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Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response

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Summary

The rise of the insurgent terrorist group known as the Islamic State (IS, aka the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or ISIL/ISIS) and Russia's military intervention on behalf of the Syrian government have reshaped debates over U.S. policy toward the ongoing civil conflict in Syria, now in its sixth year. The Islamic State controls large areas of northeastern and central Syria, from which it continues to launch assaults on forces opposed to and aligned with the government of President Bashar al Asad. Meanwhile, fighting elsewhere pits government forces and their foreign allies against a range of anti-government insurgents, some of whom have received limited U.S. assistance. Russian military intervention in support of Asad poses a direct challenge to U.S. goals in Syria, and is raising new questions about the future of the conflict and U.S. strategy.

Since March 2011, the conflict has driven more than 4.8 million Syrians into neighboring countries as refugees (out of a total population of more than 22 million). More than 6.1 million other Syrians are internally displaced and are among more than 13.5 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance. The United States remains the largest bilateral provider of such assistance, with more than $5.5 billion in U.S. funding identified to date. The United States also has allocated more than $500 million to date for assistance programs in Syria, including the provision of nonlethal equipment to select opposition groups. President Obama requested $238.5 million in FY2017 funding for such assistance. The Administration also requested $250 million in FY2017 defense funds for its Syria Train and Equip program.

Syrian officials and their Russian and Iranian backers have stated their conditional willingness to serve as "counterterrorism" partners of the United States in Syria, provided that U.S. officials accept a role for the Asad government as a bulwark against Sunni Islamist extremism. Whereas in the past Administration officials have described a "fundamental strategic disagreement" with Russia over Syria and Asad's future, in 2016 the Administration has explored the possibility of cooperation with Russia against terrorist groups in Syria in conjunction with efforts to obtain a lasting cessation of hostilities between pro-Asad forces and armed opposition groups. Some Members of Congress and observers have argued that the United States should seek to compel Asad to negotiate or act militarily to protect Syrian civilians. Others have expressed concern that disorderly regime change could further empower extremists or that civilian protection missions could prolong the conflict or involve the United States too deeply in long-term stabilization.

U.S. officials and Members of Congress continue to debate how best to pursue U.S. regional security and counterterrorism goals in Syria without inadvertently strengthening Asad, the Islamic State, or other anti-U.S. armed Islamist groups. Anti-Asad armed forces and their activist counterparts have improved their coordination in some cases and share antipathy toward Russian and Iranian intervention, but they remain divided over tactics, strategy, and their long-term political goals. Powerful Sunni Islamist forces seek outcomes that are contrary in significant ways to stated U.S. preferences for Syria's political future. The United Nations Security Council has endorsed new efforts at negotiation and has created an investigative body empowered to assign responsibility for the use of chemicals as a weapon of war in Syria.

The 114th Congress is now considering proposed appropriations (H.R. 5293, S. 3000, S. 3117 and H.R. 5912) and authorization legislation (H.R. 4909 and S. 2943) related to Syria. For more information, see CRS Report R43612, *The Islamic State and U.S. Policy*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted) .

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Overview

The resilience of the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS/ISIL or by the Arabic acronym *Da'esh*) and Russia's ongoing military intervention on behalf of President Bashar al Asad's government have reshaped debates over U.S. policy toward the ongoing civil conflict, which has driven more than 4.8 million Syrians into neighboring countries as refugees. The Islamic State controls large areas of northeastern and central Syria, from which it continues to launch assaults on forces aligned with the Asad government as well as other armed groups, including some who oppose the government. Fighting elsewhere pits government forces and their foreign allies (chiefly Russia, Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iraqi Shia militia groups) against a range of anti-government insurgents, some of whom have received limited U.S. assistance. U.S. and Turkish military operations in northwest Syria have severed the group's remaining access to the Turkish border. While progress has been made in reducing the amount of territory held by IS fighters in both Syria and Iraq, competition and discord between and among local actors in both countries continue to create complications for U.S. officials, as does intervention by and competition among regional and extra-regional actors, including Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Arab Gulf states.

In Congress, Members are weighing the relative risks and rewards of action in Syria against the Islamic State and the Asad government while conducting oversight of U.S. lethal and nonlethal assistance to vetted members of select opposition groups, including the provision of military training, arms, and defensive protection. President Obama's FY2017 budget requests for foreign operations and defense seek more than $4 billion in Syria- and Iraq-related assistance funding for programs in those two countries and the surrounding region. The 114th Congress also has considered proposals to authorize the use of military force against the Islamic State organization.

The negative effects of the humanitarian and regional security crises emanating from Syria appear to be beyond the power of any single actor, including the United States, to independently contain or fully address. The region-wide flood of Syrian refugees, the growth of armed extremist groups in Syria, and the spread of conflict to neighboring Lebanon and Iraq have negatively affected overall regional stability. To date, U.S. policymakers and their counterparts have appeared to feel both compelled to respond to these crises and cautious in considering potentially risky options for doing so, such as the commitment of military combat forces or the provision of large-scale material assistance to armed elements of the opposition. Russia's forceful entrance into the conflict in 2015 bolstered flagging pro-Asad forces, but may not fundamentally change the ability of the Asad government to reassert control over all of Syria. In light of these conditions and trends, Congress may face tough choices about U.S. policy toward Syria and related U.S. relief and security assistance programs for years to come.

FY2017 Legislation and Issues for Congress

The 114th Congress has considered FY2017 appropriations (H.R. 5293, S. 3000, S. 3117 and H.R. 5912) and defense authorization legislation (H.R. 4909 and S. 2943) related to Syria, and has debated proposals to authorize the use of military force against the Islamic State. Key issues under consideration in relation to legislation in the 114th Congress include:

- **What is the United States' overall strategy toward the Syria conflict in general and toward the Islamic State in Syria and the Asad government in particular?** Members of Congress continue to express a range of views concerning U.S. strategy toward the conflict in Syria, combatting the Islamic State, and coordinating responses to the crises in Iraq and Syria. Several

legislative proposals call on the Administration to provide Congress with new or updated strategy reports on these topics.

- **What authority and funding should be provided for U.S. assistance to Syrians, including assistance to opposition elements?** While some proposals to rescind funding and authority for the Syria Train and Equip program have thus far failed to garner sufficient congressional support for enactment, Members continue to debate the proper scope, pace, and goals of the program, especially in light of reports of past program setbacks. The overarching authority for the program provided in the FY2015 NDAA (NDAA, P.L. 113-291) expires after December 31, 2016, although some activities envisioned under the redesigned program could arguably proceed pursuant to other authorities. Legislative proposals under consideration for FY2017 would extend the duration of the program's authority and alter existing funding arrangements for the program.
- **How if at all should the United States respond to calls for a no-fly zone or safe zones for the protection of civilians in areas of Syria?** The terms of the cessation of hostilities negotiated by the United States and Russia call for the end of Syrian combat operations over opposition-held areas. If Syrian forces do not abide by these terms, there may be renewed calls for the establishment of areas safe from air attack. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter has stated that the establishment of a humanitarian safe zone would be "a major combat mission."[1]
- **What responsibility does the United States have to protect U.S.-backed forces that come under attack?** The Obama Administration has committed to protecting forces receiving U.S. training and assistance, including train and equip program participants and select Kurdish and non-Kurdish forces. To date, various Syrian forces trained or equipped by the United States have come under attack by the Syrian government, Russia, the Nusra Front (now known as Jabhat Fatah al Sham), the Islamic State, and Turkey—with varied U.S. responses.
- **Can the United States exert additional pressure on the Syrian government?** Members continue to debate additional measures that might be effective in reducing Syrian government violence. H.R. 5732 (known as the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2016) would require the President to impose sanctions on foreign persons and entities that finance, do business with, support, or act on behalf of the Syrian government or government-controlled entities. Although the Administration has many of these authorities under existing executive orders, implementation has been at the discretion of the executive branch.
- **To what extent should the United States seek cooperation with Russia in order to promote a political settlement and reduce levels of violence?** U.S. officials have encouraged Russia to use its leverage with the Syrian government to reduce strikes against civilian targets, but it is unclear whether U.S. attempts to cooperate with Russia on this effort will lead to significant reductions in Syrian government strikes. At the same time, Russian military operations in Syria have created new operational considerations for the ongoing coalition air campaign against the Islamic State as well as for proposals for other types of intervention, including the establishment of safe zones or no-fly zones.

These issues are discussed in more detail below (see "U.S. Policy and Assistance").

[1] Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense, May 6, 2015.

Figure 1. Syria: Areas of Influence

Conflict Synopsis

2011: Protests Emerge. In March 2011, protests broke out in the southern province of Dar'a. The unrest was sparked by the arrest of a group of school children, but reflected long-standing political and socioeconomic grievances. Largely peaceful protesters called for political and economic reforms rather than the removal of the Asad government. At the same time, a small armed element was also present within some of the protests. As security forces responded with mass arrests and occasionally opened fire on demonstrators, protests became larger and spread to other towns and provinces.

The opposition movement eventually coalesced into two umbrella groups—one political, one armed—and both based primarily in exile. Political groups merged to form the Syrian National Council (SNC), although members struggled to establish trust and develop shared goals. A small number of junior military defectors formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which claimed

leadership over the armed opposition but whose authority was generally unrecognized by local armed groups. Ongoing violence, primarily but not exclusively on the part of the Syrian government, prompted President Obama in August 2011 to call for Syrian President Asad to step aside. Meanwhile Al Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq tasked some of its members to commence operations in Syria under the banner of a new group known as Jabhat al Nusra (aka the Nusra Front). In December 2011, the first Nusra Front suicide attacks hit government buildings in downtown Damascus.

2012: Insurgency. In 2012, the conflict became increasingly violent, as the government began to use artillery and fixed wing aircraft against opposition targets. Extremist attacks became more frequent—between November 2011 and December 2012, the Nusra Front claimed responsibility for nearly 600 attacks in Syria, ranging from more than 40 suicide attacks to small arms and improvised explosive device operations.[2] In February 2012, the United States closed its embassy in Damascus, citing security concerns. Local armed groups began to seize pockets of territory around the country, primarily in rural areas. A July bombing in downtown Damascus killed several senior regime officials, including the then-Minister of Defense. Concerns about regime tactics became more acute, and President Obama in August declared that

> We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized.... We have communicated in no uncertain terms with every player in the region that that's a red line for us and that there would be enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons.[3]

The international community also increased efforts to seek a negotiated solution to the conflict. In June, the United States and Russia signed the Geneva Communiqué, which called for the establishment of a transitional governing body with full executive powers.[4] The document, which became the basis of future negotiations between the government and the opposition, did not clarify the role of Asad in any future government. Meanwhile, Syria's political opposition remained divided and in flux. In November, the SNC became part of a larger umbrella group known as the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (aka the Syrian Opposition Coalition, SOC), a move which some described as an effort to dilute the influence of Islamist members.

2013: Proxy War and Chemical Weapons. In March 2013, rebels seized the city of Raqqah, which became the first provincial capital to fall out of government control. A series of other opposition victories in the area led the government to effectively concede control of Syria's rural northeast to the opposition. At the same time, the Asad government received military and intelligence support from Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, as well as political backing from Russia. In turn, the United States, Turkey, and some European and Arab Gulf states increased their support to the Syrian opposition—each prioritizing their own interests and at times working at cross purposes.

In April, the United Kingdom and France reported to the United Nations that there was evidence that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons (CW) on multiple occasions since

[2] "Terrorist Designations of the al-Nusrah Front as an Alias for al-Qa'ida in Iraq," Press Statement by State Department Spokesperson Victoria Nuland, December 11, 2012.

[3] President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps, August 20, 2012.

[4] Action Group for Syria, Final Communiqué, June 30, 2012.

December 2012.[5] In August, the United States attributed a large-scale CW attack on the Damascus suburb of Ghouta to the Syrian government.[6] President Obama requested congressional approval of a limited authorization for the use of military force to respond.[7] The following month, Russia negotiated an agreement for the Syrian government to dispose of its CW stockpiles and destroy associated facilities in exchange for staving off a U.S. military response.

2014: Caliphate and Operation Inherent Resolve. In February 2014, Al Qaeda formally disavowed the Islamic State (IS, then known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham, aka ISIL/ISIS) because of the Islamic State's interference in Syria and its demands that the Nusra Front recognize IS leadership. After the Nusra Front and other opposition groups forced IS fighters from some areas of northwestern Syria, IS fighters seized vast stretches of territory in central and northeast Syria from local armed groups and in June declared the establishment of a caliphate spanning areas of both Syria and Iraq. Thousands of foreign fighters traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State.

