

# Kurds in Iraq and Syria: U.S. Partners Against the Islamic State

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## Summary

Since 2014, the United States and members of a coalition it leads have partnered with a politically diverse set of Kurdish groups to combat the Islamic State organization (IS, also known as ISIS/ISIL or by the Arabic acronym Da'esh). For background information on these groups and their relationships in the region, see CRS In Focus IF10350, *The Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted)

Existing legal authorities enacted by Congress and the President permit the Administration to provide some arms and some Iraq/Syria anti-IS-related funding to Kurdish groups under certain conditions. In April 2016, the Defense Department announced that it would provide more than \$400 million in assistance to pay and otherwise sustain Iraqi Kurdish fighters as part of an ongoing partnership that delivers U.S. assistance to Iraqi Kurds with the consent of the Iraqi national government. Some Members of Congress have proposed legislation in the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress that would extend or expand U.S. cooperation with Kurdish groups under certain conditions.

This report examines:

- the roles played in U.S. and coalition efforts to defeat the Islamic State by Iraqi Kurdish groups affiliated with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and by the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD)/People's Protection Units (YPG);
- interactions Iraqi and Syrian Kurds have with other actors;
- various benefits and challenges the Kurdish actions and aspirations present for U.S. interests in the region;
- the outlook for military operations (such as against Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria) and political outcomes;
- humanitarian concerns regarding displaced persons in Kurdish-controlled areas, and human rights concerns regarding Kurdish forces' treatment of civilians in areas they capture;
- specific U.S. policy questions as they relate to assessments of and plans for U.S.-Kurdish cooperation; and
- the broader trajectory of the U.S.-Kurdish partnership.

U.S. military trainers and advisors have been based in KRG-controlled areas (along with other areas in Iraq) since 2014, and the U.S. government has acknowledged that advisors have periodically engaged in direct action missions in both Iraq and Syria. Since late 2015, U.S. officials have announced additional "advise and assist" deployments in Iraq and Syria.

U.S. officials appear to have embraced the benefits Kurdish ground forces provide in ongoing anti-IS operations. At the same time, U.S. officials seem to be seeking ways in which Kurds' success might help empower non-Kurdish forces that can command political legitimacy among local populations in predominantly Sunni Arab areas such as Mosul and Raqqa. Another apparent goal of U.S. officials is to avoid having cooperation with Kurds significantly disrupt U.S. relations with other partners.

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## Overview

Since 2014, the United States and members of a coalition it leads have partnered with a politically diverse set of Kurdish groups to combat the Islamic State organization (IS, also known as ISIS/ISIL or by the Arabic acronym *Da'esh*).<sup>1</sup> Coalition-backed Kurdish forces have reversed IS advances in some parts of Iraq and Syria and have taken control of some previously IS-controlled territory.<sup>2</sup> Coalition air support for Kurdish fighters is provided primarily from bases in Iraq, Turkey, and Arab Gulf states.

U.S. officials have praised Kurdish fighters as some of the most effective ground force partners the coalition has in Iraq and Syria. Their effectiveness may partly stem from a measure of Kurdish political and military cohesion—relative to other groups—that predates the ongoing conflicts in both countries. Yet, Kurdish military success in both states has led to some complications—particularly in U.S. efforts to partner with the Iraqi and Turkish governments—because of the boost such success apparently has given to the political ambitions and regional profiles of various Kurdish groups.

In Iraq, the U.S. military has worked with fighters who come under the official authority of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) (see **Figure 1**). In Syria, U.S. forces have partnered with fighters from or allied with the Democratic Union Party (PYD)/People's Protection Units (YPG) (see **Figure 2**). As Administration officials and Members of Congress assess how to match U.S. coordination with Kurdish groups with overall U.S. objectives, their considerations include:

- The extent to which Kurdish groups should be involved in military operations and post-conflict security in areas with predominantly Sunni Arab or other non-Kurdish populations.
- Whether U.S. military support for Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria is more likely to promote or to hinder state cohesion and political compromise among varying ethnic, sectarian, and ideological groups.
- Whether and how the coalition's strategic priorities might come into conflict with Kurdish groups' possible goals to (1) maximize their control over territory and resources and (2) reduce or eliminate potential threats (either from rival Kurds or non-Kurds).
- Questions of leverage between the United States and Kurdish groups, given how they depend on one another for their success and how they each manage relations with other actors—such as the Syrian and Iraqi governments, Turkey, Russia, and Iran.<sup>3</sup>
- The nature of relationships among Kurdish groups, including the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization.

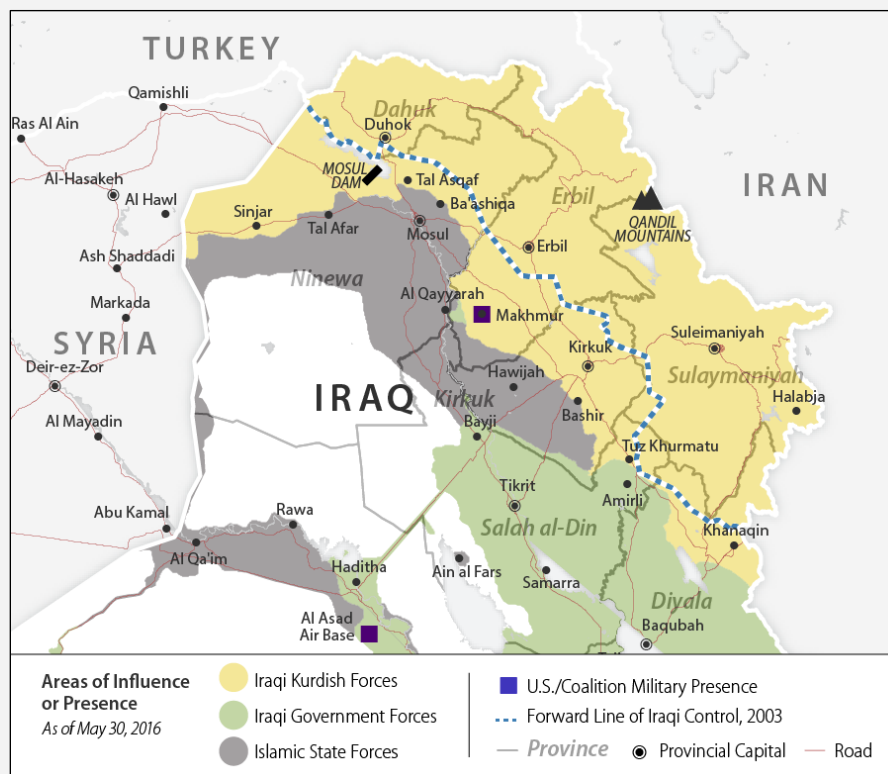
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<sup>1</sup> For background information on these groups and their relationships in the region, see CRS In Focus IF10350, *The Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted).

<sup>2</sup> For general information on U.S. policy and military operations against the Islamic State, see CRS Report R43612, *The Islamic State and U.S. Policy*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted). For information on legal authorization of U.S. force, see CRS Report R43760, *A New Authorization for Use of Military Force Against the Islamic State: Issues and Current Proposals*, by (name redacted).

<sup>3</sup> For information on the KRG's relationship with Iran, see, e.g., Lazar Berman, "The Iranian Penetration of Iraqi Kurdistan," *Institute for Contemporary Affairs*, vol. 16, no. 3, January 21, 2016; "Barzani: Iran Gave Weapons to Iraq's Kurds," *Agence France Presse*, August 26, 2014.

Figure 1. Iraqi Kurds Countering the Islamic State: Map and Timeline



**JUNE 2014** After the Iraqi army abandons areas of northern Iraq as a result of an IS offensive, KRG-affiliated *peshmerga* take over **Kirkuk** and other areas, many of which are subjects of dispute between the KRG and Iraq's central government.

**AUGUST 2014** KRG-affiliated forces encounter difficulties in battling the Islamic State in the **Sinjar** area, and are reportedly helped by YPG and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) fighters in relieving the IS siege against the largely Yazidi population. South of Kirkuk, *peshmerga* also assist in breaking the IS siege (according to reports, the U.S.-led coalition, Iraqi army, Shia militias, and Iran were also involved) against the largely Shia Turkmen town of **Amirli**.

**FALL 2014** The KRG sends a contingent of armed personnel into Syria through Turkey to help the YPG repel the Islamic State from Kobane/Ayn al Arab, and donates small arms and supplies that the U.S. military airdrops to Kurdish fighters in Kobane/Ayn al Arab.

**OCTOBER 2015** A joint U.S.-KRG raid frees around 70 hostages from an IS prison in **Hawijah**.

**NOVEMBER 2015** The KRG captures Sinjar from the Islamic State, cutting off the main road and supply line between the key IS strongholds of Raqqa (in Syria) and **Mosul** (in Iraq).

