services Committee, March 3, 2015.

expand its self-declared caliphate into the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa and South Asia and planning terrorist attacks against Western and Shia interests.”<sup>36</sup>

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 close to 3,000 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,” which has reportedly engaged in preparations for transnational terrorist attacks.<sup>37</sup>

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.<sup>38</sup> 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

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<sup>36</sup> Testimony of DNI James Clapper before the Senate Armed Services Committee, February 26, 2015.

<sup>37</sup> 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 northwestern Syria. The group is primarily focused on transnational terrorist attack plotting. Coalition airstrikes in Syria probably killed a number of senior al-Nusrah 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.

<sup>38</sup> 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.

securing U.S. personnel and facilities.<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> On December 18, Lieutenant 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.<sup>41</sup>

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.<sup>42</sup> The definition of "capable," according to U.S. officials, includes whether an ISF unit integrates both Sunni and Shiite personnel. Some private assessments by nongovernment observers argue that even fewer ISF units are capable of reversing the Islamic State gains, and underscore the continuing role of Shiite militia groups in defending Iraqi-government held-territory and conducting offensive operations against IS forces.

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 is not 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 the 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:

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<sup>39</sup> 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.

<sup>40</sup> In December 2014, the Department of Defense authorized the deployment of 1,000 members of the Third Brigade Combat Team, 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division from Fort Bragg, NC, along with 300 enabling personnel drawn from various Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps units.<sup>40</sup> 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.

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

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

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 have begun providing training to smaller Iraqi military and Kurdish *peshmerga* units. Training is expected to continue over a period of about 8 to 10 months. The training is taking place at military facilities in Baghdad, Irbil, Taji (north of Baghdad) and Al Asad in Anbar Province, as well as additional training sites in and south of Baghdad.

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.<sup>43</sup>

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."<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup>

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

<sup>43</sup> Gen. Dempsey told the House Armed Services Committee on November 13, "I'm not predicting, at this point, that I would recommend that those [Iraqi] forces in Mosul and along the border would need to be accompanied by U.S. forces, but we're certainly considering it."

<sup>44</sup> 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.

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

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 M1151A1 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.<sup>46</sup> A number of European countries, such as the United Kingdom, 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*.<sup>47</sup>

On December 2, the KRG and Baghdad signed a partial reconciliation agreement under which the KRG would provide up to 550,000 barrels<sup>48</sup> 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).<sup>49</sup> 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*.<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup> 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.

<sup>46</sup> 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.

<sup>47</sup> The *peshmerga*, with U.S. assistance, have retransferred some weapons and ammunition to Syrian Kurdish forces battling Islamic State fighters in Syria. U.S. Central Command news release. "U.S. Resupplies Kurdish Forces Fighting ISIL Near Kobani." October 20, 2014.

<sup>48</sup> 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.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

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

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

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 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).<sup>52</sup> According to Kirby, U.S. officials are now engaging with different Syrian groups in order to identify potential recruits for the program; as of early March, they had identified as many as 1,500 planned participants and vetted 100 of them. 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 three-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.

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<sup>52</sup> 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.

## 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.<sup>53</sup>

**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 and 2199 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.<sup>54</sup>

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 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 \$1 million a day to several million dollars a week.<sup>55</sup> 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.<sup>56</sup> 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.<sup>57</sup>

**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.<sup>58</sup> To date, few

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

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

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

<sup>56</sup> Remarks by Secretary of State John Kerry at a joint press conference with U.K. Foreign Secretary Hammond and Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi, January 22, 2015.

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

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

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.<sup>59</sup>

## **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.<sup>60</sup> 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.”<sup>61</sup>

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.”<sup>62</sup> 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.”<sup>63</sup> 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. As noted above, anti-IS operations have killed thousands of IS personnel since August 2014, including an unknown number of foreign fighters.

The U.S. government has supported the adoption of several U.N. Security Council Resolutions to strengthen international sanctions and halt flows of foreign fighters and financing to the Islamic State, Jabhat al Nusra, and Al Qaeda-affiliated entities. Resolution 2170 (August 2014) calls upon all Member States “to take national measures to suppress the flow of foreign terrorist fighters to,

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

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

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

<sup>62</sup> 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.”

<sup>63</sup> 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.

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.