In August, the United States began airstrikes in neighboring Iraq to stop the group's territorial advance and reduce the threat to U.S. personnel in Iraq. U.S. forces also airdropped humanitarian supplies to Yazidis trapped on Mount Sinjar in Iraq. In September, the United States expanded airstrikes to Syria, with the goal of preventing the Islamic State from using Syria as a base for its operations in Iraq. A subsequent air campaign to lift the IS siege on the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane brought the United States into partnership with the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which U.S. officials have come to view as among the United States' most effective partners in the anti-IS campaign. In September 2014, Congress authorized the Administration to begin a train and equip program for select Syrian forces.[8]

2015: Train & Equip Begins, Russia Enters the Fray. In 2015, the Syrian government faced a number of additional territorial losses. Opposition forces captured the provincial capital of Idlib in northwestern Syria and surrounding areas with the support of Al Qaeda-linked fighters. Islamic State fighters seized territory in central Homs province, and Kurdish fighters expanded their control over areas along the Turkish border. In May, the United States began training the first batch of recruits for the Syria Train and Equip Program. The program was designed to build a local force capable of fighting the Islamic State, protecting opposition-held areas, and "promoting the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria."

Over the summer of 2015, Russia began a gradual buildup of Russian personnel, combat aircraft, and military equipment inside Syria, and began airstrikes in September. The following month, the

[5] Letter dated 22 March 2013 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, U.N. Document S/2013/184, March 22, 2013.

[6] The White House, Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013, August 30, 2013. United Nations investigations confirmed that a chemical attack took place but its September and December 2013 reports did not address attribution. See U.N. Document A/67/997–S/2013/553, Report of the United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic on the alleged use of chemical weapons in the Ghouta area of Damascus on 21 August 2013, September 16, 2013; and, United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic, Final Report, December 2013.

[7] President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President Before Meeting with Members of Congress on the Situation in Syria, September 3, 2013.

[8] The FY2015 Continuing Resolution (P.L. 113-164, "the FY2015 CR") contained temporary authorization for the training and equipping of vetted Syrians that differed from the Administration's requests and expired on December 11, 2014. The FY2015 NDAA (Sections 1209, 1510, and 1534 of Division A of P.L. 113-291) and the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2015 ('Counterterrorism Partnership Fund' and Section 9016 of P.L. 113-235) provided further authority and funding guidance for the program.

United States and Russia signed a memorandum of understanding to establish a safety-of-flight protocol for aircraft operating in the same airspace. Also in October, challenges in implementation led the Administration to modify the Syria Train and Equip program to focus on equipping existing units commanded by vetted leaders. Kurdish YPG forces that had received U.S. support in operations at Kobane merged with a small number of non-Kurdish groups to form the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which began to receive U.S. support.

Implications of Russia's Military Intervention

Russian strikes initially focused on Syrian opposition targets, including some groups reportedly backed by the United States.[9] In 2016, Russia expanded its targeting to include Islamic State forces, although it continued to occasionally target U.S.-backed rebel groups.[10] Russia also continues to resupply Syrian military forces, although Russian officials have stated that they are merely fulfilling existing bilateral contracts.

The series of losses suffered by Syrian government forces in 2015 may have contributed to Russia's decision to enter the conflict directly when it did. Russian concerns about U.S. and other third party security assistance to Syrian opposition groups, and the potential for broader U.S.-led coalition military operations in Syria, also may have been motivating factors. Russian leaders have blocked action in the U.N. Security Council that would have increased pressure on the Asad regime for its conduct, and Russia remains an outspoken critic of what it describes as unwarranted external interference aimed at regime change in Syria and elsewhere.

Russian involvement has enabled pro-Asad forces to reverse opposition gains, particularly around Aleppo. Russia's introduction of advanced air defense systems in Syria (reportedly including the S-400)[11] also constrains the ability of other aircraft to operate freely in the area—complicating proposals calling for the establishment of a no-fly zone. At the same time, Russia has used its involvement in Syria to push for cooperation between U.S. and Russian military forces in Syria against terrorist groups—which in Russia's view includes any group fighting the Asad government.

2016: Cessation of Hostilities and Increased Dialogue with Russia. In February 2016, the United States and Russia negotiated a cessation of hostilities (CoH) between pro-government and opposition forces, and agreed to use their respective influence with the warring sides to implement the agreement. The CoH excluded the Islamic State and the Nusra Front, which remained legitimate targets for attack by all parties. The CoH was widely violated by all sides and was criticized for lacking enforcement and accountability mechanisms. Nonetheless, U.S. officials stated that it led to a decrease in violence in some areas. In summer 2016, reports began to emerge suggesting that the United States was considering cooperation with Russia to target groups such as the Nusra Front.[12] Possibly driven in part by these reports, the Nusra Front in July 2016 announced that it was reconstituting itself as an independent group and changing its name to *Jabhat Fatah al Sham* (Levant Conquest Front). U.S. officials downplayed the announcement as a rebranding effort, noting the continued role and presence of Al Qaeda operatives within the Front.

[9] "Russians Strike Targets in Syria, but Not ISIS Areas," *New York Times*, September 30, 2015.

[10] "Russia's attack on U.S.-backed rebels in Syria puzzles, frustrates the Pentagon," *Military Times*, June 23, 2016.

[11] "Russia S-400 Syria missile deployment sends robust signal," *BBC*, December 1, 2015.

[12] "Obama proposes new military partnership with Russia in Syria," *Washington Post*, June 30, 2016.

Recent Developments

Military

U.S.-Backed Forces Retake Manbij

U.S. and coalition military operations against the Islamic State in northwest Syria have long sought to sever the group's access to the Turkish border and gradually move toward the group's declared capital at Raqqah. Islamic State control over the so-called "Manbij pocket"—the area bound by Azaz in the west, the Turkish border in the north, Al Bab to the south, and the Euphrates river to the east (see **Figure 2**)—served as the remaining connection point for the Islamic State to the outside world and provided a key supply and foreign fighter transit route.

In late May 2016, predominantly Arab SDF forces referred to as the Syrian Arab Coalition launched a new offensive to retake the area, backed by Kurdish fighters. U.S. and coalition forces provided ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance) support for the Manbij operation, and maintain advisors with the SDF on the ground.[13] Efforts to take the town were challenged by heavy IS resistance, as well as the continued presence of what military officials estimated to be thousands of civilians, some of which IS fighters have used as human shields.[14] In July, reports emerged that U.S. strikes had killed dozens of civilians around Manbij. At least two allegations of civilian deaths resulting from U.S. strikes are under formal investigation.[15] In August, SDF forces captured the town of Manbij. A convoy of a "hundred to a couple hundred" IS fighters was permitted to exit the city because fighters in each vehicle were reportedly intermingled with civilians.[16]

Aleppo

Aleppo, Syria's most populous city, has been divided into regime and opposition-held areas since 2012. The Syrian government has been working to cut off access to opposition areas of the city, and in July 2016 was able to sever Castello Road north of the city, cutting off the last remaining access point into opposition-held eastern Aleppo. An objective years in the making, the offensive reportedly involved not only Syrian government troops but also Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, and Iranian ground forces units. The U.N. has estimated that approximately 275,000 civilians remain trapped inside the eastern half of the city. In August, opposition groups led by Jabhat Fatah al Sham (JFS, formerly the Nusra Front) temporarily created an access point to besieged eastern Aleppo by retaking territory to the southwest of the city, but they have been unable to secure the area, which does not have infrastructure that would allow the wide-scale passage of aid. The agreement announced by the United States and Russia in September (discussed below) contains some provisions regarding securing civilian and humanitarian access to Aleppo, and also calls on opposition groups to distance themselves from JFS.

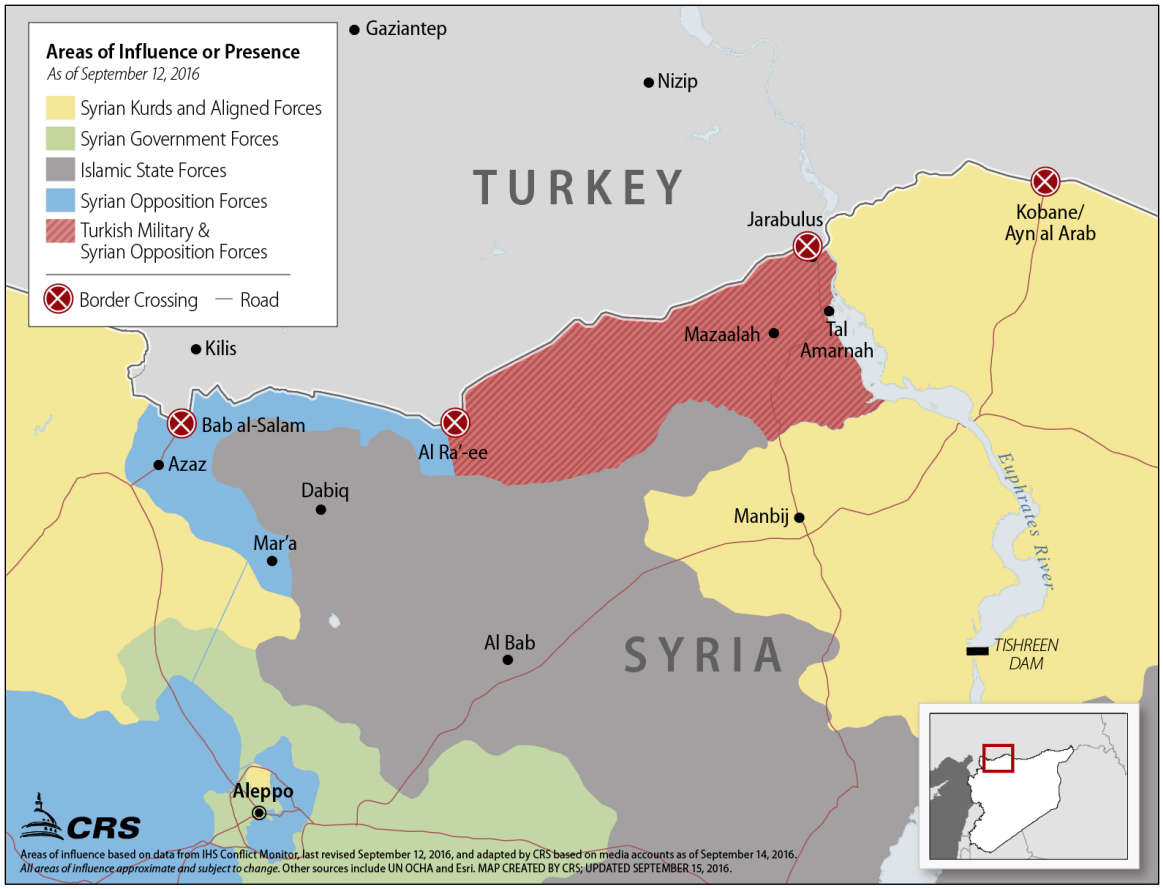
[13] Department of Defense Press Briefing by Col. Garver via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq, June 8, 2016.

[14] Department of Defense Press Briefing by Colonel Garver via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq, July 22, 2016.

[15] Department of Defense Press Briefing by Col. Garver via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq, August 3, 2016.

[16] Department of Defense Press Briefing by Colonel Garver via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq, August 16, 2016.

Figure 2. Syrian-Turkish Border



Turkish Forces Cross into Northern Syria

In August 2016, U.S. and Turkish aircraft supported an incursion by Turkish special forces and armored vehicles into the Syrian border town of Jarabulus. The operation, which also involved some Syrian rebels, was nominally intended to clear Jarabulus of IS fighters. However, a Turkish presidential spokesman stated that the operation was aimed at neutralizing threats that Turkey perceives from both the Islamic State and the YPG,[17] which had advanced northward toward Jarabulus after clearing the city of Manbij. Turkey has previously expressed concern that the YPG could create a contiguous area of Kurdish control along the Turkish border by unifying its eastern and western cantons (shaded yellow in **Figure 1**). Kurdish forces—predominantly YPG fighters—already control the majority of the Syrian border to the east of the Euphrates river. Turkey considers the YPG to be the Syrian arm of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which both Turkey and the United States have designated as a terrorist group. The United States does not view the YPG as a terrorist organization, though there is some evidence to support Turkish claims of ties between the two groups.[18]

[17] Amberin Zaman, "Turkish Troops Enter Syria to Fight ISIS, May also Target U.S.-Backed Kurdish Militia," Woodrow Wilson Center, August 24, 2016.

[18] Aaron Stein and Michelle Foley, "The YPG-PKK Connection," Atlantic Council, January 26, 2016.

In early September, U.S. military officials reported that the Turkish military had sealed off the border area, and that interaction between the Turkish military and the SDF was "relatively peaceful."[19] In mid-September, U.S. military officials announced that U.S. special forces would partner with the Turkish military and Syrian opposition forces in northern Syria in a train, advise, and assist capacity.

For additional background, see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted) , and CRS Report R44513, *Kurds in Iraq and Syria: U.S. Partners Against the Islamic State*, coordinated by (name redacted)

Syrian Air Force Targets U.S.-backed Forces

In mid-August, the United States scrambled aircraft in response to Syrian airstrikes against Kurdish fighters in the eastern province of Al-Hasakah. U.S. officials stated that the Syrian airstrikes occurred in "close proximity" to where U.S. personnel were operating.[20] Following the attack, additional U.S. combat air patrols were sent to the area to protect personnel on the ground.[21] U.S. officials emphasized that the area was "not a no-fly zone," but added that Syrian forces "would be wise to avoid areas where coalition forces have been operating."[22] U.S. officials have since faced questions about what some characterize as a willingness by the United States to protect Syrian Kurdish allies from attack by Syrian forces but not from attack by Turkish forces.