**SPRING 2016** *Peshmerga* and Shia Turkmen Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) fighters clash in the town of **Tuz Khurmatu** south of Kirkuk, but cooperate in regaining **Bashir** southwest of the city. *Peshmerga* fighters join Iraqi and U.S. military forces in Mosul-focused operations near **Makhmur**, **Tal Asqaf**, and **Ba'ashiqah**.

**Source:** Graphic created by CRS, June 1, 2016, using ESRI, IHS Conflict Monitor, and UN OCHA data. "Forward Line of Iraqi Control, 2003," as depicted in U.S. government map "Kurdish Areas of Northern Iraq" 761867AI I-03 in MPG 387230AI I-03—"IRAQ: Country Profile."

**Notes:** All areas approximate. Areas of influence subject to change. Last revised May 30, 2016.

**Figure 2. Syrian Kurds Countering the Islamic State: Map and Timeline**



**LATE 2013-EARLY 2014** As fighting between and among various Kurdish and Arab groups continues, the PYD/YPG establish a de facto ruling body for three northern Syrian cantons (Afrin, Kobane, Jazirah [the town of Qamishli and its surroundings]) with primacy over other Kurdish groups.

**AUGUST 2014** The YPG reportedly helps relieve an Islamic State (IS) siege against the largely Yezidi population in the **Sinjar** area of northern Iraq.

**FALL 2014** The United States provides air support to the YPG, helping it and Iraqi Kurdish fighters to repel an IS attack on **Kobane/Ayn al Arab**.

**JUNE 2015** The YPG captures **Tal Abyad** from the Islamic State, helping establish contiguous PYD/YPG control between the Kobane and Jazirah cantons, and hindering IS access to the Turkish border.

**FALL 2015** YPG cooperation with non-Kurdish groups in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) facilitates direct U.S. support for the SDF, particularly east of the Euphrates River.

**WINTER 2015-2016** Some YPG-led operations west of the Euphrates River appear to be enabled by Russia and the Syrian government in targeting Sunni Arab groups backed by Turkey and Arab Gulf states. Turkish cross-border fire targets some YPG positions between the Syrian town of **Azaz** and the Euphrates River.

The SDF captures the **Tishreen Dam** on the Euphrates River.

**FEBRUARY 2016** The SDF (including the YPG) captures the town of **Ash Shaddadi** with apparent assistance from U.S. forces, further hindering IS communications between the IS stronghold of **Raqqa** and Mosul in Iraq.

**MAY-JUNE 2016** The SDF begins operations toward **Raqqa** and **Manbij**, with some local sources speculating that some local Arabs may resent any Kurdish-led advances.

**Source:** Graphic created by CRS, June 1, 2016, using ESRI, IHS Conflict Monitor, and UN OCHA data. Areas of Jabhat al Nusra influence derived from USAID Office of Transition Initiatives Syria Response Program, "Areas of Significant Presence in Syria" data, May 18, 2016.

**Notes:** All areas approximate. Areas of influence subject to change. Last revised May 30, 2016.

Existing legal authorities enacted by Congress and the President permit the Administration to provide some arms and some anti-IS-related funding for Iraq and Syria to Kurdish groups under certain conditions, as discussed below. For example, in April 2016, U.S. officials announced that they would provide more than \$400 million to pay and otherwise sustain Iraqi Kurdish fighters with the consent of the Iraqi national government. Such support will be drawn from Defense Department-administered funds Congress has appropriated in recent years for countering the Islamic State organization in Iraq. The Obama Administration has requested additional funds to counter the Islamic State organization for FY2017, and Congress has the option to authorize or appropriate anti-IS funding in general terms and/or specifically for various Iraqi forces—including Kurdish groups.

## **In Iraq**

### **Kurdish Forces and Their Interaction with U.S. and Other Forces**

Iraqi Kurdish fighters number approximately 160,000, including regular *peshmerga*<sup>4</sup> and elite forces such as the Zeravani. Prior to the 2014 outbreak of conflict against the Islamic State, these forces had primarily been serving as internal security providers. Of these forces, about 40,000 *peshmerga* fight in nominally integrated KRG brigades, with the remainder loyal to one of the two main Iraqi Kurdish political groups: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) or the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).<sup>5</sup> According to one estimate, as of February 2016, about 16,000 *peshmerga* had received U.S. military training in anticipation of future operations,<sup>6</sup> and statements from U.S. officials indicate the number of U.S.-trained Kurdish fighters continues to grow.<sup>7</sup>

The general U.S. practice in supplying arms to Iraqi Kurdish *peshmerga* forces, dating from before Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), has been to do so via Iraq's central government.<sup>8</sup> On July 7, 2015, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee that the United States and other countries “basically convey” weapons directly to the Kurds with central government approval. Various NATO countries reportedly have directly provided or committed to provide some weapons—including anti-tank missiles and transport helicopters—and non-lethal equipment to *peshmerga* to augment the Kurds' aging core arsenal of largely Soviet-era small arms and armored vehicles.<sup>9</sup> According to one analyst, Iran has been the

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<sup>4</sup> For background on the *peshmerga*, see, e.g., “Profile: Who are the Peshmerga?,” *BBC News*, August 12, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Mario Fumerton and Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, “Kurdistan's Political Armies: The Challenge of Unifying the Peshmerga Forces,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Regional Insight, December 16, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Helene Cooper and Matthew Rosenberg, “After Gains Against ISIS, Pentagon Focuses on Mosul,” *New York Times*, February 29, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> In a May 18, 2016, Defense Department press briefing, the Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) spokesman said that “1,100 Peshmerga fighters have completed training within the last 30 days. There are an additional 1,100 in training right now.”

<sup>8</sup> Lazar Berman, “The Status of Western Military Aid to Kurdish Peshmerga Forces,” *Institute for Contemporary Affairs*, vol. 15, no. 14, May 11, 2015, available at <http://jcpa.org/article/the-status-of-western-military-aid-to-kurdish-peshmerga-forces/>.

<sup>9</sup> Berman, op. cit., listing the following NATO countries (other than the United States) as committing to provide arms and/or other aid to the Iraqi Kurds: Albania, Canada, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Italy, France, Spain, Turkey, and United Kingdom. European Union countries have reportedly provided these weapons with prior consent from the Iraqi government. Adrian Croft and Barbara Lewis, “EU gives European governments go-ahead to arm Iraqi Kurds,” *Reuters*, August 15, 2014. For additional information on the *peshmerga* arsenal, see Wladimir van Wilgenburg, “Are (continued...)”



“peshmerga’s primary artillery provider, especially BM-14 and BM-21 truck mounted rocket launchers.”<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding the equipment received by peshmerga commanders from various sources, KRG leaders have complained about a lack of heavy weaponry they deem necessary for attacking IS forces from longer ranges.<sup>11</sup>

Russia has provided arms to the KRG, leading one observer to speculate that this support might influence the United States to consider stepping up its arms supplies.<sup>12</sup> Russian officials disclosed in early 2016 that they have provided arms to the KRG with Iraqi central government approval, including anti-aircraft autocannons.<sup>13</sup> In April, U.S. military officials provided information showing that the U.S.-led coalition was in the process of providing additional equipment to the peshmerga in preparation for anti-IS operations in and around Mosul, including Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) armored personnel carriers, anti-tank weapons, mortars, and light arms and ammunition.<sup>14</sup>

U.S. military trainers and advisors have been based in KRG-controlled areas (along with other areas in Iraq) since 2014, and the U.S. government has acknowledged that advisors have periodically engaged in direct action missions in both Iraq and Syria.<sup>15</sup> As of June 2016, about 5,000 U.S. military personnel are deployed throughout Iraq. Defense Department announcements since December 2015 indicate that the Administration plans to have more than 400 personnel available to facilitate direct U.S. action against IS targets and coordinate with Kurdish and other Iraqi forces,<sup>16</sup> and that the U.S. military plans to deploy AH-64 Apache attack helicopters and High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) to support operations to retake Mosul from the Islamic State.<sup>17</sup> Also in December 2015, the *New York Times* reported that a Pentagon proposal to establish a network of counterterrorism-oriented bases is considering Erbil (the KRG capital) as a possible Middle East hub.<sup>18</sup>

In April 2016, the Defense Department announced that the United States would provide more than \$400 million in assistance to Kurdish peshmerga in coordination with the Iraqi government. This support is intended to help with monthly installments for peshmerga salaries and food,

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Kurdish forces, the Peshmerga, a challenge to the Iraqi army?,” *ekurd.net*, August 1, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Berman, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> CRS conversations with visiting KRG officials in Washington, DC, at various times in 2015 and 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Katz of George Mason University, cited in Thomas Grove and Ben Kesling, “Moscow Ramps Up Its Support for Kurds,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 22, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Rikar Hussein and Fatima Tlisova, “Russia Sends Arms to Iraqi Kurds for IS Fight,” *Voice of America*, March 17, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Seth Robson, “Kurdish peshmerga getting heavy weapons for Mosul push,” *Stars and Stripes*, April 13, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Transcript of Remarks by Brett McGurk, Special Presidential Envoy to the Global Coalition To Counter ISIL, November 20, 2015, available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/11/249856.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Missy Ryan, “New Iraq Task Force expands Direct U.S. Role in Battle against Islamic State,” *Washington Post*, December 1, 2015; Michael S. Schmidt, “U.S. Will Send Military Advisers Closer to Front Lines of ISIS Fight in Iraq,” *New York Times*, April 19, 2016. To date, three U.S. servicemen have been killed as part of OIR in northern Iraq—an Army special forces soldier killed in October 2015 while assisting peshmerga in a successful raid on an IS prison, a Marine killed in March 2016 by rocket fire at an outpost providing fire support to Iraqi forces, and a Navy Seal killed in May 2016 when an IS surprise attack temporarily breached peshmerga lines and engaged U.S. support personnel.