Resolution 2178 (September 2014) 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 Bradkte 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.”<sup>64</sup>

Resolution 2199 (February 2015) condemns engagement in direct or indirect trade, particularly in oil and oil products, “with ISIL, ANF, and any other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities designated as associated with Al Qaeda.” The resolution reaffirms several requirements to restrict flows of arms, combat financing, and prevent trade in Syrian and Iraqi cultural property. The resolution also establishes a reporting mechanism on international implementation of existing related resolutions.

## **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.

The State Department lists more than 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.

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.<sup>65</sup> Relations between Iraq’s government and the Sunni Arab Gulf states have been consistently strained in the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> 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.

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, the United Kingdom, 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."<sup>66</sup> To date, the Administration has sought—and received—a range of support from international partners, including participation in the air campaign against IS forces, financial support, assistance for Iraqi government and Iraqi Kurdish forces, offers of support for efforts to arm and train vetted Syrians, increased intelligence sharing, and actions to curb foreign fighter and financial flows.<sup>67</sup>

**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.<sup>68</sup> NATO previously conducted a military training mission in Iraq from

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<sup>66</sup> As of December 3, coalition members attending a joint strategy meeting included: Republic of Albania, Hungary, Sultanate of Oman, Australia, Republic of Iceland, Republic of Poland, Republic of Austria, Republic of Iraq, Portuguese Republic, Kingdom of Bahrain, Ireland, State of Qatar, Belgium, Italian Republic, Republic of Korea, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Japan, Romania, Republic of Bulgaria, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Canada, Republic of Kosovo, Republic of Serbia, Republic of Croatia, State of Kuwait, Republic of Singapore, Republic of Cyprus, Republic of Latvia, Slovak Republic, Czech Republic, Republic of Lebanon, Republic of Slovenia, Denmark, Republic of Lithuania, Federal Government of Somalia, Arab Republic of Egypt, Luxembourg, Spain, Republic of Estonia, Macedonia, Sweden, European Union, Moldova, Taiwan, Republic of Finland, Montenegro, Republic of Turkey, French Republic, Morocco, United Arab Emirates, Georgia, Kingdom of the Netherlands, Ukraine, Federal Republic of Germany, New Zealand, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Hellenic Republic (Greece), Norway, and the United States of America.

<sup>67</sup> 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.

<sup>68</sup> 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.

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, the United Kingdom, 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 hostages<sup>69</sup> 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.<sup>70</sup> 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.<sup>71</sup>

**Russia, China, Iran, and Asad.** U.N. Security Council permanent members Russia and China are not members of the coalition, but Russia has pledged its support for counterterrorism efforts in Syria, while arguing that coalition members should include the Asad government in their efforts. The coalition includes several countries that have cooperated with the United States in joint efforts to support the Syrian people and Syrian opposition movements during the evolving civil conflict, underscoring the challenges of forging a common set of objectives between coalition members and backers of Asad.<sup>72</sup> 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 Allies<sup>73</sup>

On the sidelines of NATO's Wales Summit, held on September 4-5, the United States and United Kingdom (U.K.) co-chaired a discussion on the Islamic State. NATO member countries France, Germany, Canada, Turkey, Italy, Poland, and Denmark, and observer state Australia, reportedly

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<sup>69</sup> The release reportedly occurred in exchange for Turkey's release of 180 Islamic State detainees.

<sup>70</sup> Murat Yetkin, "Turkey joins anti-ISIL coalition, opens Incirlik for logistics ops," *Hurriyet Daily News* Online, September 10, 2014.

<sup>71</sup> 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.

<sup>72</sup> 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.

<sup>73</sup> Prepared by Derek Mix, Analyst in European Affairs.

joined the United States and U.K. in agreeing to coordinate efforts to fight the group.<sup>74</sup> 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.<sup>75</sup> 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 U.K. have been providing weapons to Kurdish forces in Iraq, as well as non-lethal equipment and humanitarian aid.<sup>76</sup> As in the United States, other Western countries encounter more difficult legal and political questions in relation to military action inside Syria.