Syria-Iraq-Jordan Tri-border Area

U.S.-backed forces have established a base of operation at the At-Tanf garrison in southeastern Syria, near to where Syria, Jordan, and Iraq intersect—known as the tri-border area. In late June, U.S.-backed opposition forces based at At-Tanf—some of whom were trained during the initial phase of the Defense Department's Syria Train and Equip program[23]—conducted an offensive against the Syrian town of Abu Kamal, along the Iraqi border. The Syrian forces, known as the New Syrian Army (NSA), were routed by Islamic State fighters, who seized U.S. equipment and displayed their acquisitions on social media. U.S. officials described the operation as "not an overwhelming defeat because the New Syrian Army is still in the fight."[24] In August, Islamic State forces again attacked NSA forces at Al Tanf.[25] The base was previously struck twice by Russian airstrikes. These Russian strikes, as well as the Syrian airstrikes against Kurdish forces in Al Hasakah, highlight one of the key issues in the policy debate on Syria—that of how the United States should respond to strikes against U.S.-backed forces.

U.S. Strike on Syrian Military Forces

On September 17, U.S. military officials stated that they had halted a strike in eastern Syria after being informed by Russia that the vehicles and personnel targeted were possibly part of the

[19] Department of Defense Press Briefing by Col. Dorrian via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq, September 8, 2016.

[20] State Department press briefing by Deputy Spokesperson Mark C. Toner, August 23, 2016.

[21] "DoD: Syrian Regime Airstrikes Near Hasakah Put Coalition Forces at Risk," *DoD News*, August 19, 2016.

[22] Department of Defense Press Briefing by Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook in the Pentagon Briefing Room, August 22, 2016.

[23] Department of Defense Press Briefing by Col. Garver via Teleconference From Baghdad, Iraq, July 6, 2016.

[24] Ibid.

[25] "Islamic State hits U.S.-backed Syrian rebel base near Iraq border," Reuters, August 7, 2016.

Syrian military.[26] Syrian and Russian officials stated that 62 Syrian troops were killed in the strikes, and approximately 100 injured. Russia called an emergency meeting of the Security Council to discuss the incident, which represents the first time U.S. forces have engaged the Syrian military since kinetic operations began in Syria in September 2014. In a statement, Pentagon officials stated that coalition forces believed they were striking Islamic State militants near Dayr az Zawr, and that Russian officials notified of the operation earlier that day had voiced no concerns.[27] U.S. officials expressed regret for any mistaken coalition airstrike, and stated that "coalition forces would not intentionally strike a known Syrian military unit."[28] Britain, Denmark, and Australia have also acknowledged that their aircraft participated in the strike.

Political

September 2016 Cessation of Hostilities

The Syrian government has separately negotiated a series of local cease-fires in some opposition-held towns. These are generally viewed as primarily favoring the Syrian government, both by freeing up soldiers for other battles and by allowing the government to resolve individual trouble spots while avoiding a broader political settlement. In late August, the Syrian government and rebel fighters came to agreement in the Damascus-area town of Daraya, which had been under government siege since 2012. Rebel fighters and civilians were transferred to Idlib province, while Daraya was reclaimed by government forces.

On September 9, Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced a new agreement designed to reduce violence and resume progress toward a political settlement. Secretary Kerry framed the agreement as one that, if implemented, would eventually result in the cessation of Syrian combat operations over opposition-held areas. According to Kerry, the agreement would begin with "seven days of a genuine reduction in violence" and unrestricted humanitarian access to besieged areas, effective sundown local time on September 12. After seven days of continuous adherence to the cessation of hostilities and humanitarian access, the United States and Russia would establish a Joint Implementation Center (JIC) to target the Islamic State and the Nusra Front (now known as Jabhat Fatah al Sham/the Levant Conquest Front).[29] Such cooperation would be predicated on Russia's ability to prevent Syrian government forces from conducting airstrikes on opposition-controlled areas. Kerry also stated that U.S.-backed opposition groups would need to distance themselves from the Nusra Front in order to preserve their legitimacy.

According to Kerry, the agreement also includes some specific provisions in designated geographic areas—such as requiring all sides to pull back from Castello Road in Aleppo, and the creation of a demilitarized zone around the area that would permit the resumption of humanitarian and civilian traffic. To date, the full text of the agreement has not been made publicly available. While Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that the Syrian government has accepted the agreement, Syrian President Asad declared that the Syrian government is determined to recover all areas of

[26] Coalition halts airstrike in progress against possible Syrian military position, September 17, 2016.

[27] Statement by Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook on Coalition Airstrike in Syria, September 17, 2016.

[28] Coalition halts airstrike in progress against possible Syrian military position, September 17, 2016.

[29] Remarks by Secretary of State John Kerry with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura in Geneva, Switzerland, September 9, 2016.

the country from "the terrorists."[30] As of mid-September, violence had been reduced, although the United Nations stated that the Syrian government was not yet allowing full humanitarian access.

Prospects for Peace Negotiations

Since 2012, the Syrian government and opposition have participated in U.N.-brokered negotiations under the framework of the Geneva Communiqué. Endorsed by both the United States and Russia, the Geneva Communiqué calls for the establishment of a transitional governing body with full executive powers. According to the document, such a government "could include members of the present government and the opposition and other groups and shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent."[31] The document does not discuss the future of Asad.

Subsequent negotiations have made little progress, as both sides have adopted differing interpretations of the agreement. The opposition has said that any transitional government must exclude Asad. The Syrian government maintains that Asad was reelected (by referendum) in 2014,[32] and notes that the Geneva Communiqué does not explicitly require him to step down. In the Syrian government's view, a transitional government can be achieved by simply expanding the existing government to include members of the opposition. Asad has also stated that a political transition cannot occur until "terrorism" has been defeated.

In late 2015, Syria's various international backers met in Vienna, resulting in the dissemination of two documents: the Vienna Communiqué on Syria (issued October 30)[33] and the Statement of the International Syria Support Group of November 14, 2015.[34] Referred to collectively as the "Vienna Statements," they affirmed the unity, independence, territorial integrity, and secular character of Syria. They stated that Syria's state institutions would remain intact, and that the rights of all ethnic and religious minorities would be protected. Reaffirming their commitment to a political transition based on the Geneva Communiqué, they called for a new constitution and elections. They also set a target date of January 1, 2016, for the resumption of formal negotiations between the government and the opposition, and called upon the Syrian opposition to select negotiating representatives. The opposition did so during a December 2015 meeting in Riyadh, which established the opposition High Negotiations Committee (HNC).[35]

In addition, the Vienna Statements expressed support for a Syrian-led political process that would, "within a target date of six months, establish credible, inclusive, and nonsectarian governance and set a schedule and process for drafting a new constitution. Free and fair elections would be held pursuant to the new constitution within 18 months." On December 18, the U.N. Security Council unanimously passed UNSCR 2254, which endorsed the Vienna Statements.[36]

In January 2016, the HNC participated in indirect talks with the Syrian government, but these soon dissolved amid ongoing government violence. The CoH signed in February was strongly

[30] "Assad vows to retake Syria, calling into question impending cease-fire," *Washington Post*, September 12, 2016

[31] Action Group for Syria, Final Communiqué, June 30, 2012, http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf.

[32] "Syrian President Bashar al-Assad wins third term," *BBC*, June 5, 2014.

[33] Vienna Communiqué on Syria, October 30, 2015, https://damascus.usembassy.gov/statedept103015en1.html.

[34] Statement of the International Syria Support Group, November 14, 2015, http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/11/249511.htm.

[35] The Kurdish PYD—which controls much of northern Syria via its YPG militia forces—has been excluded from the above negotiations, reportedly at the behest of Turkey and members of the Sunni Arab opposition.

[36] United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, S/RES/2254 (2015).

backed by U.S. officials, who recognized that the U.S. goal of bringing the Syrian opposition back to the negotiating table would be challenging without a reduction in violence and improved humanitarian access.[37] Despite some progress on both fronts, the last round of U.N.-brokered peace negotiations between the Syrian government and members of the opposition closed in April 2016 without achieving significant results. The agreement announced in September by the United States and Russia is ostensibly designed to create the conditions for the resumption of negotiations.

Humanitarian[38]

Violence, insecurity, government and opposition interference, the closure of key border points, bureaucratic procedures, and resource shortfalls continued to hinder aid delivery, particularly to an estimated 5.5 million people in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. These included areas controlled by government forces or under opposition control, and eastern provinces under Islamic State control.[39] Armed conflict has affected millions of Syrians, most recently in the city of Aleppo, in which an estimated 275,000 people in the eastern part were almost cut off amid heavy fighting and aerial bombardments, while in the western part of the city, where humanitarian organizations were able to operate, a further 1.5 million people were difficult to reach.

As of mid-September 2016, the security situation remained precarious. Despite some reduction in violence, the United Nations stated that it had not yet received sufficient security guarantees to be able to deliver aid to eastern Aleppo. In addition to the security situation for aid convoys, the United Nations also has reported on the challenges of procuring the necessary permits from the Syrian government to deliver aid to several areas it is otherwise ready to reach. As humanitarian access is critical to the cease-fire as well as movement toward a political solution, the pressure on humanitarian actors remained high to deliver assistance. On September 19, aid trucks operated by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent were reportedly hit by airstrikes outside Aleppo.

During the Syria conflict, systematic violations of human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL) have been widespread by all parties, including the Islamic State.[40] Civilian protection concerns include mass executions, systematic rape and sexual violence, torture, and appalling treatment of those in detention. Lack of access, food insecurity, health concerns (injuries, disease outbreaks, serious medical conditions and disabilities), inadequate shelter, and an economic recession coupled with growing poverty contribute to the vulnerability of millions of civilians.

As of September 2016, an estimated 13.5 million people inside Syria, more than half the population, were in need of humanitarian and protection assistance, including 6 million children.[41] There were estimated to be more than 6.1 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Syria, but this number is imprecise and very fluid. Many Syrians, some of whom have been

[37] State Department Press Briefing by Mark C. Toner, Deputy Spokesperson, February 16, 2016.

[38] Prepared by (name redacted), Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy.

[39] With regard to access for relief aid workers in Syria, and U.N. cross-border and cross-line delivery of humanitarian aid to conflict affected areas without the Syrian Arab Republic Government's approval, see Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014) and 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015), August 16, 2016, S/2016/714.

[40] See Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/30/48, August 13, 2015.

[41] U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), "Syria Crisis Bi-Weekly Situation Report No. 12, September 2, 2016; UNOCHA, Global Humanitarian Appeal 2016 (Syria). The figures include an estimated 5.47 million Syrians living in besieged or hard-to-reach locations, half of whom were in central and eastern areas of the country controlled by the Islamic State organization.

displaced multiple times, leave their homes to escape violence and then return when conflict in their area decreases. It is not clear how many IDPs are affected by repeat displacements, nor if, or how often, they are included in IDP counts.

In addition, more than 4.8 million Syrians have registered as refugees abroad, with most fleeing to countries in the immediate surrounding region as well as Europe.[42] Experts recognize that some fleeing Syrians have not registered as refugees, presumably from fear or other reasons, and have chosen instead to blend in with the local population, living in rented accommodations and makeshift shelters, particularly in towns and cities. The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) estimates that more than 90% of Syrian refugees are living outside camps in mostly urban settings, where refugees may be difficult to identify and assist.

Interagency cross-line convoys and cross-border operations from Turkey and Jordan provided humanitarian assistance and protection services to millions of people across the country each month. In 2016, all 18 besieged locations were reached at least once.[43] In addition to the many assistance and protection concerns, by August, preparations for winter were well underway.

In December 2015, the United Nations, along with humanitarian partners, launched several appeals: the Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) appeal for $4.6 billion; and the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Syria for $3.1 billion.[44] Since 2011, U.N. appeals have remained significantly underfunded, which in 2015 resulted in cuts to food aid and cash assistance. As of September 2016, taken together, the 2016 appeals for Syria and the region were 43% funded. At a February 2016 pledging conference in London, donors pledged $11.3 billion, of which $5.9 billion is for 2016 and $5.4 billion is for 2017-2020.

The United States is the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to the Syria crisis. Since FY2012, it has allocated nearly $5.6 billion to meet humanitarian needs using existing funding from global humanitarian accounts and some reprogrammed funding.[45] The Administration's FY2017 budget request seeks nearly $6.2 billion in global humanitarian assistance. This includes $2.1 billion for Syria in Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funds provided through the Migration & Refugee Assistance (MRA) and International Disaster Assistance (IDA) accounts.

[42] UNOCHA, "Syrian Arab Republic: Humanitarian Snapshot," January 31, 2016. UNOCHA, "2016 Summary of Humanitarian Response Plan Monitoring Report, Syrian Arab Republic, January – June 2016." See also USAID, "Syria – Complex Emergency," Fact Sheet #4, Fiscal Year (FY) 2016, July 13, 2016 (most recent fact sheet available).