<sup>17</sup> Department of Defense Press Briefing by Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook in the Pentagon Briefing Room, April 25, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Mazzetti, et al., “Pentagon Seeks to Knit Foreign Bases Into ISIS-Foiling Network,” *New York Times*, December 11, 2015.



which have been in short supply given KRG budget shortfalls discussed below.<sup>19</sup> Funding is likely to be provided from FY2015 and FY2016 funds appropriated for the Iraqi Train and Equip Fund (ITEF). The Administration did not seek specific funds for the peshmerga in its FY2017 request, but proposed legislation would authorize some amounts for peshmerga and other local forces (see “Enacted and Proposed Legislation Regarding Direct Funding” below).

Senators Lindsey Graham (chair of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs) and John McCain (chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee) had previously called for assistance to pay peshmerga salaries. In response to them, Senator Bob Corker (chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee) said that in considering any decision to directly fund the KRG, “you have to take into account you could be encouraging the breaking apart of the country.”<sup>20</sup>

Some preparatory operations by the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to retake Mosul from the Islamic State occurred in spring 2016 with northward advances by the ISF, including from an outpost called Kara Soar near the northern Iraqi town of Makhmur. Some Kurdish peshmerga are reportedly based at the outpost in defensive positions. Since late March 2016, Administration officials have disclosed via press briefings and media interviews that close to 200 U.S. Marines have been temporarily deployed to provide fire support and protection for the Iraqi forces at Kara Soar.<sup>21</sup>

## **Political and Budgetary Disputes<sup>22</sup>**

Various political and budgetary issues within the KRG and between the KRG and the Iraqi central government could complicate the KRG’s role in countering the Islamic State. These include:

- An ongoing KRG budget crisis that is linked to (1) Iraqi central government unwillingness since early 2014 to pay the KRG its 17% share of total Iraqi oil revenue (partly driven by the KRG’s independent export since 2014 of oil resources it controls via Turkish ports), (2) declines in global oil prices, and (3) increases in military spending since the IS threat clearly emerged in 2014.<sup>23</sup>
- The limited integration (as mentioned above) of KDP and PUK peshmerga into apolitical KRG units.
- Disputes within the KRG over the continued rule of Masoud Barzani (head of the KDP) as KRG president after his prescribed term in office expired in August 2015.
- Ongoing tension between the KRG and Iraqi Prime Minister Hayder al Abadi over Abadi’s proposals for a more technocratic cabinet with less Kurdish representation.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Department of Defense Press Briefing by Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook in the Pentagon Briefing Room, April 25, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> “Republican senators seek to appropriate funds for Kurds,” *Rudaw*, February 5, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Transcript of Department of Defense Press Briefing by Colonel Warren via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq, March 21, 2016; Michael S. Schmidt, “New Focus on U.S. Role in Iraq,” *New York Times*, April 12, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> For more information, see CRS Report RS21968, *Iraq: Politics and Governance*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted) .

<sup>23</sup> Ranj Alaaldin and Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, “Iraqi Kurdistan’s Economy Is a Worse Threat Than ISIS,” *Daily Beast*, April 11, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Mohammed A. Salih, “Why Iraq’s Kurds are united in Baghdad and divided in Erbil,” *Al-Monitor Iraq Pulse*, April (continued...)

- The potential for a future KRG statehood referendum to exacerbate existing KRG-Baghdad disputes regarding territory, governance, and oil.<sup>25</sup>

To date, these issues do not appear to have significantly undermined the KRG's military capacity. Nevertheless, some analysts speculate about their possible effect on morale. Before the U.S. announcement in April 2016 of assistance for KRG fighters, the KRG reportedly was paying peshmerga only once every four months.<sup>26</sup> These issues could also complicate prospects for longer-term post-conflict stability in Iraq, and particularly its northern provinces.

## Enacted and Proposed Legislation Regarding Direct Funding

At present, U.S. assistance to security forces in Iraq, including to Kurdish and other regional or local forces, is coordinated with and/or channeled through the Iraqi central government. This process reflects U.S. policy since the 2003 invasion of Iraq—a policy whose merit has been vigorously debated by U.S. officials and lawmakers—of promoting Iraq's unity under a non-sectarian national government. The process is also reflective of an overall U.S. legal and policy approach that identifies countries (i.e., national governments) and international organizations as the specified lawful recipients of U.S. security assistance.<sup>27</sup>

However, since 2014, some U.S. and international observers have at times criticized the ISF's performance against the Islamic State. Critics have contended that Iraq's central government has at times failed to direct necessary assistance to local Kurdish and Sunni forces or to adequately constrain some Iran-backed Shia militia forces engaged in the anti-IS fight.<sup>28</sup>

Some legislative proposals considered in the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress have reflected these views and have sought to provide authorization for direct U.S. assistance to specific forces in Iraq in addition to ongoing engagement with and support for the ISF. A version of the 2016 National Defense Authorization Act passed by the House (H.R. 1735) in July 2015 would have required that at least 25% of the \$715 million in Iraq Train and Equip Funds (ITEF) authorized under Section 1223 of the bill would have been used to directly assist peshmerga and/or various local Sunni security forces without requiring prior approval or consultation with Baghdad.<sup>29</sup>

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8, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> "Kurdish leader Barzani: 'Time has come' for statehood referendum," *Agence France Presse*, February 3, 2016, quoting Barzani as saying "This referendum would not necessarily lead to [an] immediate declaration of statehood, but rather to know the will and opinion of the people of Kurdistan about their future." Masrour Barzani, "Kurdistan deserves an amicable divorce from Baghdad," *Washington Post*, May 5, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Alaaldin and Meleagrou-Hitchens, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> Relevant provisions of the Arms Export Control Act (22 U.S.C. §2751, et seq.) and the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (22 U.S.C. §2151, et seq.) identify authorized recipients of U.S. defense and security assistance as a "country or international organization." See, for example, the references to "country or international organization" in the Arms Export Control Act's section on eligibility for defense articles and defense services (22 U.S.C. § 2753) and in the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961's sections on security assistance (22 U.S.C. § 2301, et seq.). The Defense Security Cooperation Agency's Security Assistance Management Manual states that "Defense articles and services are not generally sold to foreign purchasers under the AECA unless they are part of the national defense establishment, under the direction and control of the ministry responsible for defense matters." See Chapter 4 of the Manual, available at <http://www.samm.dsca.mil/chapter/chapter-4>.

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Kristina Wong, "Defense chief rebuffs Congress on Iraqi arms," *The Hill*, May 7, 2015; Anand Gopal, "The Hell After ISIS," *Atlantic*, May 2016.

<sup>29</sup> The version of H.R. 1735 reported by the House Armed Services Committee would have explicitly directed the executive branch to consider Kurdish peshmerga and various other subnational forces as the equivalents of "countries." (continued...)

In line with post-2003 U.S. policy regarding Iraq and its constituent geographic, ethnic, and sectarian parts, the Obama Administration expressed concerns that removing the requirement for the central government to consent to U.S. assistance for Kurds in northern Iraq might undermine Iraq's unity and political cohesion.<sup>30</sup> As mentioned above, by mid-2015, U.S. officials had begun to expedite arms deliveries more to KRG-affiliated forces, probably to some extent in response to Kurdish complaints that the Iraqi central government did not distribute U.S.-provided weapons fairly or quickly enough.<sup>31</sup> In Secretary Carter's July 7, 2015, Senate Armed Services Committee testimony, he said that KRG President Barzani had communicated to him that the delays the KRG had experienced in procuring equipment were no longer occurring.