## Policy Debates and Related Legislative Issues

### Presidential Authority to Use Military Force against the Islamic State<sup>77</sup>

The President in his August 2014 notifications to Congress of deployments and airstrikes in Iraq indicated his powers as Commander in Chief and Chief Executive under Article II of the Constitution gave him authority to undertake such action. Obama Administration officials and the President's September 2014 notifications<sup>78</sup> to Congress for airstrikes and other actions in Iraq and Syria, however, stated that two enacted authorizations for use of military force (AUMFs), the Authorization for Use of Military Force ("2001 AUMF"; P.L. 107-40), and the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002 ("2002 AUMF"; P.L. 107-243), provide authorization for certain U.S. military strikes against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, as well as the Khorasan Group of Al Qaeda in Syria. After these notifications, however, the President indicated on November 5, 2014 that he intended to enter into discussions with congressional leaders to develop a new AUMF specifically targeting the Islamic State, in order to "right-size and update whatever authorization Congress provides to suit the current fight, rather than

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<sup>74</sup> Sam Jones, "NATO States to Form Military Coalition to Fight ISIS," *Financial Times*, September 5, 2014.

<sup>75</sup> Julian Hale, "NATO Weighs Training Mission to Iraq," *Defense News*, September 12, 2014.

<sup>76</sup> "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 U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, "Iraq: UK Government Response," September 13, 2014.

<sup>77</sup> Prepared by Matthew Weed, Analyst in Foreign Policy Legislation, ext. 7-4589.

<sup>78</sup> Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/23/letter-president-war-powers-resolution-regarding-iraq>; <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/23/letter-president-war-powers-resolution-regarding-syria>.

previous fights” authorized by the 2001 and 2002 AUMFs.<sup>79</sup> The President called on Congress to enact a new AUMF targeting the Islamic State in his January 2015 State of the Union address, and transmitted a draft AUMF to Congress on February 11, 2015. Both houses are expected to take up consideration of a new AUMF in the near term.

## **2001 Post-9/11 Authorization for Use of Military Force**

In response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Congress enacted the AUMF authorizing the President to use military force against “those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons....” Although the Islamic State does not appear to fall within that language, it is possible that the executive branch regards it as one of the “associated forces” fighting alongside Al Qaeda and the Taliban that it asserts are also targetable under the 2001 AUMF.<sup>80</sup> The Obama Administration had stated previous to the latest action against the Islamic State and the Khorasan Group that it will use force against such associated forces under the 2001 AUMF only when they are lawful military targets that “pose a continuing, imminent threat to U.S. persons....” Due to Al Qaeda’s February 2014 disavowal of any remaining ties with the Islamic State, some question whether the Islamic State can be considered part of Al Qaeda or an associated force under the 2001 AUMF. The Obama Administration has stated that the Islamic State can be targeted under the 2001 AUMF because its predecessor organization, Al Qaeda in Iraq, communicated and coordinated with Al Qaeda; the Islamic State currently has ties with Al Qaeda fighter and operatives; the Islamic State employs tactics similar to Al Qaeda; and the Islamic State, with its intentions of creating a new Islamic caliphate, is the “true inheritor of Osama bin Laden’s legacy.”<sup>81</sup>

## **2002 Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq**

Congress enacted the 2002 AUMF prior to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq that toppled the government of Saddam Hussein, with U.S. military deployments to and operations in Iraq continuing until December 2011. The 2002 AUMF authorizes the President to use U.S. Armed Forces to enforce relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions and to “defend the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq....” Although the 2002 AUMF has no sunset provision and Congress has not repealed it, one view is that after the establishment of a new Iraqi government, the restoration of full Iraqi sovereignty, and the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, the 2002 AUMF no longer has force. Obama Administration officials have recently voiced support for repealing the 2002 AUMF, reflecting the Administration’s belief that it is no longer needed. Conversely, another view asserts that, although its preamble focuses on the Saddam Hussein regime and its WMD programs, the 2002 AUMF’s authorization language is broad, referring only to a “continuing threat” from Iraq, and that the 2002 AUMF could provide authority to defend against threats to Iraq as well as threats posed by Iraq. Indeed, 2002 AUMF authority was the basis for the U.S. military presence in Iraq from the fall of Saddam Hussein and

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<sup>79</sup> President Barack Obama, remarks at a press conference, November 5, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/05/remarks-president-press-conference>.

<sup>80</sup> Testimony of Stephen W. Preston, General Counsel, Department of Defense, before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, hearing on the Authorization for Use of Military Force, 113<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., May 21, 2014, [http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Preston\\_Testimony.pdf](http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Preston_Testimony.pdf).