See also, International Organization for Migration, "Irregular Migrant, Refugee Arrivals in Europe Top One Million in 2015," December 22, 2015. In 2015, Europe was impacted by what many consider to be its worst refugee and migration crisis since World War II, as more than a million people fled conflict and poverty in neighboring regions. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees has asserted that more than 85% of those recently arriving in Europe are from refugee-producing countries, with many from Syria and Iraq.

[43] UNOCHA, "2016 Summary of Humanitarian Response Plan Monitoring Report, Syrian Arab Republic, January – June 2016."

[44] In order to help maximize efficiency, reduce duplication and ensure greater accountability, effectiveness and reach of humanitarian programming, the humanitarian community takes a whole-of-country approach in Syria.

[45] USAID, Syria Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #4, Fiscal Year (FY) 2016, July 13, 2016 (most recent fact sheet available).

U.S. Policy and Assistance

Debating U.S. Strategy and Policy

After initially calling for Bashar al Asad to step down, the Obama Administration has actively engaged since 2012 in multilateral efforts to reach a negotiated settlement between the Asad government and many of the opposition groups arrayed against it. This approach has been combined with nonlethal U.S. support to select opposition groups, reported covert assistance to some armed groups, overt training and assistance to vetted Syrian opposition forces for select purposes, and the often-stated assertion by Administration officials that "there is no military solution to the conflict." This assertion has appeared to reflect U.S. assessments of the balance of forces, their shifting fortunes, and the ebb and flow of the conflict over time. It also reflects the stated U.S. preference for some preservation of elements of the Syrian state apparatus over military developments that lead to state collapse. Some recent reports have raised questions about the extent of remaining Syrian state institutional capacity, particularly in the security sector.[46]

Over time, some observers have viewed U.S. assertions that there is "no military solution" as an implicit indication that the U.S. government views options that could support certain military objectives (such as a limited civilian protection mission or the forcible overthrow of Asad) as unacceptable in strategic, diplomatic, material, financial, humanitarian, or moral terms. U.S. officials also may judge that various proposals for more robust U.S. or other external military intervention would do little to resolve Syria's underlying political disputes. Given the range of actors and interests at play in Syria, it is debatable whether some proposed military courses of action would deliver greater stability or whether they would set the stage for further conflict, particularly with conflict in neighboring Iraq ongoing and tensions between regional and extra-regional actors running high.

Changes in battlefield dynamics over time—particularly the rise and success of the Islamic State organization and other Salafist-jihadist insurgent groups, the weakening of pro-Asad forces, and Russia's military intervention—have been accompanied by some shifts in U.S. policy and rhetoric about the conflict. While continuing to refer to a negotiated settlement as the aim of U.S. policy and stating that Asad has lost legitimacy, the Obama Administration has since mid-2014 publicly embraced limited overt intervention in the conflict in Syria. It requested and received congressional authority and funding for the training and equipping of vetted Syrians to counter terrorism and to contribute to conditions intended to lead to a negotiated settlement of the conflict. It also launched U.S. military operations against Islamic State and other extremist targets, and these operations have undermined extremist control in some areas of the country.

Prior to Russia's intervention, leading U.S. policymakers described an overall approach that remained engaged in the "political track," but U.S. statements tended to be circumspect about the prospects for political arrangements to bring about a durable settlement of the conflict.[47] In this regard, U.S. defense officials described both desirable and likely scenarios for near-term evolution in the conflict. Secretary of Defense Carter described the "best" scenario for the Syrian

[46] See Tobias Schneider, "The Decay of the Syrian Regime is Much Worse Than You Think," War on the Rocks (online), August 31, 2016.

[47] On June 16, 2015, Secretary of State Kerry said, "we are engaged in a number of efforts right now diplomatically and otherwise to see whether or not there might be some life in the political track, and it's too early to answer that question, but we are not simply sitting there and allowing this to happen without any efforts to see if there's a way to stop it." Secretary of State John Kerry, Press Availability, June 16, 2015.

people as one that would entail an agreed or managed removal of Asad and the coalescence of opposition forces with elements of the remaining Syrian state apparatus as U.S. partners in opposition to the Islamic State and other extremists.[48] In July 2015, Secretary Carter told the Senate Armed Services Committee that

> the outcome that we are aiming for is one in which Bashar al Assad and those who have been associated with his atrocities in Syria are removed and -- but the structures of government in Damascus and in Iraq [sic] that remain continue on our -- in an inclusively governed way that is multisectarian to get -- to include Alawites and others and that can then turn to the task of regaining its sovereign territory from ISIL to the east in a project that would look like what we are working with Baghdad to accomplish to its west in Iraq. That is the post-Asad transition that will be the best for the Syrian people and the best for our counter-ISIL strategy.[49]

Secretary Carter also warned that "further conflict, further civil war, and ethnic cleansing" could follow in a scenario in which the Asad regime collapsed, making a political transition "much to be preferred."[50]

Since late 2015, U.S. policy has reflected the Administration's desire to bring an end to the wider conflict while promoting multilateral cooperation against select groups, where possible. Developments that may have shaped evolution in U.S. policy include Russia's 2015 military intervention, the corresponding shift by pro-Asad forces from defense to offense in some areas, the weakening of the Islamic State, and shared U.S.-Russian concerns about the strength of other extremist groups. Administration officials and Members of Congress have expressed confidence about the course of the campaign against the Islamic State, but continue to debate measures that could place greater economic or military pressure on the Asad government or provide more or different levels of support to various U.S. partner forces.

Whether or not state preservation scenarios described as desirable by U.S. officials are feasible in the longer term is debatable. While U.S. officials and their counterparts in other governments may wish for some element of Syria's state apparatus and security services to be salvageable as a hedge against total state collapse, the true capacity and durability of Syria's state institutions is largely unknown. Some analysts doubt that the Syrian government has the capacity to defend and administer areas under its current control, much less reassert its control and administrative authority over areas of the country that have slipped from its grasp. Many armed and unarmed opposition groups have called for the removal and prosecution of all officials with "blood on their hands," including Asad, while calling for the preservation and reform of key security institutions. Others seek more fundamental change and have made hostile sectarian statements about the collective culpability of Syrian Alawites for the Asad government's conduct during the war.

Even if a transitional Syrian state acceptable to a sufficient segment of armed opposition forces were achieved, it may not prove to be capable of administering state services, dedicated to impartially providing justice according to the rule of law, or willing to partner with the United States and others against extremist groups. It is furthermore unclear whether the balance of

[48] On June 18, Secretary of Defense Carter said, "…the best way for the Syrian people for this to go would be for him to remove himself from the scene and there to be created, difficult as that will be, a new government of Syria based on the moderate opposition that we have been trying to build and support and then helping them strengthen themselves and to retake all of Syrian territory. That would be a desirable path if he did remove -- was removed from the scene or removed himself from the scene." Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, June 17, 2015.

[49] Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, July 7, 2015.

[50] Ibid.

power, in such a scenario, would lie with nonextremist opposition forces and the remnants of the Syrian state, even if somehow they were induced to work together. The prospect of Syria's dissolution into smaller de facto jurisdictions might allow for deeper U.S. partnership with individual groups or regions but might also provoke strong, self-interested, and disparate reactions from Syria's neighbors and outsiders like Iran and Russia. A more likely scenario than either a formal division of the country or reunification under moderate opposition forces may be one in which a de facto division of Syria prevails and the United States, its partners, and its adversaries must manage the negative consequences of an ambiguous, lasting conflict that is beyond their ability to resolve.

To date, Members of Congress have not reached a degree of consensus on the Syrian conflict that would allow Congress to offer its own detailed plan for responding to Russia's intervention, bringing the crisis to a close, supporting a political transition and reconstruction, or combatting the Islamic State and other extremists in Syria. Congress has acted to provide the Administration with new authorities and contingency funds to address the Syrian conflict, but has placed limits on newly authorized efforts and requires the Administration to use contingency authorities and funds to provide nonlethal support to armed opposition groups outside of the specially authorized Train and Equip program. Congress debated but did not grant President Obama authority to use military force in response to the Asad government's alleged use of chemical weapons in August 2013. Congress has yet to grant specific authorization for the use of military force against the Islamic State or new and specific authorization for the use of military force to defend U.S.-backed Syrian opposition forces from attacks by pro-Asad forces.

Over time, some voices in Congress have called for different forms of U.S. military intervention to protect civilians in select areas of the country or to weaken extremist groups. Some also favor an expansion of U.S. training and equipping of moderate opposition groups. Others in Congress have warned against the possible unintended consequences of deeper U.S. involvement. However, Congress also has not reached consensus on whether or how any reduction in involvement by the United States and its allies might better manage the negative consequences of ongoing, unmitigated conflict.

FY2017 Budget Requests for Syria

The FY2017 foreign assistance request for Syria reflects the two main elements of the Obama Administration's policy response: (1) humanitarian assistance to meet the needs of internally displaced Syrians and refugees in neighboring countries, and (2) continued political, economic, and nonlethal military support for national and local opposition groups. In addition to more than $238 million in foreign assistance funded programs, the Administration has requested $250 million in FY2017 defense funding to continue the Train and Equip program for vetted Syrians authorized by Congress in 2014.

The Administration's FY2017 request of more than $4 billion for Syria-Iraq-Islamic State-related funding does not draw clear distinctions in purpose between funds intended for enduring programs, funds to counter the Islamic State specifically, funds to respond to the crises in Syria and Iraq, and funds for related humanitarian responses. Funding requests are presented as mutually reinforcing. The request calls for $238.5 million to support U.S. efforts to achieve a political solution in Syria and counter the Islamic State and other extremist threats, including $50 million in the Peacekeeping Operations account to provide nonlethal assistance to moderate, armed Syrian opposition groups.

The Administration also describes enduring foreign assistance programs for Jordan ($1.0 billion) and Lebanon ($234 million) as contributions toward the overall U.S. effort against the Islamic

State and a response to the Syria crisis. Assistance to these countries would address not only the security challenges, but also economic and humanitarian needs of communities hosting Syrian refugees. Funds allocated to State Department Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund programs and for countering violent extremism also contribute to counter-IS efforts.

Combatting the Islamic State in Syria

President Obama said in September 2014 that U.S. engagement in Syria would 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.[51] As discussed above, U.S. and coalition airstrikes continue to target IS forces in some areas of Syria, which have assisted anti-IS forces in retaking some territory. The United States also provides assistance to a range of anti-IS forces, including Kurdish and non-Kurdish members of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition and individuals from eastern Syria based near At-Tanf. In parallel, U.S. diplomatic officials have sought to more closely link the campaign against the Islamic State and other extremists to efforts to find a solution to the broader conflict.

Previously, the Administration had reiterated its view that any effort to defeat the Islamic State in Syria must be complemented by an effort to bring an end to the broader Syrian conflict that would result in a transition away from Bashar al Asad's rule. President Obama and senior U.S. officials identified Asad's presence as an aggravating factor and a contributor to the appeal of extremist groups—a view rejected by Russian and Syrian officials. However, increased U.S. dialogue with Russia about potential counterterrorism cooperation has led some observers to question whether U.S. commitment to Asad's immediate departure has waned.

To date, challenges to the U.S. counter-IS campaign in Syria have included:

Finding effective partners. Some U.S. critics of the Obama Administration's approach to the conflict and terrorism threats in Syria have argued that U.S. strategy has lacked effective Syrian partners willing or able to advance against Islamic State- and/or Al Qaeda-affiliate-held territory on the ground or to durably administer recaptured areas once extremists are defeated.[52] The former concerns have been addressed to a certain degree by the evident military success of some U.S. partner forces in operations against the Islamic State, but the latter concerns about long-term administration and political repercussions remain. This is particularly true with regard to U.S.-backed Kurdish forces in Syria, whose military successes have raised concerns among other U.S. partners, principally the Turkish government. At times, various U.S. critics have suggested that the United States should either abandon its efforts to support vetted partner forces in Syria or drastically expand the size and scope of those efforts to create more formidable or inclusive partner forces.

Partner expectations. 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 direct action to degrade

[51] 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.

[52] For a selection of critical perspectives see, Michael Eisenstadt, "The War Against ISIL: In Search of a Viable Strategy, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 15, 2015; Frederic Hof, Trouble in Train-and-Equip Land, the Atlantic Council, July 9, 2015; Michael Rubin, "U.S. Policy towards the Islamic State after its Seizure of Ramadi and Palmyra," American Enterprise Institute, June 3, 2015.

IS capabilities in Syria. Some Syrian political and military opposition forces appear to resent what they see as the United States' narrow focus on fighting Sunni extremists in Syria 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.[53] These parties also question why the United States and coalition partners are willing to act militarily to halt Islamic State atrocities but not to protect Syrian civilians from attacks by government forces or opposition groups.