The 2016 National Defense Authorization Act enacted by Congress and the President in late 2015 (NDAA, P.L. 114-92) provides an explicit legal basis—previously lacking—for direct U.S. support to Iraqi Kurdish and Sunni forces, but leaves ultimate discretion on the matter with the President. Section 1223(e) authorizes the President to provide arms directly to Kurdish peshmerga (among other regional or local Iraqi forces with a “national security mission”) for anti-IS purposes if he determines that the Iraqi government has failed “to take substantial action to increase political inclusiveness, address the grievances of ethnic and sectarian minorities, and enhance minority integration in the political and military structures in Iraq.”<sup>32</sup> In a March 2016 report to various congressional committees required by Section 1223(e), the Defense Department and State Department assessed that the Iraqi government has taken meaningful steps toward greater inclusivity and integration of minorities.<sup>33</sup>

Additionally, Section 7041(c)(3) of the 2016 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 114-113) states that funds appropriated by the act for Iraq under the headings “International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement” and “Foreign Military Financing Program” “should be made available to enhance the capacity of Kurdistan Regional Government security services and for security programs in Kurdistan.”

The House Appropriations Committee report (H.Rept. 114-577) accompanying the committee's version of the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2017 (H.R. 5293), strongly encourages the Secretary of Defense to “consider the use of all available authorities and funding to build the capacity of the KRG” against the Islamic State. The version of the 2017 NDAA (H.R. 4909) passed by the House of Representatives in May 2016 would make \$50 million of the \$680 million that would be authorized for ITEF available for “stipends and sustainment” for peshmerga and other specified groups in Iraq with a “national security mission.” The \$50 million would be in addition to the Administration's original request for ITEF (which was \$630 million). Of that \$50 million, at least 33% would be available for Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga. The House version of H.R.

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This version sparked considerable national political debate in Iraq, and the direct reference to “countries” was removed by a managers' amendment during floor consideration of the bill.

<sup>30</sup> Yerevan Saeed, “Kurdish official: US has assured Iraq's Kurds they will get the arms they need,” *Rudaw*, May 8, 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Wong, *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> For information on recently proposed legislation, see also H.Res. 682 “Urging the Department of State to provide necessary equipment and training to the men and women of the Kurdish Peshmerga in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS);” Kristina Wong, “House panel votes to directly arm Kurdish forces against ISIS,” *The Hill*, December 9, 2015, discussing H.R. 1654 (To authorize the direct provision of defense articles, defense services, and related training to the Kurdistan Regional Government, and for other purposes.), which was reported favorably by the House Foreign Affairs Committee on December 9, 2015, by unanimous consent.

<sup>33</sup> CRS consultations with congressional committee staff, April 2016.

4909 would require a Defense Department/State Department briefing—rather than a written report—assessing inclusivity and integration in Iraq along the lines of the Section 1223(e) requirement in P.L. 114-92.

The Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) reported a version of the FY2017 NDAA (S. 2943) that would extend the authorization for the Iraq Train and Equip Program through December 31, 2019, and would require a written inclusivity and integration report 120 days after enactment. The SASC version of S. 2943 would also authorize \$1.26 billion for a Counter Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant Fund that would fund the Iraq and Syria Train and Equip Programs, along with other activities.

## Outlook

Defense Department officials have indicated that while retaking Mosul is a priority for the United States and the government of Iraq, Iraqi leaders will likely prioritize an “Anbar first” policy—Iraqi Security Forces launched an operation to retake the Anbar Province city of Fallujah in May 2016. Defense Department officials expect to draw upon Kurdish forces’ capabilities in an eventual offensive against Mosul,<sup>34</sup> but a number of factors make it likely that the ISF and local Sunni tribal fighters would ultimately take a larger combat and post-conflict security role as their capabilities permit. These factors include:

- U.S. and Iraqi central government interests in minimizing Kurdish-Arab tensions in Mosul and Kurdish political control over ethnically mixed areas, given concerns about Iraqi political unity and human rights practices in areas currently under Kurdish control (see “Human Rights Concerns: Treatment of Civilians” below).<sup>35</sup> For example, the peshmerga seizure in June 2014 of most of the disputed province of Kirkuk as the Islamic State overran Mosul has complicated ISF-peshmerga cooperation.
- Apparent Kurdish interests in maintaining control over the largely Kurdish-populated territory they already hold rather than taking military risks in areas largely populated by Sunni Arabs and other non-Kurds.
- Improvement in non-Kurdish forces’ capabilities via training, experience, and U.S. air and ground support.<sup>36</sup>

A May 2016 article quoted a senior Administration official as saying that “Who takes Mosul matters a lot.... If there’s too much [Iran-linked Shiite militia] or Peshmerga elements, we’re going to have a problem.”<sup>37</sup> Other media reports indicate skepticism among Iraqi Kurdish figures regarding the readiness of the ISF and the overall plan for Mosul’s recapture.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Cooper and Rosenberg, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> In May 2016, a former U.S. official said, “The Kurds are quite open about how anything they take becomes part of Kurdistan forever, which obviously has residents of Mosul slightly concerned, not to mention Baghdad.” Douglas Ollivant, quoted in Dan DeLuce and Henry Johnson, “Who Will Rule Mosul?,” *foreignpolicy.com*, April 29, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., David Ignatius, “How the U.S. fights the Islamic State,” *Washington Post*, May 22, 2016.

<sup>37</sup> DeLuce and Johnson, op. cit.

<sup>38</sup> Martin Chulov, “Mosul: suspicion and hostility cloud fight to recapture Iraqi city from Isis,” *theguardian.com*, May 11, 2016; Jackson Diehl, “The saddest piece of Barack Obama’s legacy,” *Washington Post*, April 17, 2016.

## In Syria

### Kurdish Forces and Their Interaction with U.S. and Other Forces

In October 2015, the Administration shifted the focus of its Syria train-and-equip program away from forming new units and toward supporting approved leaders and units already fighting or poised to fight the Islamic State.<sup>39</sup> Some forces from the YPG—estimated by various unofficial sources to range in number from 25,000 to 50,000<sup>40</sup>—then joined with non-Kurdish (mainly Sunni Arab, with some Christian and Turkmen) units to form an umbrella organization known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Shortly thereafter, the U.S. military began airdropping weapons to elements within the SDF and working closely with it. Since late 2015, approximately 50 U.S. special forces personnel reportedly have been deployed in northern Syria. As of January 2016, an unspecified number were reportedly in Kurdish-controlled areas, acting primarily in an advisory capacity.<sup>41</sup>

In April 2016, President Obama authorized 250 additional U.S. forces, including special operations forces and medical and logistics personnel, to deploy to Syria, following the earlier deployment of 50 personnel to gather information and build relationships. The new forces may also be devoting new efforts to recruiting Sunni Arab forces to fight with Kurdish units.<sup>42</sup> One apparent reason for deploying additional personnel is to reassure Turkish counterparts who perceive difficulties near and within their borders as a result of Syrian Kurdish gains (see additional discussion of Turkey's concerns regarding the PYD/YPG in the sections below).<sup>43</sup> In an April 28, 2016, Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, General Joseph Dunford, USMC, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, indicated that one justification for increasing U.S. personnel in Syria—likely to operate in close proximity with local forces—is a calculation that the improved U.S. relationship with these local forces has mitigated concerns about force protection.

When addressing questions about the supply of U.S. arms and participation in military operations, U.S. officials generally emphasize the diverse composition of the SDF, even though the YPG is reportedly “the main element of the coalition and outnumbers all other groups.”<sup>44</sup> According to one source, Arabs comprise about 15% of the forces fighting under direct YPG (i.e., Kurdish) command.<sup>45</sup> Although a YPG official was cited in October 2015 as claiming that the YPG received a U.S. weapons airdrop and would share it with other SDF groups,<sup>46</sup> Secretary Carter

<sup>39</sup> CRS Report R43612, *The Islamic State and U.S. Policy*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted).

<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Steele, “The Syrian Kurds Are Winning!,” *New York Review of Books*, December 3, 2015; International Crisis Group, *Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, Middle East Report No. 151, May 8, 2014, footnote 7.