<sup>81</sup> White House, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest,” press release, September 11, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/11/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-9112014>.

completion of the WMD search to its 2011 withdrawal, a span of over eight years, a period that could be characterized as dealing with threats to Iraq rather than threats from Iraq. The IS threat in Iraq could therefore be seen as breathing new life into 2002 AUMF authority. In addition, former supporters of Saddam Hussein reportedly provide support to the Islamic State, possibly forming a link between the original aims of the 2002 AUMF and any future actions taken against the Islamic State.

## **Presidential Authority Under Article II of the Constitution**

Article II of the Constitution makes the President Commander in Chief of the U.S. Armed Forces, and gives the President certain foreign affairs powers. It is debated to what extent Article II authorizes the President to unilaterally use military force, especially given Congress's Article I war powers, including the power to declare war. The President's authority to use force to defend the United States, its personnel, and citizens against ongoing or imminent attack has been generally accepted, while employing such force simply to further foreign policy or general national security goals is more controversial. In Iraq, the President would seem to have substantial authority to use force to defend U.S. personnel, the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, and any other U.S. facilities and property. His August 2014 notifications of airstrikes in Iraq, however, have also cited as justification furthering U.S. national security and foreign policy interests, and have described uses of force to provide humanitarian assistance, and to aid Iraqi security forces in their fight against the Islamic State. In addition, the President's stated strategy for degrading and destroying the Islamic State, as well as his September 2014 notifications to Congress of airstrikes and other actions in Iraq and Syria, are not based primarily on immediate protection of the United States, its personnel, or citizens. Thus, it can be argued that Article II alone might not provide sufficient authorization for the use of military force against IS and Khorasan Group forces in Iraq and Syria.

## **The President's February 2015 IS AUMF Proposal**

On February 11, 2015, the President provided Congress with a draft proposal for a new IS AUMF,<sup>82</sup> stating in an accompanying letter that he "can think of no better way for the Congress 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."<sup>83</sup> 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.

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<sup>82</sup> Available at <http://www.cq.com/doc/4622425?0&pos=alert&dlvid=115410051&agenttype=13>.

<sup>83</sup> 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>.

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, expressed as it is, 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 or measurable goal.
- 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.

## **Types of Proposed AUMF Provisions and Related Issues**

In general, language in a new AUMF targeting the Islamic State and other groups (IS AUMF) could either broaden the purpose of military force to include unspecified U.S. national security interests, or narrow the scope of authorization to specific objectives related to the Administration's stated goal of "degrading and ultimately destroying" the Islamic State. Congress could limit the IS AUMF's geographic scope, authorizing force only in Iraq and/or Syria. With continued uncertainty surrounding the Iraqi government, Congress might include authorization to use U.S. Armed Forces in Iraq in furtherance of political stability objectives. Provisions in any IS AUMF targeting the Islamic State might address the possible effect that targeting the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq could have on the ongoing conflict in Syria. Congress might also include a prohibition on the use of appropriated funds for the use of military force outside the scope of the specified authorization. Proposals for a new IS AUMF might contain provisions to limit

presidential authority to use military force against the Islamic State as to scope and duration, and in some cases to sunset or repeal the existing authority in the 2001 and 2002 AUMFs.

The President has stated that an IS authorization should provide the flexibility to carry out “not just our strategy [for the military campaign against the Islamic State] over the next two or three months, but our strategy going forward.”<sup>84</sup> It could be argued, however, that even if limitations are enacted and perceived later to have a deleterious effect on the U.S. campaign against the Islamic State, such limitations 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.

The following sections address some specific aspects of an AUMF that may come under debate in the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress.

### ***Authorization Purpose and Scope***

Some observers and Members of Congress have argued that recent open-ended, broadly worded authorizations can empower a President to continue military operations outside of Congress’s intent. An IS AUMF could include language in the authorizing provision identifying the specific purpose for and scope of the President’s use of U.S. military force, narrowing or broadening the President’s flexibility. An authorization that authorizes force to defend “U.S. national security” against the threat posed by the Islamic State would seem to provide a broad “national security” basis for possible long-term, open-ended military operations. Authorizing force to protect U.S. “interests” generally would seem to provide even wider authority to the President, while including the goal of protecting both the United States and U.S. allies could expand the range of purposes for military action. As to scope, many past AUMFs include language stating that the President can use all “necessary and appropriate” force to achieve the purpose of the authorization. While this could provide the President with the flexibility he needs to effectively employ U.S. Armed Forces, such language leaves the determination of the form and extent of U.S. military force generally to the President. Congress could decide to place limitations and conditions on any broader purpose and scope provisions in an attempt to shape the President’s use of U.S. military force. (See “Limitations and Conditions” below.)