U.S. Obligations to Partners. Senior Administration officials have told Congress and the press that the Administration is prepared to provide military protection to U.S.-trained Syrian participants of the Train and Equip program in their engagements with Islamic State forces and if they come under attack by other forces, including the Syrian government.[54] In the case of potential attack by Syrian government forces, for example, such protection could entail attacks against Syrian military units, now backed by Iran and Russia. However, DOD-equipped forces have focused on the Islamic State and avoided engagement with the Syrian military. In response to a question on whether the U.S.-backed SDF in northern Syria could eventually clash with Syrian government forces near the IS capital of Raqqah, U.S. military officials stated that U.S.-backed forces in northern Syria "know that the engagement they have with the United States, with the coalition, is specific to the fight against ISIL."[55]

U.S.-trained or -equipped units have come under attack by the Nusra Front, the Islamic State, the Turkish military, the Syrian military, and the Russian air force.[56] The United States responded with airstrikes to counter IS and Nusra Front attacks, and has sought to dissuade further attacks by other states' forces.[57]

Managing disputes. U.S. assistance to the Kurdish YPG continues to be a significant point of contention with Turkey, which considers the YPG to be a terrorist group. The United States has tried to ameliorate these concerns by bolstering the presence of Sunni Arabs within the U.S.-supported Syrian Defense Forces, a primarily Kurdish force. In addition, there have also been reports about fighting between different Syrian rebel groups supported by the United States.[58]

End User Issues. Material assistance provided by the United States to Syrian rebels could potentially fall into the hands of extremist groups or the Asad government. Since the start of the DOD-administered Syria Train and Equip Program, there have been several reports of U.S.-

[53] For one discussion of this issue, see Michael Weiss, "Exclusive: Syrian Rebels Backing Out of U.S. Fight Vs. ISIS," The Daily Beast, May 31, 2015.

[54] 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; and Briefing by Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter and CJCS General Martin E. Dempsey, May 7, 2015.

[55] Department of Defense Press Briefing by Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook in the Pentagon Briefing Room, June 6, 2016.

[56] "Rivals of ISIS Attack U.S.-Backed Syrian Rebel Group," New York Times, July 31, 2015; "Islamic State hits U.S.-backed Syrian rebel base near Iraq border," Reuters, August 7, 2016; "Russia's attack on U.S.-backed rebels in Syria puzzles, frustrates the Pentagon," *Military Times*, June 23, 2016.

[57] Ibid.

[58] "In Syria, militias armed by the Pentagon fight those armed by the CIA," *Los Angeles Times*, March 27, 2016.

provided weaponry falling into the hands of the Nusra Front or the Islamic State.[59] There has also been at least one report of U.S. weapons being diverted by regional allies.[60]

For information on the operational aspects of U.S. operations against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, see CRS Report R43612, *The Islamic State and U.S. Policy*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted) .

U.S. Assistance to Syrians and the Syrian Opposition

A broad set of bilateral U.S. sanctions on Syria existed prior to the outbreak of conflict, and some, such as those triggered by Syria's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism, initially had a limiting effect on the delivery of U.S. assistance in the country. The FY2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act (Section 7041[i]) of Division K of P.L. 113-76) significantly expanded the Administration's authority to provide nonlethal assistance in Syria for certain purposes using the Economic Support Fund (ESF) account. Such assistance had been restricted by a series of preexisting provisions of law (including some terrorism-related sanctions provisions) that required the President to assert emergency and contingency authorities (i.e., Sections 451 and 614 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended) to provide such assistance to the unarmed Syrian opposition and communities in Syria. Such assistance has been provided to select unarmed opposition groups on a periodic basis since May 2012, although the Administration has not publicly released a detailed accounting or list of recipients. Congressional committees of jurisdiction are notified when the Administration intends to obligate funds for these purposes.

The FY2014 assistance authorities, as expanded and extended by the FY2015 Appropriations Act (Section 7041[h] of P.L. 113-235), made FY2015 and prior year ESF funding available "notwithstanding any other provision of law" for select nonlethal purposes. The FY2016 Appropriations Act (Section 7041[h] of P.L. 114-113) extended this authority further, granting notwithstanding exceptions for FY2016 ESF funds as well as for FY2016 funds in the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) and Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) accounts. In prior years, the Administration has used the INCLE and PKO accounts to support justice sector activities in opposition-held areas of Syria and to provide nonlethal assistance to select armed opposition groups. The FY2016 appropriations act authorizes "non-lethal assistance for programs to address the needs of civilians affected by conflict in Syria, and for programs that seek to—

> (A) establish governance in Syria that is representative, inclusive, and accountable;
>
> (B) expand the role of women in negotiations to end the violence and in any political transition in Syria;
>
> (C) develop and implement political processes that are democratic, transparent, and adhere to the rule of law;
>
> (D) further the legitimacy of the Syrian opposition through cross-border programs;
>
> (E) develop civil society and an independent media in Syria;
>
> (F) promote economic development in Syria;

[59] "Syria: al-Qaeda Nusra Front shows off huge cache of US weapons seized from moderate Harakat Hazm rebels," *International Business Tribune*," March 4, 2015; "The Islamic State Just Got Their Hands on More U.S. Weapons," *Foreign Policy*, June 29, 2016.

[60] "C.I.A. Arms for Syrian Rebels Supplied Black Market, Officials Say," *New York Times*, June 26, 2016.

> (G) document, investigate, and prosecute human rights violations in Syria, including through transitional justice programs and support for nongovernmental organizations;
>
> (H) counter extremist ideologies;
>
> (I) assist Syrian refugees whose education has been interrupted by the ongoing conflict to complete higher education requirements at regional academic institutions; and
>
> (J) assist vulnerable populations in Syria and in neighboring countries.

The acts require the Secretary of State to "take all appropriate steps to ensure that mechanisms are in place for the adequate monitoring, oversight, and control of such assistance inside Syria," and require the Secretary of State to "promptly inform the appropriate congressional committees of each significant instance in which assistance provided pursuant to the authority of this subsection has been compromised, to include the type and amount of assistance affected, a description of the incident and parties involved, and an explanation of the Department of State's response."

The acts further require the Obama Administration to submit a comprehensive interagency strategy prior to using the authorities that includes a "mission statement, achievable objectives and timelines, and a description of inter-agency and donor coordination and implementation of such strategy." The strategy, which may be classified, must also include "a description of oversight and vetting procedures to prevent the misuse of funds." All funds obligated pursuant to the authorities are subject to established congressional notification procedures.

Foreign operations legislation under consideration in Congress would extend and/or add and amend these authorities for some FY2017 funds (see comparison in **Table 1**). The House version of the FY2017 foreign operations appropriations bill (H.R. 5912) would extend the notwithstanding authority for ESF funding and amend some authorized purposes. The Senate version (S. 3117) would extend the notwithstanding authority for the same three accounts as FY2016 (ESF, INCLE, and PKO) and would amend and add the authorized purposes of assistance.

Table 1. FY2016 and Proposed FY2017 Authorities for U.S. Foreign Assistance to Syrians

FY2016 Appropriations Act	Senate FY2017 Proposal (Sec. 7041(h)(1) of S. 3117)	House FY2017 Proposal (Sec. 7041(h)(1) of H.R. 5912)
Authorizes and appropriates FY2016 ESF, INCLE, and PKO funding for "non-lethal assistance for programs to address the needs of civilians affected by conflict in Syria, and for programs that seek to— (A) establish governance in Syria that is representative, inclusive, and accountable; (B) expand the role of women in negotiations to end the violence and in any political transition in Syria; (C) develop and implement political processes that are democratic, transparent, and adhere to the rule of law; (D) further the legitimacy of the Syrian opposition through cross-border programs; (E) develop civil society and an independent media in Syria; (F) promote economic development in Syria; (G) document, investigate, and prosecute human rights violations in Syria, including through transitional justice programs and support for nongovernmental organizations; (H) counter extremist ideologies; (I) assist Syrian refugees whose education has been interrupted by the ongoing conflict to complete higher education requirements at regional academic institutions; and (J) assist vulnerable populations in Syria and in neighboring countries.	Would authorize and appropriate FY2017 ESF, INCLE, and PKO funding for "non-lethal assistance for programs to address the needs of civilians affected by conflict in Syria, and for programs that seek to— (A) establish governance in Syria that is representative, inclusive, and accountable; *(B) empower women through political and economic programs, and address the psychosocial needs of women and their families in Syria and neighboring countries;* (C) develop and implement political processes that are democratic, transparent, and strengthen the rule of law; (D) further the legitimacy *and viability* of the Syrian opposition through cross-border programs; (E) develop *and sustain* civil society and an independent media in Syria; (F) promote *stability and* economic development in Syria, *including in areas liberated from extremists*; (G) document, investigate, and prosecute human rights violations in Syria, including through transitional justice programs and support for nongovernmental organizations; (H) expand the role of women in negotiations to end the violence and in any political transition in Syria; (I) assist Syrian refugees whose education has been interrupted by the ongoing conflict to complete higher education requirements *at universities,* regional academic institutions, *and through distance learning*; (J) assist vulnerable populations in Syria and in neighboring countries; *(K) protect and preserve the cultural identity of the people of Syria, particularly those living in neighboring countries and among the youth, and promote the use of traditional art, music, and literature as a counterbalance to extremism;* *(L) protect and preserve cultural heritage sites in Syria, particularly those damaged and destroyed by extremists; and* *(M) counter extremism in Syria.*	Would authorize and appropriate FY2017 ESF funding for "non-lethal assistance for programs to address the needs of civilians affected by conflict in Syria, and for programs that seek to— (A) establish governance in Syria that is representative, inclusive, and accountable; (B) expand the role of women in negotiations to end the violence and in any political transition in Syria; (C) develop and implement political processes that are democratic, transparent, and adhere to the rule of law; (D) further the legitimacy of the Syrian opposition through cross-border programs; (E) develop civil society and an independent media in Syria; (F) promote economic development in Syria; (G) document, investigate, and prosecute human rights violations in Syria, including through transitional justice programs and support for nongovernmental organizations; (H) counter extremist ideologies; (I) assist Syrian refugees whose education has been interrupted by the ongoing conflict to complete higher education requirements at regional academic institutions; and (J) assist vulnerable populations in Syria and in neighboring countries

Source: Congress.gov. Differences italicized in FY2017 Senate proposal for reference purposes only.

Nonlethal Assistance to Armed Syrian Opposition Elements

Until the creation of the Syria Train and Equip program in 2014 discussed below, overt U.S. assistance to armed opposition forces remained restricted to nonlethal items. Prior to the creation of the program and the extension of the FY2016 foreign assistance authorities discussed above, congressional appropriators and authorizers had not provided the Administration with notwithstanding authority to provide nonlethal assistance to armed opposition groups. For that purpose, the Administration had relied upon special authorities granted by the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended (Section 552[c] and Section 614).

In 2012, the Administration began to use these special authorities to provide food rations and medical supplies to the National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC) and the Turkey-based Syrian Military Council (SMC). Since then, U.S. assistance has expanded to encompass a range of smaller, local groups. In August 2015, the State Department reported,

> Non-lethal assistance is being provided to a range of civilian opposition groups, including local councils, civil society organizations, and SOC-affiliated entities to bolster their institutional capacity, create linkages among opposition groups inside and outside Syria, and help counter violent extremism. These efforts enable the delivery of basic goods and essential services to liberated communities as they step in to fill voids in local governance. In addition to civil administration training programs, we have provided opposition groups with a wide array of critical equipment, including generators, ambulances, cranes, dump trucks, fire trucks, water storage units, search and rescue equipment, educational kits for schools, winterization materials, and commodity baskets for needy families in the local community.[61]

This equipment is used to bolster governance by providing services such as emergency power, sanitation, water, and education services. Other U.S. assistance provided under authorities granted by Congress in FY2014-FY2016 appropriations acts supports the maintenance of public safety, rule of law, and the documentation of human rights violations.

Administration officials have noted that U.S. efforts to deliver and monitor security assistance and other aid inside Syria have been hindered by border closures, ongoing fighting, and risks from extremist groups. Some U.S. nonlethal assistance to armed opposition groups has fallen into the hands of unintended recipients and has led to changes in delivery and oversight mechanisms.[62] Infighting among some opposition forces, the empowerment of the Islamic State in Syria, and concerns expressed by other outside actors such as Russia and Turkey have created further complications. Although the Islamic State has lost control of border crossings it formerly held, other anti-U.S. extremist groups control some border crossings in northwestern Syria. As such, access issues may continue to hinder efforts to expand support to anti-IS forces.

In July 2016, the Government Accountability Office released a report examining the delivery of nonlethal assistance to Syria. The report recommended that the Department of State, USAID, and their implementing partners incorporate greater oversight of fraud risk in the delivery of such aid.[63]

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[61] Office of the State Department Spokesperson, "Syrian Crisis: U.S. Efforts and Assistance," August 7, 2015.

[62] Opposition infighting in late 2013 led to the capture of some nonlethal U.S. assistance by Islamist groups. U.S. officials subsequently revisited some delivery and monitoring mechanisms and worked to improve the reliability and security of delivery channels. Dasha Afanasieva and Humeyra Pamuk, "U.S., Britain suspend aid to north Syria after Islamists seize weapons store," Reuters, December 11, 2013.