<sup>41</sup> Benedetta Argentieri, “Are the Syrian Democratic Forces any of the above?,” *Reuters*, January 26, 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Gordon Lubold and Adam Entous, “U.S. Plans To Increase Forces In Syria,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 25, 2016.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Argentieri, *op. cit.* For various estimates of the SDF's troop numbers and/or breakdowns of its composition, see Barak Barfi, “Ascent of the PYD and SDF,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Research Notes No. 32, April 2016 (considering the YPG to be separate from the SDF); Aron Lund, “Origins of the Syrian Democratic Forces: A Primer,” *syriadeeply.org*, January 22, 2016; Columb Strack, “US-backed militia offensive against Islamic State in eastern Syria probably aimed at cutting off Mosul from Raqqa,” *Jane's Intelligence Review*, December 3, 2015; Fehim Tastekin “Can the Islamic State be defeated without Kurds?,” *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, April 8, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Barfi, *op. cit.*

<sup>46</sup> Roy Gutman, “Syrian Arab militias dispute they received U.S. airdrop of ammunition,” *McClatchy*, October 20, (continued...)



countered that the airdrop was delivered to Arab elements of the SDF.<sup>47</sup> In April 2016, the Defense Department's OIR spokesperson said that there are tens of thousands of SDF fighters, and that the SDF's irregular Arab militias' personnel numbers fluctuate but are generally close to 5,000.<sup>48</sup>

Most reports indicate that the YPG remains relatively lightly armed. Some observations suggest that the YPG's guerrilla-style battlefield tactics rely on significant operational flexibility and a high tempo based on the use of foot soldiers, snipers, machine guns, and self-produced mortars and explosives.<sup>49</sup> Weapons sources for the YPG presumably include black market purchases and caches seized from the Islamic State and other adversaries. Blogs and social media engaging in unsubstantiated speculation about other possible YPG arms sources reference Iraqi Kurdish groups and the Turkish-originated Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The PKK is a U.S.-designated terrorist organization and foreign narcotics trafficker that is widely viewed as the PYD/YPG's parent organization (see "Turkey, the PKK, and Potential Syrian Kurdish Autonomy" below).

Because the U.S. military lacks a state partner in Syria, the United States may be more dependent in Syria than in Iraq on Kurdish ground forces. Consequently, a key U.S. objective appears to be to strengthen the YPG's non-Kurdish partners in the SDF so that they can (1) help capture IS-held territory in predominantly Sunni Arab areas, and (2) take primary responsibility for providing security to non-Kurdish populations after territory is taken. The United States sponsors a coalition of Sunni Arab groups—described by U.S. officials as the Syrian Arab Coalition, or SAC—that fights as part of the Syrian Democratic Forces. While the majority of SDF forces continue to be comprised of the Kurdish YPG, SAC forces may seek to take the lead in clearing traditionally Sunni Arab areas. Given accounts of YPG primacy in SDF operations to date, it is unclear whether the non-YPG elements have proven themselves in battle.

The Administration has struggled with how to calibrate support for the YPG on one hand and various Syrian Sunni Arab forces on the other.<sup>50</sup> In one report, the crux of the U.S. dilemma was that the YPG was capable but presumably less motivated than Sunni Arabs to attack and hold IS strongholds in Arab-majority areas such as Raqqa, while the Syrian Arabs' general lack of operational success had not inspired U.S. confidence.<sup>51</sup> The area around Aleppo, where pro-Asad forces, the YPG, and rebel groups vie for territory, is demonstrative of the broader challenge. Reportedly, early 2016 clashes near Aleppo prompted Washington to have the YPG "back off,"<sup>52</sup> but some accounts report subsequent skirmishes.<sup>53</sup> If the United States or various regional actors

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2016.

<sup>47</sup> Media Availability with Secretary Carter en route to Fort Wainwright, Alaska, October 30, 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Department of Defense Press Briefing by Col. Warren via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq, April 7, 2016.

<sup>49</sup> Tim Lister and Clarissa Ward, "Meet the men fighting ISIS with hunting rifles and homemade mortars," *CNN*, October 28, 2015; Michael Stephens, "Analysis: YPG – the Islamic State's worst enemy," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, September 12, 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Rogin and Lake, op. cit.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. See also Amberin Zaman, "Mission Impossible? Triangulating U.S.-Turkish Relations with Syria's Kurds," Woodrow Wilson Center, April 2016.

<sup>52</sup> Zaman, "Mission Impossible? Triangulating U.S.-Turkish Relations with Syria's Kurds," op. cit.

<sup>53</sup> International Crisis Group, "Steps Toward Stabilising Syria's Northern Border," Middle East Briefing No. 49, April 8, 2016.

provide additional military support to non-Kurdish armed groups in Syria, that could affect the balance of forces among Arab and Kurdish fighters.<sup>54</sup>

## **Turkey, the PKK, and Potential Syrian Kurdish Autonomy<sup>55</sup>**

Turkey is the NATO country where many anti-IS coalition aircraft are based, and its leaders seek to have influence over outcomes and future order in border areas of the weakened Iraqi and Syrian states.<sup>56</sup> Turkey equates the PYD/YPG with the PKK, and thus strongly opposes U.S. support for the PYD/YPG and is suspicious of support for the SDF.<sup>57</sup> Increased PYD influence and territorial control in northern Syria may be partly fueling conflict in Turkey and Iraq between the PKK and the Turkish military.<sup>58</sup>

Although the Obama Administration does not equate the PYD/YPG with the PKK as Turkey does, it has reportedly limited its support for the SDF to small arms given Turkish officials' concerns that anti-tank missiles could be used against Turkey in the future.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, media reports indicate that Turkey has previously influenced U.S. officials to discourage Kurdish advances in a key corridor of largely IS-held territory stretching west along the Turkey-Syria border from the Euphrates River to the vicinity of the town of Azaz (see **Figure 2**—U.S. officials often refer to this Azaz-Euphrates corridor as the “Manbij Pocket”).<sup>60</sup> YPG operations in the Manbij Pocket could increase the probability of eventual de facto PYD control over a contiguous strip of territory stretching all the way from the area surrounding Afrin to Syria's eastern border. Since January 2016, some predominantly Arab Syrian opposition forces (including some with reported Turkish backing) have advanced eastward from Azaz along the Turkish border, seeking to capture and hold villages from the Islamic State.

A number of sources point to evidence of close and continuing operational and personnel links between the PKK and PYD/YPG.<sup>61</sup> One such source claims that although the PYD and PKK are officially independent, “in practice, Syrian Kurdish PKK cadres with years of service in Qandil (the organisation's northern Iraqi mountain base) [see **Figure 1**] dominate the YPG leadership and are the decision-makers within the self-proclaimed ‘autonomous administration’” in Syria.<sup>62</sup> This same source even states that U.S. support for the YPG has encouraged the broader PKK organization to pursue escalation in Turkey.<sup>63</sup> The PKK and its affiliates apparently calculate—perhaps not recognizing that U.S. views would probably reject this calculation—that an upheaval

<sup>54</sup> Adam Entous, “U.S. Readies ‘Plan B’ to Arm Syria Rebels,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 12, 2016.

<sup>55</sup> For more information, see CRS Report R44000, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief*, by (name redacted)

<sup>56</sup> See, e.g., Reva Bhalla, “Turkey, the Kurds and Iraq: The Prize and Peril of Kirkuk,” *Stratfor*, October 7, 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Tastekin, op. cit.

<sup>58</sup> Asli Aydintasbas, “A Kurdish Autumn Becomes Turkey's Long Winter,” Center for American Progress, April 19, 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Strack, op. cit.

<sup>60</sup> “Ankara warns US of Kurdish presence west of River Euphrates,” *Rudaw*, January 7, 2016.

<sup>61</sup> Barfi, op. cit.; Sam Heller, “PKK Links, Nusra Parallels Make Syrian Kurds a Troubling U.S. Partner,” *World Politics Review*, March 14, 2016; Aaron Stein and Michelle Foley, “The YPG-PKK Connection,” Atlantic Council MENASource Blog, January 26, 2016.

<sup>62</sup> International Crisis Group, “Steps Toward Stabilising Syria's Northern Border,” op. cit., footnote 1. See also Barfi, op. cit.

<sup>63</sup> International Crisis Group, “Steps Toward Stabilising Syria's Northern Border,” op. cit.



undermining central authority in Turkey could “reshuffle the regional order in the Kurds’ favour” without endangering PYD/YPG achievements in Syria.<sup>64</sup>

As the PYD has extended its de facto political control throughout areas controlled or seized by the YPG, it has sought greater public and international legitimacy. PYD leaders likely hope that the United States, Russia, and other key actors agree that an eventual Syrian political resolution will probably involve some degree of decentralization, as well as a role for the Kurds.<sup>65</sup> In January 2016, the PYD sought to participate in international talks regarding Syria’s political future, but was ultimately excluded based in part on objections from Turkey, which claimed that other Syrian Kurds should participate.<sup>66</sup> The PYD still faces some opposition from other Syrian Kurdish groups, and some human rights organizations (as discussed below) have questioned YPG compliance with international laws and norms in areas it controls.

Media reports indicate that Syrian Kurds and a council they lead that includes Arabs, Turkmen, and Christians are considering declaring a federal region for the various groups in areas under de facto PYD control.<sup>67</sup> Beyond Turkey’s clear objections to the influence that greater Syrian Kurdish autonomy might have on the aspirations of Turkey’s Kurds,<sup>68</sup> a Syrian Kurdish-led federal region would have implications for a number of other stakeholders in Syria’s conflict.<sup>69</sup> It could affect the military posture and political aspirations of Syria’s government, the Islamic State, various other Sunni groups, and minorities. It could also influence the calculations of outside actors. In a March 17, 2016, daily press briefing, the State Department spokesperson stated U.S. opposition to “self-rule, self-autonomous zones,” while expressing openness to a federal system if chosen by the Syrian people.