### ***Identifying Targeted Entities***

Any new IS AUMF would be expected to name the Islamic State (or one of its other monikers, including ISIS and ISIL) as the primary entity to be targeted by authorized U.S. military force. As evidenced by the implementation of the 2001 AUMF, however, a number of issues arise in determining exactly who can be lawfully targeted under such a provision, and the extent to which Congress desires to define and/or limit the universe of lawful targets in an IS AUMF. First, while specifically targeting the Islamic State provides a basic starting point for determining authorized targets, in many cases it might be unclear whether individuals are in fact part of the Islamic State, are part of groups fighting alongside the Islamic State, or are merely part of non-aligned groups

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<sup>84</sup> President Barack Obama, remarks at a press conference, November 5, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/05/remarks-president-press-conference>.

also fighting in the region, either against the United States and its allies or otherwise. Congress might also wish to include language providing for future iterations of the structure of the Islamic State group. The Islamic State might splinter at multiple points in time into several new entities with different names and different affiliations, or combine with other groups to form new entities. Indeed, the Islamic State itself was formerly known, among other things, as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and its former close relationship and subsequent reported split with Al Qaeda has complicated determinations of whether the 2001 AUMF could be applied against it. An IS AUMF could include language that extends the authority to use military force against any successor entities of the Islamic State.

Perhaps the aspect of identifying lawful targeted entities considered most fraught is the matter of “associated forces.” One of the central criticisms of the application of authority in the 2001 AUMF has been the expansion of military force to target entities that successive Administrations have designated “co-belligerent” with Al Qaeda and the Taliban. In the context of the current campaign against the Islamic State, the Obama Administration has asserted that the Islamic State can be targeted as it can be considered a branch or in some ways a successor to Al Qaeda.<sup>85</sup> It can be argued that this opens the possibility of military force being used now and in the future against a number of groups associated with the Islamic State, further expanding the universe of targeted entities, possibly in countries other than Iraq and Syria.

Some recent IS AUMF proposals have attempted to better define what constitutes “associated forces,” or requires presidential reporting on or certification of newly designated associated forces, in an attempt to circumscribe the number of lawfully targeted entities and ensure congressional input into any expansion of such entities. The term “associated forces” would seem to apply to forces that are not part of IS forces but are fighting in concert with such forces. Some proposals, however, such as the President’s IS AUMF proposal, include language that seems to define both IS and associated forces, stating the term means “individuals and organizations fighting for, on behalf of, or alongside ISIL....” This language might be seen as overly broad and vague; Members of Congress may desire to more precisely define the term, ensuring that only those forces that are determined to directly engage in military operations in cooperation with IS forces are lawfully targeted under any IS AUMF. On the other hand, given the President’s stated policies of defending U.S. national security, stabilizing and maintaining a democratic Iraq, and supporting moderate Syrian groups fighting the Syrian forces of the Asad government, an IS AUMF could eschew the “associated forces” term in favor of targeting the Islamic State and any other individuals or groups that pose a threat to those policies.

### ***Limitations and Conditions***

In considering any proposals to limit the authority of an IS AUMF, for example, by prohibiting the use of ground forces or constraining operations to a certain geographic area, Congress must weigh competing interests. The President’s proposal would not allow “enduring offensive ground combat operations,” while several previous IS AUMF proposals prohibited the use of ground combat forces or operations with specific carve-outs regarding special forces and training, among other units/operations. Understanding the expected effect of these different provisions would likely be key to Congress’s decision on including them into a finalized IS AUMF. The limitation on the use of ground forces or prohibiting ground combat operations might, as some argue,

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<sup>85</sup> See “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest,” *supra* note 5.

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. Some in 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, or identify themselves as parts of the Islamic State itself, in countries such as Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, it could be reasonably expected that the President might 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.

### ***Repealing Previous AUMFs and Sunset Provisions***

The President's proposal includes a three-year sunset provision automatically terminating the IS-specific authorization; H.J.Res. 27 (114<sup>th</sup> Congress) would terminate the new authorization and repeal the 2001 AUMF after three years. There is concern that Congress placing time limitations on the campaigns against the Islamic State, as well as Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups targeted under the 2001 AUMF, would send the wrong message to such targeted groups and the world about U.S. resolve to defeat these groups. On the other hand, 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.