[63] *Syria Humanitarian Assistance*, Government Accountability Office, July 2016.

Syria Train and Equip Program[64]

The establishment of the Syria Train and Equip program by Congress in 2014 represented a further evolution of the involvement of the United States in supporting Syrian opposition groups. Several hundred U.S. military training personnel and a similar number of support personnel deployed in support of the program, which Congress authorized to train and equip vetted Syrians to fight the Islamic State, defend against terrorist threats, and promote "the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria." According to Administration officials, the program originally was designed to recruit, vet, train, and equip a force of 5,400 Syrians per year for each of three years. However, challenges in implementation significantly limited the program's output in 2015, and in October 2015, Obama Administration officials announced plans for a significant shift in the program's focus toward equipping select vetted fighters inside Syria and away from training and equipping new units in neighboring countries.

The shift from training and equipping of new vetted units toward equipping existing vetted armed groups has featured some unique risks. While equipment losses have not proven to be a major systemic concern since the change was announced, some Syrian opposition groups that reportedly have received U.S. equipment and weaponry have surrendered or lost these items to other groups, including to the Islamic State.[65] The comprehensive training approach under the program's first iteration sought to create unit cohesion, groom and support reliable leaders to serve as U.S. partners, and inculcate a spirit of nationalist motivation among fighters in the place of local, sectarian, or ideological goals. The amended approach appears to have more rapidly and effectively equipped some anti-IS forces in some areas of Syria, but it has had less apparent and quantifiable effects on the development and practices of opposition forces that may influence security in Syria for years to come. Increased reliance on vetted group leaders may also have reduced U.S. visibility and influence over which individual fighters receive U.S. weapons.

While some critics disagree strategically with President Obama and argue that U.S.-backed forces should be trained for offensive operations against the Syrian government, the anti-Islamic State focus of the program does not appear set to fundamentally change.

Related Appropriations and Authorities

Of the $500 million in Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund monies approved by congressional defense committees for the Train and Equip program in FY2015, $384 million was obligated as of September 30, 2015, with $116 million transferred back to the Fund at the end of the fiscal year to preserve its availability in FY2016. The $116 million were subsequently transferred back out of the CTPF to various operations and maintenance accounts for program activities in November 2015.

The FY2016 NDAA (P.L. 114-92) authorized $406.45 million in funding for the program, less than the Obama Administration's request for $600 million. FY2016 defense appropriations

[64] For more on this program and related legislation, see CRS Report R43727, *Train and Equip Program for Syria: Authorities, Funding, and Issues for Congress*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted) .

[65] The program came under intense scrutiny in the wake of August and September 2015 reports that some of the small number of U.S. trainees that had completed the program quit and others may have turned over equipment and weaponry to Jabhat al Nusra, the Al Qaeda affiliate that controls much of Idlib Province in northwest Syria. As of October 2015, U.S. officials reported that the program had produced 124 graduates, 70 of whom had returned to Syria in September 2015. Of the other 54, U.S. CENTCOM Commander General Lloyd Austin told the Senate Armed Services Committee that "four or five" then remained "in the fight" against the Islamic State in Syria, after having come under Jabhat al Nusra attack in July 2015.

legislation (H.R. 2685, S. 1558) would have provided $600 million for the program on different terms. However, the omnibus appropriations act for FY2016 did not appropriate

> funding for the Syria Train and Equip Fund, but it allows the Secretary of Defense to use funds from the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund for efforts to assist appropriately vetted elements of the Syrian opposition, if the Secretary outlines a detailed and clear plan for the use of such funds and provides such justification to the congressional defense committees in a reprogramming request.[66]

In March 2016, the Administration requested congressional approval to reprogram $300 million in FY2016 CTPF funding to support the continuation of the program. The congressional defense committees approved the reprogramming action after a period of review and debate.[67]

The overarching authority for the program provided in the FY2015 NDAA (NDAA, P.L. 113-291) expires after December 31, 2016, although some activities envisioned under the redesigned program could arguably proceed pursuant to other authorities.

The Administration's FY2017 request includes $250 million in defense funding to train, equip, and/or sustain appropriately vetted Syrian forces engaged in the fight against the Islamic State.[68] Of the amount requested, $210.8 million would support the procurement and provision of weapons, ammunition, and equipment; $18.6 million would support lift and transportation costs; and $20.6 million would support trainee stipends and operational sustainment.

The House-approved version of the FY2017 NDAA (H.R. 4909) would authorize the appropriation of $250 million for a Syria Train and Equip Fund (STEF). In addition, Section 1221 of that bill would extend the authority for the program through December 31, 2017. The committee would require the Administration to continue to use prior approval reprogramming requests for the program. These requests would need to be accompanied by certifications that the Administration had developed a plan to take and hold Raqqah, Syria, and to deploy numbers and types of U.S. personnel necessary to enable trained and equipped Syrian forces to defend themselves against the Islamic State and the Syrian government. An amendment offered to the House bill that would have removed the authorization for the program and fund was considered and rejected by committee members during the markup of the bill and was not made in order for reconsideration on the House floor.

The Senate-approved version of the FY2017 NDAA (Section 1221 of S. 2943) would extend the authorization for the Syria Train and Equip Program through December 31, 2019, and would require notification of congressional committees 30 days prior to the initiation of new initiatives under the program. Unlike the House bill, S. 2943 would authorize $1.26 billion for a Counter Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant Fund that would fund both the Iraq and Syria Train and Equip Programs, along with other activities.

Defense appropriators also have proposed a combined fund for FY2017 anti-IS partnership programs, with the House proposing an $880 million Counter-Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant Train and Equip Fund (H.R. 5293), and Senate appropriators proposing a $930 million Counter-ISIL Train and Equip Fund (S. 3000).

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[66] "Explanatory statement" accompanying the enrolled version of P.L. 114-113/H.R. 2029, as published by the House Rules Committee.

[67] Department of Defense, Prior Approval Reprogramming Action FY16-11PA, March 17, 2016.

[68] Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Request for Overseas Contingency Operations Syria Train and Equip Fund, February 2016.

Other Reported U.S. Assistance

Then-Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel said in a September 2013 hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Administration was taking steps to provide arms to some Syrian rebels under covert action authorities.[69] Several press accounts citing unnamed U.S. government sources have described reported U.S. and partner nation efforts to that effect.[70] To date, other U.S. officials have not publicly acknowledged any such efforts or publicly described which elements of the Syrian opposition may have received U.S. training or support via any such channels, what any training may have entailed, what types of weaponry may have been provided, or what safeguards may be in place to monitor the disposition of equipment and the actions of any U.S.-trained or equipped personnel. One June 2015 article discussed differences of opinion among Members of Congress about future funding for the reported program.[71] In October 2015, unnamed U.S. officials were cited in press reports that suggested that Russia was actively targeting Syrian opposition groups that had received covert support from the United States.[72]

U.S.-Origin Weaponry and the Syria Conflict

Since April 2014, various anti-Asad forces have released videos of their operatives loading and firing what appears to be U.S.-origin anti-tank weaponry in Syria.[73] In April 2014, an official affiliated with the now-defunct opposition group Harakat Hazm told the *New York Times* that "friendly states" had provided "modest numbers" of the weapons.[74] The commander of the group told the *Washington Post* that those who supplied the missiles had U.S. government approval and said the shipment suggested "a change in the U.S. attitude toward allowing Syria's friends to support the Syrian people."[75]

Asked in April 2014 about the reported shipments and use of U.S. origin weaponry by Syrian rebels, U.S. National Security Council spokeswoman Bernadette Meehan said, "The United States is committed to building the capacity of the moderate opposition, including through the provision of assistance to vetted members of the moderate armed opposition. As we have consistently said, we are not going to detail every single type of our assistance."[76] In May 2014, an unnamed senior Administration official reiterated that formulation to members of the press in a background briefing, while stating that "asymmetry which exists on the ground militarily, unfortunately, between the regime and the moderate opposition is problematic for the emergence of the kinds of political conditions necessary for a serious political process. And we and others are focused on that."[77]

[69] Secretary Hagel said, "it was June of this year that the president made the decision to support lethal assistance to the opposition. As you all know, we have been very supportive with hundreds of millions of dollars of nonlethal assistance. The vetting process that Secretary Kerry noted has been significant, but—I'll ask General Dempsey if he wants to add anything—but we, the Department of Defense, have not been directly involved in this. This is, as you know, a covert action. And, as Secretary Kerry noted, probably to [go] into much more detail would—would require a closed or classified hearing."

[70] Adam Entous, Julian E. Barnes and Siobhan Gorman, "U.S. Begins Shipping Arms for Syrian Rebels," *Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 2013; Greg Miller, "CIA ramping up covert training program for moderate Syrian rebels," *Washington Post*, October 2, 2013; Greg Miller and Karen DeYoung, "Secret CIA effort in Syria faces large funding cut," *Washington Post*, June 12, 2015.

[71] Miller and DeYoung, "Secret CIA effort in Syria faces large funding cut," *Washington Post*, June 12, 2015.

[72] Adam Entous, "U.S. Sees Russian Drive Against CIA-Backed Rebels in Syria," *Wall Street Journal*, October 5, 2015.

[73] See Harakat Hazm YouTube Channel, April 15, 2014, at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5x5Q4aTGvu0.

[74] Ben Hubbard, "Syrian Election Announced; Rebels Report New Weapons," *New York Times*, April 21, 2014.

[75] Liz Sly, "Syrian rebels who received first U.S. missiles of war see shipment as 'an important first step,'" *Washington Post*, April 27, 2014.

[76] Tom Bowman and Alice Fordham, "CIA Is Quietly Ramping Up Aid To Syrian Rebels, Sources Say," National Public Radio (Online), April 23, 2014

[77] Transcript of Background Briefing on Syria by Senior Administration Official, U.S. State Department, May 5, 2014.

Specific public information is lacking about the sources of U.S.-origin weaponry and which units or personnel may have continuing access to U.S.-origin weaponry.[78] In 2015, a range of opposition groups largely affiliated with the Free Syrian Army movement published videos that purported to depict their personnel firing U.S.-origin anti-tank weapons. This includes groups targeted by Russian airstrikes, some of whom have subsequently posted footage of their fighters using such weaponry to repel follow-on ground attacks by pro-Asad forces.[79] Islamist groups also have posted similar videos and images of captured U.S.-origin anti-tank weapon stocks, including the Ansar al Islam Front,[80] Jabhat al Nusra,[81] and the Islamic State.[82]

In June 2016, a joint investigation by the *New York Times* and *Al Jazeera* concluded that weapons shipped into Jordan by U.S. and Saudi intelligence services intended for Syrian rebels were instead diverted by Jordanian intelligence officials and sold on the black market.[83]

Chemical Weapons and Disarmament[84]

A major policy concern of the United States has been the use or loss of control of chemical weapons in Syria during the ongoing civil war. Syrian opposition sources and Syrian government officials have repeatedly traded allegations concerning the use of chemical weapons and toxic chemicals as weapons of war since late 2012. Several governments—including the governments of Syria and the United States—have submitted allegations of chemical attacks to the U.N. Secretary General and/or the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).[85] The United States, the United Nations,[86] and other countries have assessed that the Syrian government has used chemical weapons repeatedly against opposition forces and civilians in the country. Expert teams affiliated with the U.N. Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic and the OPCW Fact Finding Mission in Syria have investigated some of these allegations and have found evidence that in some cases confirms and in others suggests that chemical weapons and/or toxic chemicals have been used in attacks by

[78] Section 3(a)(2) of the Arms Export Control Act (22 U.S.C. 2753 (a)(2)) applies obligations, restrictions, and possible penalties for misuse of U.S.-origin equipment to any retransfer by foreign recipients of U.S.-supplied defense articles, defense services, and related technical data to another nation. If such a retransfer occurred in the absence of prior U.S. approval, then the nation making such a transfer could be determined to be in violation of its agreement with the United States not to take such an action without prior consent from the U.S. government.

[79] See Tajammu al Izza YouTube Channel, October 1, 2015, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqGuUbVtGl8.

[80] See Ansar al Islam Front YouTube Channel, August 10, 2014, at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9pxIFUKEZg and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QclDMPQkPw.

[81] Umberto Bacchi, "Syria: al-Qaeda Nusra Front shows off huge cache of US weapons seized from moderate Harakat Hazm rebels," International Business Times, March 4, 2015; Michael Smallwood, "Captured TOW 2A missiles employed in Syria," Armament Research Services, 2015

[82] OSC Report TRR2015062676424947, "ISIL Deploys Apparent TOW Missile System Against Regime Forces in Al Hasakah," June 26, 2015.

[83] "C.I.A. Arms for Syrian Rebels Supplied Black Market, Officials Say," *New York Times*, June 26, 2016.

[84] Prepared by Mary Beth Nikitin, Specialist in Nonproliferation.