## Outlook

Administration officials have stated that a significant focus of anti-IS planning in Syria is the eventual capture of the IS “capital” at Raqqa. At the April 28 Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, General Dunford—presumably referring to SDF troop strength—estimated that almost 30,000 Kurdish-led forces and about 6,000 Arab-led forces were available at the time to prepare for operations in Raqqa, with around 12,000 more Arabs in the vetting process and more expected to follow. In response to a question at the hearing, Dunford stated that the Kurdish forces by themselves would not be able to take and hold Raqqa. He also indicated that the United States is assisting anti-IS forces with planning, logistics, equipment, and training in preparation for a Raqqa operation.

Nevertheless, questions remain regarding the readiness of non-Kurdish ground forces, the YPG’s motivation, and the sense of U.S. urgency in achieving this objective. In February 2016, Secretary Carter indicated that United Arab Emirates special forces would join a U.S.-led effort that also

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> International Crisis Group, “Steps Toward Stabilising Syria’s Northern Border,” op. cit.

<sup>66</sup> “Turkey against PYD, not Syrian Kurds, says PM Davutoğlu,” *Anadolu Agency*, January 26, 2016. To date, the Kurdish National Council (KNC), which is aligned with Masoud Barzani’s KDP in Iraq, has been the primary Syrian Kurdish group participating in the international talks. Unlike the PYD, the KNC—composed of several Kurdish parties—is a member of the Syrian Opposition Coalition, the opposition’s primary political umbrella group.

<sup>67</sup> “Syrian Kurds in six-month countdown to federalism,” *Reuters*, April 12, 2016; Anne Barnard, “Syrian Kurds Look to Create Federal Region in Nation’s North,” *New York Times*, March 17, 2016.

<sup>68</sup> “Syrian Kurds in six-month countdown to federalism,” op. cit.

<sup>69</sup> Barnard, op. cit.

included Saudi special forces to prepare local Arab fighters seeking to help capture Raqqa.<sup>70</sup> In the April 7, 2016, Defense Department press briefing from Baghdad, the spokesperson said that the U.S. military has a less-developed plan for Raqqa than for Mosul. One analyst has written that the YPG

... will probably have a low tolerance for suffering high casualties fighting for traditionally Sunni [Arab] territory, which they are very unlikely to hold in the longer term, [but] given the perceived existential threat to the Kurds posed by the Islamic State, [the YPG does] have a strong incentive to support Sunni [Arab] tribal fighters in pushing back the Islamic State to extend their strategic depth.<sup>71</sup>

Reports in late May 2016 indicated that Kurdish-led, partly Arab SDF forces located approximately 30 miles north of Raqqa have begun operations to push southward toward the city, with one apparent objective to get within artillery range. U.S. officials have been cited as saying that a “significant Arab force is needed before an assault directly on the city.”<sup>72</sup>

The PYD/YPG also reportedly favors operations in the Manbij Pocket. Turkey has already shown willingness to fire across the border (with a reported artillery range of 40 km) against YPG positions in this area and further west in Afrin.<sup>73</sup> On June 1, new reports citing U.S. officials stated that U.S. personnel had begun supporting Arab-led and Kurdish-supported operations to retake the city of Manbij where the YPG and Arab members of the SDF have appeared to be working toward military and political consensus with local populations.<sup>74</sup>

U.S. plans for the Manbij Pocket may be driven by multiple factors, including the desires to gain Kurdish support for operations against Raqqa, avoid a Kurdish-Turkish flare-up, and counter the Islamic State and Al Qaeda and cut off their supply lines; and considerations regarding other actors (including the Syrian government, Russia, Iran, and various Syrian militias). One source has cited experts saying that “if IS is eventually ousted, the U.S.-backed operation could result in an extended dispute over who controls the area.”<sup>75</sup>

In April 2016, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu stated that the United States would deploy HIMARS (with the system’s reported 90 km range) in Turkey near the Syrian border sometime in May.<sup>76</sup> In a May 8, 2016, briefing, the Defense Department press secretary indicated that there may still be some time before a HIMARS deployment in Turkey is finalized. On May 30, Cavusoglu was quoted as criticizing U.S. partnership with the YPG and as saying that the United States “is entering a phase that is very dangerous for the future of Syria.”<sup>77</sup>

<sup>70</sup> “Carter Says UAE Will Put Special Forces in Syria,” *Associated Press*, February 12, 2016.

<sup>71</sup> Strack, op. cit.

<sup>72</sup> See, e.g., Liz Sly, “Ground offensive in Syria seeks to ‘squeeze’ Islamic State stronghold Raqqa,” *washingtonpost.com*, May 24, 2016; Maria Abi-Habib and Raja Abdulrahim, “Rebels Attack Near Islamic State’s Syrian Stronghold of Raqqa,” *wsj.com*, May 25, 2016.

<sup>73</sup> Humeyra Pamuk, “Turkish minister says U.S. to deploy rocket launchers near Syrian border,” *Reuters*, April 26, 2016; Amberin Zaman, “How the Kurds Became Syria’s New Power Brokers,” *foreignpolicy.com*, February 18, 2016; and, Thomas Schmidinger, “Afrin and the Race for the Azaz Corridor,” *Atlantic Council SyriaSource Blog*, February 23, 2016.

<sup>74</sup> Tastekin, op. cit.; Rikar Hussein, “Turkish-Syrian Border Pocket is Heart of Fight Against IS,” *Voice of America*, April 20, 2016; and Phil Stewart and John Davison, “U.S.-backed forces open major front in Syria war,” *Reuters*, June 1, 2016.

<sup>75</sup> Hussein, op. cit. See also Schmidinger, op. cit.

<sup>76</sup> Pamuk, op. cit.

<sup>77</sup> *Associated Press*, “Turkey Says It Could Seize IS Stronghold With US,” May 30, 2016.

The PYD/YPG has a historically grounded wariness of the Asad regime, and some skirmishes between the two were reported in April 2016,<sup>78</sup> but the two have been relatively non-belligerent throughout Syria's civil conflict. Some reports indicate that the YPG has received occasional assistance from the regime, and that Russian forces in Syria have enabled some YPG military actions west of the Euphrates.<sup>79</sup> One source asserts that YPG officials claim that they are using the prospect of additional Russian military support as leverage to obtain U.S. support for their proposed operations.<sup>80</sup> In April 2016, Russia announced that it has sent troops to fight alongside Kurds based in Afrin—perhaps as a provocation against the United States and Turkey.<sup>81</sup> Various sources provide differing perspectives on whether Kurdish fighters in Afrin are affiliated with the YPG.<sup>82</sup>

## Humanitarian and Human Rights Concerns<sup>83</sup>

While Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria work with the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State, various humanitarian and human rights concerns have affected Kurdish-populated communities and the surrounding areas where Kurdish forces have been active.

### Humanitarian Concerns: Refugees and IDPs in Kurdish-Controlled Areas

As a result of the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, significant population displacement has occurred and has affected, among other areas, those largely populated by Kurds.<sup>84</sup> Certain Kurdish-controlled areas in both countries have become havens for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

#### Iraq

In connection with various waves of fighting in Iraq since 2014, more than 1 million IDPs (the KRG claims the number is close to 1.8 million)—including Arabs, Kurds, Yazidis, Turkmen, and Assyrian Christians—have sought shelter in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) as of May 2016.<sup>85</sup> Reportedly, IDPs constitute approximately one-sixth of the current population of the KRI,

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<sup>78</sup> Anne Barnard, “Kurds and Syrian Forces Clash, Adding a Worrying Wrinkle to a Complex War,” *New York Times*, April 22, 2016.

<sup>79</sup> Barfi, op. cit.

<sup>80</sup> International Crisis Group, “Steps Toward Stabilising Syria’s Northern Border,” op. cit.

<sup>81</sup> Grove and Kesling, op. cit.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid; Faysal Itani and Aaron Stein, “Turkey’s Syria Predicament,” Atlantic Council: Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, May 2016.

<sup>83</sup> This section was authored by (name redacted), Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy, with contributions from (name redacted), Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs.

<sup>84</sup> See Iraq Humanitarian Country Team, *2016 Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP)*, December 2015. For broader context, since January 2014, an urgent humanitarian crisis has unfolded in Iraq with roughly one-third of the population in need of humanitarian and protection assistance. In Syria, where conflict began in March 2011, more than half the population is severely impacted. Described as a “mega crisis,” taken together, it is estimated that nearly 24.5 million people living in either Iraq or Syria are affected by conflict and in need of humanitarian assistance. This number climbs to nearly 30 million when refugee populations from both countries are included. The funding streams and operational framework for the international humanitarian response in each country remains distinct, in part reflecting the unique conditions unfolding in each country.