### ***Reporting and Certification***

Although the President has provided information both publicly and in briefings to Members of Congress concerning the campaign against the Islamic State, Congress may decide to require the President to report to Congress both before a new authorization can enter into effect, and at regular intervals as the campaign moves forward. Ensuring Congress is being presented with substantive, up-to-date information might serve to mitigate concerns over unchecked expansion of the scope and duration of military operations taken under any IS AUMF. The President's proposal would require general reporting on the actions taken under the authorization every six months, which is in line with the existing reporting requirements in the War Powers Resolution.<sup>86</sup> Previous IS AUMF proposals have contained more frequent and detailed reporting

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<sup>86</sup> See Section 4(c) of the War Powers Resolution (P.L. 93-148; 50 U.S.C. § 1543(c)).

requirements.<sup>87</sup> Members of Congress might wish to have clear strategy presented before agreeing to authorize military force, requiring a report explaining such a strategy to Congress (such as the report required in H.J.Res. 30 [114<sup>th</sup> Congress]), and make it a condition of authorization. Periodic reporting could require updated information on the effectiveness of previously stated strategy, and the extent to which strategic goals are being achieved.

## **Maintaining and Deepening Coalition Support**

Past U.S. efforts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria suggest that U.S. policymakers 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, several other European countries, Canada, 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 Asad regime and its supporters (Iran, Hezbollah, Russia).

The capture and murder of Jordanian pilot Lieutenant 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

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<sup>87</sup> See Table A-2 of Appendix, below.

approximately 19% of air strikes (427 of 2247 total strikes) against Islamic State targets since August 2014.<sup>88</sup>

## Next Steps in Iraq

Even though the ISF and *peshmerga* have made some progress in recent months, 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.<sup>89</sup> 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. U.S. assessments of Iraqi readiness for that effort could hinge on U.S. views of how well the Iraqis performed in attempting to recapture Tikrit, as well as how the Sunni inhabitants of Tikrit fare if and when IS forces are expelled. 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.

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.

Iraq's Sunnis appear to be looking for signs that 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

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<sup>88</sup> Micah Zenko, "UAE Shows the Air War against ISIS Is Almost Entirely on America's Shoulders," *Defense One*, Feb. 4, 2015.

<sup>89</sup> Michael Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "Iraqis Prepare ISIS Offensive, With U.S. Help," *New York Times*, November 3, 2014.

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.<sup>90</sup> 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 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

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<sup>90</sup> 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.

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.

At present, senior Administration officials have told Congress that the Administration is actively considering whether or how to provide military protection to U.S.-trained Syrians participating in the train and equip program.<sup>91</sup> The prospect that Islamic State forces or pro-Asad forces may attack U.S.-trained Syrians exists, and it remains to be determined whether, how, and on what authority the U.S. military may provide armed protection for trainees. In the case of potential attack by Syrian government forces for example, such protection could entail attacks against Syrian military targets, with uncertain implications for the conflict in Syria and for anti-Islamic State operations in Iraq, where Asad's principal foreign support—Iran—is working to combat the IS in parallel with the coalition.

## 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 Maliki<sup>92</sup> and helped 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.<sup>93</sup> 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.<sup>94</sup>

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

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<sup>91</sup> Testimony of Secretary of State John Kerry, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. March 11, 2015.

<sup>92</sup> Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Iran Dramatically Shifts Iraq Policy to Confront Islamic State," Reuters, September 2, 2014.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Michael Singh, "What Obama's Letter to Khamenei Says About U.S. Policy Toward Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, November 10, 2014.

announced that one of its pilots had died in operations in Iraq.<sup>95</sup> 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. 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 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.

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<sup>95</sup> “Iran News Agency Reports Death of Iranian Pilot in Iraq,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, July 5, 2014.

**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
<b>Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF)</b>					
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.

## Author Contact Information

Christopher M. Blanchard  
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs  
cblanchard@crs.loc.gov, 7-0428

Carla E. Humud  
Analyst in Middle Eastern and African Affairs  
chumud@crs.loc.gov, 7-7314

Kenneth Katzman  
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs  
kkatzman@crs.loc.gov, 7-7612

Matthew C. Weed  
Analyst in Foreign Policy Legislation  
mweed@crs.loc.gov, 7-4589