[85] Reports by U.N. Member States have been made via confidential correspondence, such as letters containing allegations described generally in the December 2013 final report of U.N. Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic (the U.N. Mission). See U.N. Mission, Final Report, December 12, 2013, pp. 2-6.

[86] The U.N. Mission to investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic released its report on September 16, 2013, concluding that surface-to-surface rockets containing the chemical weapons nerve agent sarin were used in the Ghouta area of Damascus against civilians on a "relatively large scale." The 2013 U.N. investigative mission was not tasked with assigning culpability for the attacks.

the Syrian regime and by the Islamic State. Syrian civilians, opposition fighters, and military personnel have been targeted in alleged attacks.[87]

The largest-scale use of chemical weapons to date was reportedly an August 21, 2013, nerve gas attack, which the U.S. government estimated killed over 1,400 people.[88] In August 2013, the Obama Administration had threatened military action against Syria in response to alleged nerve gas attacks by Syrian government forces. As part of a diplomatic solution to the crisis based on a U.S.-Russian joint proposal, the Administration withdrew the threat of military force and Syria agreed to give up its chemical weapons and join the international Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which bans the use of any toxic chemicals in warfare and requires Syria to destroy all of its chemical weapons stocks and production facilities under international supervision. U.N. Security Council Resolution 2118 (2013) further mandated that Syria give up all its chemical weapons under Chapter VII provisions of the U.N. Charter.[89]

At the start of the war, Syria had more than 1,000 metric tons of chemical warfare agents and precursor chemicals, including several hundred metric tons of the nerve agent sarin, several hundred metric tons of mustard agent in ready-to-use form, and several metric tons of the nerve agent VX. The international community oversaw the removal and destruction of these chemical weapons agents from Syria, and, as of January 4, 2016, all Category 1 and 2 declared chemicals had been destroyed.[90]

Destruction of chemical weapons facilities is still underway,[91] and the United States has raised questions over whether Syria has declared all of its chemical weapons stocks. The OPCW has not been able to verify the completeness of the declaration, part of Syria's obligations under the CWC. The OPCW's Declaration Assessment Team (DAT) continues to investigate "gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies" through interviews and lab analysis of samples from site visits but the cooperation of the Syrian government has been limited and little progress has been made according to the August 2016 OPCW Executive Council report.[92]

Reports of chemical weapons use in Syria continue. Earlier U.N. and OPCW investigations had not been tasked with assigning responsibility for alleged attacks but with identifying whether chemical weapons were used. However, on August 7, 2015, the U.N. Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2235, which established a new OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) tasked with identifying "to the greatest extent feasible" those responsible for or involved in chemical attacks identified by the OPCW fact finding mission.[93] In September 2015,

[87] See U.N. Mission, Final Report, December 12, 2013; and, OPCW Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) in Syria, Final Report, December 2015 attached to "Letter dated 27 January 2016 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council," S/2016/85, January 28, 2016, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/85.

[88] Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013, White House Office of the Press Secretary, August 30, 2013.

[89] Chapter VII of the UN Charter authorizes the use of punitive measures such as sanctions or military force.

[90] "Destruction of Syrian chemical weapons completed," *OPCW Press Release*, January 4, 2016, https://www.opcw.org/news/article/destruction-of-syrian-chemical-weapons-completed/.

[91] "Note by the Director General: Progress in the Elimination of the Syrian Chemical Weapons Programme," EC-83/DG.6, August 22, 2016. https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/EC/83/en/ec83dg06_e_.pdf. As of August 22, 2016, the OPCW reported that 24 of the 27 declared chemical weapons production facilities (CWPFs) had been destroyed. The "poor security situation" prevents destruction of the remaining aircraft hangar and two stationary above-ground facilities. The OPCW said that Syrian government is cooperating on this matter.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Resolution 2235 required that the U.N. Secretary-General, in coordination with the OPCW Director-General, submit within 20 days recommendations for its approval on the establishment of a Joint Investigative Mechanism "to identify (continued...)

the United Nations Security Council adopted the Secretary General's proposal for the establishment of the OPCW-UN JIM, and the Secretary General appointed Virginia Gamba of Argentina to head the independent three-member panel that leads the JIM.

While Resolution 2235 empowers the JIM to have access anywhere in Syria, the JIM's mission has been complicated by the security situation on the ground. The JIM initially investigated nine attacks alleged to have occurred between April 2014 and August 2015. Of these, three cases lacked sufficient evidence to draw conclusions, three cases require further investigation, and three cases were concluded. Eight of the cases involved chlorine-filled barrel bombs. The JIM submitted its report on August 24, 2016, which attributed three cases of chemical weapons use.[94] According to the report:

- Bombs with toxic chemicals (such as chlorine) were dropped in Talmenes in April 2014 by the Syrian Air Force;
- Bombs with toxic chemicals (such as chlorine) were used in Sarmin in March 2015 by the Syrian Air Force; and,
- Mortar shells filled with sulfur mustard were used by the Islamic State in Marea in August 2015.[95]

In August 2016, press and social media reports said that the Syrian government was using chlorine in barrel bombs in Aleppo and other locations. The Syrian government continues to deny categorically that it has used chemical weapons or toxic chemicals, while accusing opposition forces of doing so and calling into question the methods and results of some investigations into alleged chemical attacks.[96] The U.N. representatives of the United States, France, and the United Kingdom continue to cite information they believe suggests Syrian government complicity in conducting ongoing chemical attacks, particularly with chlorine.

(...continued)

to the greatest extent feasible individuals, entities, groups, or governments who were perpetrators, organisers (sic), sponsors or otherwise involved in the use of chemicals as weapons, including chlorine or any other toxic chemical, in the Syrian Arab Republic where the OPCW FFM determines or has determined that a specific incident in the Syrian Arab Republic involved or likely involved the use of chemicals as weapons, including chlorine or any other toxic chemical… ."

[94] Letter dated 24 August 2016 from the Leadership Panel of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism addressed to the Secretary-General, S/2016/738, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/738.

[95] The JIM report states that OPCW experts were able to identify that the sulfur mustard was produced by the Islamic State because of the way it was produced, which was different from Syrian government stocks. "The OPCW confirmed that the sulfur mustard from the Syrian Arab Republic did not contain impurities such as polysulphides, meaning that a different process was used by the Government. The OPCW also reported that the sulfur mustard used by ISIL in northern Iraq on several occasions n 2015 and 2016 was produced through the Levinstein process." Ibid, p.97

[96] On August 7, the Permanent Representative of Syria to the United Nations Dr. Bashar Jaafari told the United Nations Security Council that, "the Syrian Government and the Syrian army have never used chemical weapons, and never will. Contrariwise, Syria's army and its civilians have been targeted with toxic chemicals and chemical weapons, including chlorine gas, by armed terrorist groups, such as *Daesh* [Arabic acronym for ISIL] and the Al-Nusra Front, in many parts of Syria… ." He accused unspecified investigation missions of having "based their work on false, fabricated statements made by parties well known to all. Those missions have carried out partial and biased investigations — outside Syria — without a modicum of coordination with the Syrian authorities." (U.N. Document S/PV.7501.) The U.N. and OPCW investigative missions have worked inside Syria with the permission of the Syrian government. In 2011, the U.N. Human Rights Council established an Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic that has reported extensively on the conflict, including on alleged chemical attacks. The Commission uses a "reasonable grounds to believe" standard of evidence and relies on first-hand accounts from Syrians now in neighboring countries, remote interviews, and other publicly available information.

There also have been additional press reports on possible use of mustard gas in Syria and Iraq by IS fighters.[97] U.S. Brigadier General Kevin Killea, chief of staff for military operations in Iraq and Syria, said that the United States was conducting testing to confirm these reports, which to date have not been officially confirmed by U.S. or U.N. investigations. The OPCW's chief has said that the Islamic State has produced and used sulfur mustard in northern Iraq and Syria.[98] U.S. forces struck Islamic State sites in Iraq believed to be associated with chemical weapons production in September 2016, and a multilateral effort removed chemical weapons precursors from Libya in August 2016 after Islamic State affiliate forces threatened the area where the materials had been stored.

Outlook

Russia's military intervention in Syria has reframed many of the policy questions that U.S. policymakers have grappled with since the outbreak of conflict there in 2011. In broad terms, the Administration has argued that pressure must be brought to bear on the Syrian government in order to convince its leaders to negotiate a settlement to the conflict that would result in President Asad's departure from office and the preservation of Syrian state institutions. Asad and Russia fundamentally reject this view and argue that "counterterrorism" cooperation with the Syrian government against its adversaries should precede further discussion of transition arrangements. Efforts to forcefully compel Asad's departure or empower opposition groups to depose Asad may risk direct confrontation with Russian military forces, with potentially broad implications beyond Syria. At the same time, the risk remains that any perceived U.S. acquiescence to or cooperation with Russia's intervention on Asad's behalf risks alienating anti-Asad forces and their regional backers, as well as providing Russia with an opportunity to consolidate a new, active role for itself in regional security arrangements.

Over the longer term, Syria's diversity and the interplay of its conflict and regional sectarian rivalries raise the prospect of continued violence even in the wake of the type of "managed transition" identified as a U.S. policy goal. The presence and power in Syria of armed groups directly opposed to the governance models promoted by many Syrians and the United States suggests that the conflict could persist after any negotiated settlement seeking to replace the current Asad-led government with a government of national unity or other inclusive formulation. Political opposition coalitions active internationally appear to lack both grassroots support and, because of their lack of material control over the most powerful armed groups, they appear to lack the ability to guarantee security commitments that might presumably be part of a negotiated settlement. State weakness may allow extremist and terrorist groups to operate from Syria for years to come.

Observers, U.S. officials, and Members of Congress continue to differ over which incentives and disincentives may prove most effective in influencing combatants and their supporters. Still less defined are the long-term commitments that the United States and others may be willing to make to achieve an inclusive political transition acceptable to Syrians; protect civilians; defend U.S. partners; promote accountability and reconciliation; or contribute to the rebuilding of a country destroyed by years of brutal war.

[97] "U.S. Tests Show Mustard Gas Traces in Islamic State Attack," *The Washington Post*, August 21, 2015.

[98] "IS likely used chemical weapons in Syria, Iraq; could use them elsewhere, OPCW head says," *Slovenia Press Agency*, May 11, 2016, https://www.opcw.org/is-likely-used-chemical-weapons-in-syria-iraq-could-use-them-elsewhere-opcw-head-says-interview/.

Appendix A. Syrian History and Demographics

Background: Syria, its People, and the Conflict

The Syrian Arab Republic emerged as an independent country during the Second World War after a period of French rule and nationalist unrest in the wake of the First World War. Prior to that, the territory that now comprises Syria was administered by the Ottoman Empire and had earlier been an important stage for major events in the founding of Christianity and Islam, Muslim-Christian battles during the Crusades, and the repulsion of the Mongol invasion of the Middle East. The country's strategic, central location made it a venue for superpower and regional competition during the Cold War era, and its current religious, ethnic, political, economic, and environmental challenges mirror those of some other countries in the Middle East.

Long before the current conflict, Syrians struggled with challenges that have bred deep dissatisfaction in other Arab autocracies, including high unemployment, high inflation, limited upward mobility, rampant corruption, lack of political freedoms, and repressive security forces. These factors fueled some opposition to Syria's authoritarian government, which has been dominated by the Baath (Renaissance) Party since 1963, and the Al Asad family since 1970. President Bashar al Asad's father—Hafiz al Asad—ruled the country as president from 1971 until his death in 2000. Beneficiaries of both the Asad family's rule and the economic and social status quo were drawn from across Syria's diverse citizenry; together, they offered support to the regime, helping it to manage, defuse, or repress dissent.

Syria's Diverse Population

The Syrian population, like those of many other Middle East countries, includes different ethnic and religious groups. For years, the Asad regime's strict political controls prevented these differences from playing an overtly divisive role in political or social life, whereas French and Ottoman administrators of Syria had at times manipulated popular divisions. A majority of Syrians, roughly 90% of the population, are ethnic Arabs; however, the country contains small ethnic minorities, notably Kurds, the country's largest distinct ethnic/linguistic minority (7%-10% of the total population). Of more importance in Syria are religious sectarian differences. In addition to the majority Sunni Muslims, who comprise over 70% of the population, Syria contains several religious sectarian minorities, including three smaller Muslim sects (Alawites, Druze, and Ismailis) and several Christian denominations. The Asad family are members of the minority Alawite sect (roughly 12% of the population), which has its roots in Shia Islam.

Despite the secular nature of the ruling Baath party, religious sects have been important to some Syrians as symbols of group identity and determinants of political orientation. The Asads and the Baath party have cultivated Alawites as a key base of support, and elite security forces have long been led in large part by Alawites, although some officers and most rank and file military personnel have been drawn from the majority Sunni Arab population and other minority groups. The government violently suppressed an armed uprising led by the Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s, killing thousands of Sunni Muslims and others.[99]

[99] In a March 1980 intelligence product, the Central Intelligence Agency described the then-prevailing dynamic among members of the regime and military in relation to the Islamist upheaval as follows: "President [Hafiz al] Assad has committed his minority Alawite government to a risky course with his reported decision to use the military more freely to crush civil unrest in Syrian cities. This may intimidate his domestic opponents in the short run, but unless Assad is able to reestablish order quickly, it will also further erode his domestic support and could eventually bring about his (continued...)