<sup>85</sup> Middle East Research Institute, “Impact of Displaced People on Kurdistan Region,” 2015. For example, fighting in Anbar and Nineveh provinces in early 2014 led approximately 180,000 Iraqis to flee to the KRI, the fall of Mosul to the (continued...)

and in some areas nearly one-third are IDPs. Also as of May 2016, an estimated 250,000 Syrians, most of Kurdish origin, have fled to the KRI.<sup>86</sup> Displaced persons in areas under Kurdish control comprise fewer than one-third of Iraq's total displaced population.<sup>87</sup>

Until late 2014, the KRG generally allowed displaced persons to enter and stay in the KRI. At that time, amid growing concerns about the financial implications of sheltering the displaced as their numbers swelled, the KRG imposed restrictions on those allowed to enter the KRI.<sup>88</sup> In order to work, IDPs, refugees, and other foreigners are required to have a security clearance and work permit.<sup>89</sup> Amnesty International also reports that many displaced persons have been denied access to safe areas by Iraqi and KRG authorities. The authorities justify their actions by reference to security concerns, but some observers contend that the measures taken have sectarian and discriminatory undertones.<sup>90</sup> According to the State Department, this is a problem that has mainly impacted IDPs coming into the KRG from elsewhere, but it is unclear how many people may be affected. In discussions with relevant officials, the U.S. Embassy is urging that IDPs have freedom of movement.<sup>91</sup>

Although Syrian refugees in the KRI have not been compelled to live in camps, the majority have been sheltered there with the help of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian actors. Approximately 30,000 refugees have opted to live in cities instead of camps.<sup>92</sup> For IDPs, there has been less of a coordinated strategy on the provision of facilities and services. The KRG has said that it does not have the financial or technical assistance necessary to register and track all IDPs.<sup>93</sup> IDPs are living in both camp and non-camp settings, with approximately half of these people located in Dohuk province. Some are hosted by communities and municipalities, while others live in rented accommodations or unfinished buildings.<sup>94</sup>

The Iraqi government and KRG are responding to the crisis by providing humanitarian aid and coordinating assistance through civil society, local communities, and international organizations.<sup>95</sup> Government leadership of the humanitarian operation is reinforced by

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(...continued)

Islamic State in June 2014 caused approximately 500,000 more IDPs to leave for the KRI, and conflict later in 2014 compelled about 200,000 Iraqis—including in historically Yezidi and Assyrian Christian areas—to flee either from outside or within the KRI to areas deemed safer within the KRI.

<sup>86</sup> U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), Iraq Humanitarian Country Team, *2016 Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP)*, December 2015; UNOCHA, "Humanitarian Bulletin: Iraq – April 2016," issued on May 10, 2016; USAID, "Iraq: Complex Emergency," Fact Sheet #3 Fiscal Year (FY) 2016, April 11, 2016.

<sup>87</sup> CRS email correspondence with the State Department, May 19, 2016.

<sup>88</sup> Amnesty International, "Iraq: A Year On, the Humanitarian Crisis Must be Resolved," February 2015; Middle East Research Institute, "Impact of Displaced People on Kurdistan Region," 2015.

<sup>89</sup> CRS email correspondence with Kurdistan Regional Government, Representation in the United States, Washington, DC, April 25, 2016.

<sup>90</sup> Amnesty International, "Iraq: A Year On, the Humanitarian Crisis Must be Resolved," February 2015.

<sup>91</sup> CRS email correspondence with the State Department, May 19, 2016.

<sup>92</sup> CRS email correspondence with Kurdistan Regional Government, Representation in the United States, Washington, DC, April 25, 2016.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> UNOCHA, Iraq Humanitarian Country Team, *2016 Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP)*, December 2015.

<sup>95</sup> The humanitarian community throughout Iraq includes a wide network of organizations and involves more than 12,000 humanitarian workers, 15 U.N. agencies, funds and programs, and over 170 national and international organizations.

mechanisms set up to coordinate assistance: the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Center (JCMC) in Baghdad and the Joint Crisis Coordination Center in Erbil (JCC).<sup>96</sup>

The KRG's ongoing fiscal crisis (see "Political and Budgetary Disputes" above) has been exacerbated by the region's significant population increase and accompanying costs and impacts. Humanitarian experts report that the absorption capacity of the host communities is reaching a critical threshold.<sup>97</sup> Residents are competing with the displaced for jobs and resources, contributing to tensions within communities already struggling with poverty. In 2015, the World Bank and the KRG estimated that the KRG would need \$1.4 billion in additional revenue to stabilize the economy.<sup>98</sup> The KRG has requested additional international support, arguing that it has been generous to those fleeing their homes and promoted tolerance and inclusivity throughout the process.<sup>99</sup>

Despite these humanitarian response efforts and recent ISF and Kurdish military gains against the Islamic State, Iraqi civilians (including those living in the KRI) have generally not seen a corresponding improvement in their living situation. Ongoing fighting and the perceptions of danger and uncertainty it fuels continue to create significant displacement, which is difficult to monitor and track.<sup>100</sup>

In certain areas, including the KRI, insecurity has severely constrained local, national, and international humanitarian efforts to provide assistance (i.e., food, water, sanitation, health services) and protection to refugees, IDPs, and others affected by conflict. This is especially the case for those thought to be trapped in hard-to-reach areas or in close proximity to front lines. Moreover, basic government social services are limited. Disease and food insecurity contribute to the vulnerability of millions of civilians. Close to half of those displaced in Iraq are estimated to be children, making emergency education support a significant concern for various actors involved in the humanitarian response.<sup>101</sup>

## Syria

In northeast Syria, an estimated 755,250 people—including IDPs and Iraqi refugees—are reportedly in need of assistance in Al Hasakeh governorate (roughly corresponding in location with what some Syrian Kurds regard as the "Jazirah canton" in the northeast part of the country).<sup>102</sup> Iraqi refugees are living in two refugee camps as well as in villages. A Syrian Kurdish leader estimated in May 2016 that approximately 500,000 Syrian IDPs are currently sheltering in areas of northern Syria broadly controlled by Syrian Kurds. This leader claimed that various international and private organizations have provided some humanitarian assistance to the IDPs,

<sup>96</sup> UNOCHA, "Humanitarian Bulletin: Iraq – April 2016," issued on May 10, 2016.

<sup>97</sup> UNOCHA, "Iraq: Senior U.N. Official Warns of Dire Consequences for Millions of Iraqis due to Funding Shortfalls," March 23, 2016.

<sup>98</sup> Kulaksiz, Sibel. 2015. *Iraq - Assessing the Economic and Social Impact of the Syrian Conflict and ISIS*. Washington, DC: World Bank Group. See <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2015/01/24405958/iraq-assessing-economic-social-impact-syrian-conflict-isis>

<sup>99</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government-Iraq (Representation in the United States), "Humanitarian Crisis in Kurdistan," October 3, 2015;

<sup>100</sup> A Joint IDP Profiling Service underway in the KRI aims to analyze out-of-camp urban displacement and compare the situations of displaced and local populations (while taking into account different contextual realities across provinces) in an effort to provide more a more comprehensive and coordinated humanitarian response. See <http://www.jips.org/en/news/latest-news/understanding-urban-displacement-in-the-kurdistan-region-of-iraq>

<sup>101</sup> UNICEF, "Safe Spaces for Children in Iraq," February 23, 2016.

<sup>102</sup> CRS email correspondence with the State Department, May 19, 2016.



but that such assistance—when available—is largely limited to basic subsistence.<sup>103</sup> Escalations in fighting in conflict-affected areas have increased displacement, while closures of border crossings with Iraq could have a humanitarian impact.<sup>104</sup>

## **International Humanitarian Response and U.S. Funding**

In December 2015, the United Nations, along with humanitarian partners, launched the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Iraq, which appeals for \$861 million, of which \$328 million (38%) is identified for the KRI. As of May 1, 2016, the overall Iraq appeal is 22% funded.<sup>105</sup> Since FY2014, U.S. humanitarian assistance for the Iraq response through April 11, 2016, totals \$778.29 million.<sup>106</sup> The United States is the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to the Syria crisis. Since FY2012, it has allocated more than \$5.1 billion to meet humanitarian needs using existing funding from global humanitarian accounts and some reprogrammed funding.<sup>107</sup> In keeping with humanitarian principles, U.S. humanitarian assistance is needs-based and can be used countrywide (where access is possible) in Iraq and Syria (including in Kurdish-controlled areas) for the displaced, vulnerable host communities, and others affected by conflict.<sup>108</sup> Therefore, while some assistance is being provided to populations in Kurdish-controlled areas of Iraq and Syria, a breakdown is not available.<sup>109</sup>

## **Human Rights Concerns: Treatment of Civilians**

### **In General**

Protracted conflict and the flow of displaced persons appear to have exacerbated ethnic and sectarian tensions across Iraq and Syria. These developments have heightened international concerns about the vulnerability of civilians to endangerment, dispossession, or other forms of mistreatment or hardship, while also calling into question whether displaced persons will ever be able to return to their places of origin.

The Islamic State continues to commit systematic and widespread violence, with many reported instances of mass executions, kidnappings, systematic rape and sexual violence, and torture.<sup>110</sup> Some other actors—both government and non-state—may also engage in activities endangering

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<sup>103</sup> CRS conversation with Syrian Kurdish leader in Washington, DC, April 17, 2016

<sup>104</sup> CRS email correspondence with the State Department, May 19, 2016. See, e.g., USAID, “Syria – Complex Emergency,” Fact Sheet #3, Fiscal Year (FY) 2016, May 5, 2016.

<sup>105</sup> The U.N. Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) appeals for \$4.8 billion and the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Syria appeals for \$3.2 billion. As of May 1, 2016, taken together, the appeals for Syria and the region are 19% funded. Donors pledged \$11.3 billion, of which \$5.9 billion is for 2016 and \$5.4 billion is for 2017–2020, at a February 2016 pledging conference in London.

<sup>106</sup> USAID, “Iraq – Complex Emergency,” Fact Sheet #3, Fiscal Year (FY) 2016, April 11, 2016.

<sup>107</sup> USAID, “Syria – Complex Emergency,” Fact Sheet #3, Fiscal Year (FY) 2016, May 5, 2016.

<sup>108</sup> The Administration’s FY2017 budget request seeks \$6.156 billion in global humanitarian assistance. This includes \$2.1 billion (Syria) and \$341 million (Iraq) in Overseas Contingency Operations funds provided through the Migration and Refugee Assistance and International Disaster Assistance accounts to address the humanitarian impact of these crises.

<sup>109</sup> CRS email correspondence with the State Department, May 19, 2016.

<sup>110</sup> U.N. Document S/2016/77, Second Report of the Secretary-General Pursuant to Paragraph 7 of Resolution 2233 (2015), January 26, 2016. U.N. Document A/HRC/28/18, Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights situation in Iraq in the light of abuses committed by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and associated groups, March 27, 2015.

or dispossessing civilians. In January 2016, in his report on the U.N. Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stated, “Regrettably, in areas retaken from ISIL, there have been reports of arbitrary arrests, killings, destruction of property, efforts to forcibly change demographic composition and retaliatory violence.”<sup>111</sup>

## **Involving Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish Authorities**

### ***Allegations of Mistreatment of Civilians***

Concerns about possible mistreatment by Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish authorities of non-Kurdish populations under their control—possibly even to the level of “war crimes”—are receiving international attention. A January 2016 Amnesty International report based on satellite photos, field investigations, and eyewitness and victim accounts alleges that KRG-affiliated fighters and other forces acting with their knowledge (YPG, PKK, Yezidi militias) have not only displaced Arabs from areas in Iraq captured or recaptured from the Islamic State, and looted their possessions, but have destroyed entire villages.<sup>112</sup> A news release accompanying the report’s publication stated:

Though KRG officials have justified the displacement of Arab communities on grounds of security, it appears to be used to punish them for their perceived sympathies with IS, and to consolidate territorial gains in “disputed areas” which the KRG authorities have long claimed as rightfully theirs. This is part of a drive to reverse past abuses by the Saddam Hussein regime, which forcibly displaced Kurds and settled Arabs in these regions.<sup>113</sup>

Additionally, in areas under PYD control in Syria, human rights groups have documented reports of YPG abuses against the PYD’s Kurdish political rivals,<sup>114</sup> and of forced displacement of Sunni Arab residents.<sup>115</sup>

### ***Possible Implications for U.S. Policy***

The possibility of systematic human rights abuses by Kurdish groups could greatly complicate the U.S.-led coalition’s heavy reliance on these groups to secure territory in areas of mixed ethnic and sectarian population. It also raises questions about whether and how the coalition’s strategic priorities in Iraq and Syria might come into conflict with Kurdish groups’ apparent objectives to (1) maximize their control over territory and resources they claim and (2) significantly weaken non-Kurdish groups in their vicinity that are seen as posing potential threats.

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<sup>111</sup> U.N. Document S/2016/77, Second Report of the Secretary-General Pursuant to Paragraph 7 of Resolution 2233 (2015), January 26, 2016.

<sup>112</sup> Amnesty International, *Banished and Dispossessed: Forced Displacement and Deliberate Destruction in Northern Iraq*, January 2016.

<sup>113</sup> Amnesty International, “Northern Iraq: Satellite images back up evidence of deliberate mass destruction in Peshmerga-controlled Arab villages,” January 20, 2016.

<sup>114</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-run Enclaves of Syria*, June 19, 2014.

<sup>115</sup> Amnesty International, “Syria, US Ally’s Razing of Villages Amounts to War Crimes,” October 13, 2015.



## **U.S. Policy Issues**

Some Members of Congress have considered the following issues in assessing policy options related to U.S. support for Kurdish groups fighting the Islamic State organization in Iraq and Syria:

- Risks that that U.S. equipment provided to Kurdish groups could fall under the control of the Islamic State or other actors actively working against U.S. regional goals.
- Means for better providing U.S. and international humanitarian assistance to support the needs of displaced persons in the Kurdish-controlled areas of Iraq and Syria.
- The extent to which the United States can influence the decisions of various Kurdish groups and the extent to which Kurdish decisions may reshape the strategic context in which the United States is pursuing its own goals.
- The nature of the PYD/YPG's apparent links with the PKK, and related Turkish concerns.
- Other actors' relationships with various Kurdish groups, including the Syrian and Iraqi governments, Russia, and Iran.

Questions reflected in legislative and executive policy discussions as of mid-2016 include:

- What roles should Kurdish ground forces in Iraq and Syria play in U.S.-supported operations, particularly those to take IS strongholds such as Mosul and Raqqa, and in post-conflict administration?
- To what extent should Congress authorize (or require) the Administration to provide arms or assistance directly to the KRG, the YPG, or forces affiliated with them? To what extent, if at all, should caps or conditions (such as those related to central government approvals, end-use monitoring, human rights practices, or good governance) be placed on arms shipments or assistance? How might other U.S. partners and adversaries view such assistance and respond?
- How might various types of U.S. military and political support for specific Kurdish or Kurdish-led groups affect (1) prospects for political cooperation or resolution among Kurds and between different ethnic, sectarian, and ideological groups in Iraq and Syria, (2) regional security, and (3) long-term U.S. commitments? What alternatives exist to continued cooperation with Kurdish forces to achieve stated U.S. objectives in the conflict?

## **Conclusion: The Trajectory of the U.S.-Kurdish Partnership**

As anti-IS operations continue, U.S. officials appear inclined to embrace the benefits Kurdish ground forces can provide in Iraq and Syria. At the same time, U.S. officials seem to focus on addressing and resolving limitations or complications that may arise from U.S.-Kurdish partnerships. For example, officials may be seeking to augment the Kurds' military successes with the empowerment of non-Kurdish forces that can command political legitimacy among local populations in predominantly Sunni Arab areas such as Mosul and Raqqa. U.S. officials may also

be looking to minimize disruptions in U.S. relations with other partners—such as the Iraqi and Turkish governments.

The future trajectory of the U.S.-Kurdish partnership beyond current anti-IS cooperation is unclear and could largely depend on how the current cooperation and its outcomes unfold. Might the present joint efforts translate into a longer-term partnership in a region riven by chronic instability, ethnosectarian tension, and weapons proliferation? Policymakers might conclude that greater U.S.-Kurdish closeness could promote greater stability and political resolution due to some Kurdish groups’

- active support for U.S. operations in recent decades;
- general embrace of secular political leadership; and
- relative prosperity amid the complexities and tribulations of their surroundings.

Alternatively, policymakers might conclude that greater U.S.-Kurdish closeness could work against stability in the region due to some Kurdish groups’

- possible efforts to maximize their influence, wealth, power, and status (potentially including attempts to gain independence or more autonomy) at the expense of non-Kurdish actors;
- treatment of civilians in areas over which they have recently gained control; and
- political disputes among themselves, both inside and across national borders.

Ultimately, U.S. policy on this question may depend on a number of factors. These include the degree to which the United States is willing to maintain or undertake long-term political or military commitments in the region, and Kurdish groups’ value as partners—relative to other state and non-state actors—in contributing to U.S. objectives in that context.

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