Religious, ethnic, geographic, and economic identities overlap in influencing the views and choices of Syrians about the current conflict. Within ethnic and sectarian communities are important tribal and familial groupings that often provide the underpinning for political alliances and commercial relationships. Socioeconomic differences abound among farmers, laborers, middle-class wage earners, public sector employees, military officials, and the political and commercial elite. Many rural, less advantaged Syrians originally supported the opposition movement, while urban, wealthier Syrians appeared to have mixed opinions. The decay of Syrian state institutions during the course of the conflict, especially in the security sector, appears to have empowered a new cadre of local actors whose ability to influence developments in areas under their immediate influence has complicated efforts by both the government and opposition groups to maintain law and order, security, and economic activity.

The viciousness of the conflict and the devastation it has brought to large areas of the country have further shaped the opinions of members of Syria's diverse population. Local and tribal attachments influence some Syrians, as seen in rivalries between the two largest cities, Damascus and Aleppo, in differences between rural agricultural communities and urban areas, and in the concentration of some sectarian and ethnic communities in discrete areas. Despite being authoritarian, Syrian leaders over the years often found it necessary to adopt policies that accommodated, to some degree, various power centers within the country's diverse population and minimized the potential for communal identities to create conflict.

That need is likely to remain, if not intensify, after the current conflict insofar as the conflict has contributed to a hardening of sectarian identities. While sectarian considerations cannot fully explain power relationships in Syria or predict the future dynamics of the conflict, accounts from Syria strongly suggest that some sectarian and ethnic divisions have grown deeper since 2011. Members of the Sunni Arab majority were at the forefront of the original protest movement in 2011, and predominantly Sunni Arab armed groups have engaged in most of the fighting against the security forces of the Alawite-led government. Support for the Asad government from foreign Shia fighters has galvanized some Sunnis' views of the regime as irretrievably sectarian. Nevertheless, much of the daily violence occurs between Sunni armed oppositionists and a Syrian military force composed largely of Sunni conscripts.

Syria's Christians, members of other minority groups, and civilians from some Sunni and Alawite communities have been caught between their parallel fears of what violent political change could mean for their communities and the knowledge that their failure to actively support rebellion may result in their being associated with Asad's crackdown and suffering retaliation. The Alawite leadership of the Syrian government and its allies in other sects appear to perceive the mostly Sunni Arab uprising as an existential threat to the Baath party's nearly five-decade hold on power. At the popular level, some Alawites and members of other sects may feel caught between the regime's demands for loyalty and their fears of retribution from others in the event of regime change or a post-Asad civil war.

Some Sunni Arabs may view the conflict as a means to assert their community's dominance over Alawites and others, but others may support the Asad government as an alternative to rule by

(...continued)

ouster. By committing the military, Assad is playing his last major card to keep his regime in power. Army discipline may well collapse in the face of widespread riots. This could lead to a bloody war between Sunni Muslim and Alawite units. The Alawites, however, may choose to topple Assad before such turmoil develops in order to keep their position secure." Central Intelligence Agency Directorate of Intelligence, "SPECIAL ANALYSIS - SYRIA: Assad's Prospects," National Intelligence Daily, March 17, 1980; in U.S. State Department, Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1977–1980, Volume IX, Arab-Israeli Dispute, August 1978– December 1980, pp. 1102-4.

extremist forces or out of fear of retaliation for past collaboration with the regime.[100] Some Sunni opposition leaders have sought to assuage other groups' concerns about the implications of potential Sunni dominance, whereas others have demanded that non-Sunni groups accept Sunni religious rule. Some opposition figures have pledged their commitment to seeing that orderly trials and the rule of law prevail in any post-conflict setting. Nevertheless, reports of abuses at the hands of opposition forces suggest that leaders of many armed groups at times are unable or unwilling to ensure that such standards are applied consistently to their pro-Asad adversaries.

While some Kurds view the conflict as an opportunity to achieve greater autonomy, others are wary of supporting Sunni Arab rebels who, should they come to power, may be no less hostile to Kurdish political aspirations than the Asad government. Some members of Syria's various Christian communities have expressed fears that the uprising will lead to a sectarian civil war and that they could be subjected to violent repression, given that Muslim extremist groups have targeted Iraqi Christians in recent years. Other Christians reportedly have offered assistance to some elements of the armed opposition over time.

[100] See Chris Zambelis, "Syria's Sunnis and the Regime's Resilience," U.S. Military Academy Combatting Terrorism Center (CTC), *CTC Sentinel*, May 28, 2015.

Appendix B. Parties to the Conflict

The following profiles offer limited descriptions of pro-Asad forces and select political and armed opposition forces. The profiles are based on open primary sources and CRS cannot independently verify the size, equipment, and current precise areas of operation of the armed groups described. At present, open source analysis of armed groups operating in Syria relies largely on the self-reporting of individual groups and coalitions. Information is not evenly and regularly available for all groups. The size and relative strength of groups vary by location and time. Many groups and units who claim to coordinate under various fronts and coalitions in fact appear to operate independently and reserve the right to change allegiances. The use of religious or secular imagery and messages by groups may not be reliable indicators of the long-term political aims of their members or their likely success in implementing those aims.

Pro-Asad Forces

Syrian Armed Forces and National Defense Forces

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, more than 55,000 members of the regular armed forces have died during the conflict, and reports from Syria suggest that military conscription efforts are facing resistance in some communities. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Syrian army force strength has declined from 220,000 in 2011 to 90,000 in 2016. Syria's air force has maintained its monopoly on operations in Syrian air space in relation to rebel forces, although opposition groups periodically shoot down fixed and rotary-wing aircraft, and coalition and Russian air forces now operate inside of Syria.

The Asad government, with Iranian support, organized informal pro-government popular militia into units of the so-called National Defense Forces and Popular Defense Committees, which have operated in conjunction with or at the direction of the armed forces to clear and hold government-controlled terrain.

Lebanese Hezbollah

Since at least 2013, Hezbollah has worked with the Syrian military to protect regime supply lines. Hezbollah personnel have played significant roles in battles close to the Lebanese border, in which rebel presence along key highways threatened the government's ability to move forces and to access predominantly Alawite strongholds on the coast. Hezbollah forces on the Lebanese side of the border reportedly monitor and target rebel positions near the border that facilitate attacks in Syria and Lebanon. In addition to conducting military operations, Hezbollah trains Syrian paramilitary forces, known as National Defense Forces (NDF), to improve their capacity to hold cleared terrain. Hezbollah fighters also train and advise the Syrian military, and often embed with Syrian units. Hezbollah maintains between 4,000 and 8,000 fighters in Syria, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Over one thousand Hezbollah fighter reportedly have been killed in Syria to date, including some senior leaders.

Iraqi and Other Shia Militias

Analysts estimate that there are between 5,000 and 10,000 Iraqi Shiites fighting in Syria on behalf of the Syrian government, in addition to an unknown number of Afghan and other Shia. Many hail from Iraqi Shia political and militia groups including Liwa Abu al Fadl al Abbas, Harakat al Nujaba, and Asa'ib Ahl al Haq. Reports describe these groups as assuming a broad operational role, noting that militias have formed sniper teams, led ambushes, established checkpoints, and provided infantry support for Syrian armored units. It is difficult to assess the motivations of individual Shia foreign fighters in Syria or determine whether Asad's survival is their primary goal. Reports suggest that Iraqi fighters receive training in Iran before being flown in small batches into Syria, and that they work closely with Lebanese Hezbollah. However, it is unclear who ultimately exercises command and control over these militias.

Sources: Graphic created by CRS. More detailed information available on request.

Select Anti-Asad Forces and Extremist Groups

Free Syrian Army
A loose coalition of armed groups fight under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) but the group lacks a single, organized command and control structure with unified procurement, intelligence, logistics, or sustainment capabilities. In the early period of the Syrian uprising, a number of Syrian military defectors identifying themselves as leaders of the FSA attempted to provide unified leadership and build these types of capabilities for emergent opposition forces across Syria but were unable to exert control over the actions of individual brigades. Regional and personal rivalries, the ascendance of Islamist armed groups, and competing foreign patrons continue to undermine these efforts to date. A Supreme Military Council formed in an attempt to overcome these challenges has proven incapable of overcoming them to date. At present, a number of fighting groups actively refer to themselves as part of the FSA while carrying on operations independently.

Ahrar al Sham (Free Men of the Levant)
Ahrar al Sham (AAS) is generally seen as one of the most powerful armed groups in Syria. It has collaborated with other Islamists and nationalists in fighting with pro-Asad and Islamic State forces. However, the group's apparently close relationship with the Nusra Front, its founders' links to Al Qaeda, and its Salafi-jihadist ideology lead many Western observers to classify the group as an extremist organization. AAS leadership appears divided on whether the group should participate in negotiations with the Syrian government.

Jaysh al Islam (Army of Islam)
This Damascus area-based coalition controls the eastern suburbs of the capital, an opposition stronghold known as Eastern Ghouta. Reportedly backed by Saudi Arabia, it has clashed with Syrian Government, Islamic State, and Nusra Front forces. Jaysh al Islam led the establishment of the Unified Judiciary Council in Eastern Ghouta, which governs the area in accordance with its interpretation of Islamic law. Jaysh al Islam is also part of the leadership of the Syrian High Negotiations Committee (HNC), which represents the Syrian opposition in UN-brokered talks with the Syrian government.

Jabhat Fatah al Sham (Levant Conquest Front)
Formerly known as the Nusra Front, this group emerged in late 2011 as Al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria. In July 2016, Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al Jawlani stated that his group would hereafter be known as Jabhat Fatah al Sham, and would have "no affiliation to any external entity." U.S. officials have downplayed the announcement as a rebranding effort, noting the continuing role and presence of Al Qaeda operatives within the Front. The group controls territory in Idlib province, and regularly operates alongside other armed groups, including some that may receive U.S. support.

The Islamic State (aka ISIL/ISIS/*Daesh*)
From its Syria-based capital in Raqqa, the Islamic State controls much of the Euphrates river valley east and south from the Aleppo area to the border with Iraq. It captured central Syria in 2015 and has supporters in the Damascus region and along Syria's border with Lebanon. Along the northern periphery of its areas of control, the group has suffered a series of setbacks since 2015, mainly at the hand of Kurdish fighters backed by U.S.-led coalition airstrikes. Syria appears to remain a staging ground and source of strategic depth for the Islamic State.

Sources: Graphic created by CRS. More detailed information available on request.

Select U.S.-Backed Forces

Southern Front

A coalition of dozens of smaller armed groups, many of which are aligned with the "Free Syrian Army" movement and reported to coordinate and receive assistance through a Military Operations Center (MOC) based in Jordan. Southern Front fighters scored a series of victories against pro-Asad forces in late 2014 and 2015, seizing control of the western stretch of the Syrian-Jordanian border and threatening Asad's control over the provincial capital of Daraa. Several Southern Front-aligned units have posted social media footage of their fighters using U.S.-produced anti-tank weapons against pro-Asad forces. The Front's leaders reportedly have stated their support for secular governance in Syria and eschew coordination with the Nusra Front and other extremists. The willingness of Front members to abide by these guidelines may vary considerably.

Syrian Democratic Forces

Formed in late 2015, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) is an umbrella grouping of various Kurdish, Arab, and other Syrian militias—largely led by the YPG—that operates against the Islamic State in northern Syria. According to U.S. officials, the United States has provided intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance support to SDF forces as they conduct operations against the Islamic State, and maintains advisors with the SDF on the ground. The United States also 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 SDF. While the majority of SDF forces continue to be comprised of the Kurdish YPG, SAC forces on occasion have taken the lead in clearing traditionally Sunni Arab areas, particularly along the Turkish border. Turkey equates the YPG with the PKK, and thus strongly opposes U.S. support for the YPG and is suspicious of support for the SDF.

New Syrian Army

Formed in late 2015, the New Syrian Army (NSA) brought together existing local groups in southeastern Syria—notably the Kata'ib Allahu Akbar. NSA fighters operate in the tri-border area near Jordan and Iraq. The group has attempted to interdict the Islamic State's lines of communication between Syria and Iraq, through a series of operations around key highways and border towns. According to U.S. military officials, the United States has provided advice and assistance to the NSA, including strikes in support of their operations. Some NSA fighters have also received training via the Defense Department-led Syria Train and Equip Program. Russian air forces and the Islamic State have attacked NSA positions.

Sources: Graphic created by CRS. More detailed information available on request.

Select Kurdish Forces and Political Opposition Groups

Kurdish Democratic Unity Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD)
The PYD seeks Kurdish autonomy in Syria and is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a U.S. designated Foreign Terrorist Organization. The PYD has taken a relatively ambiguous stance toward the Arab-led uprising to date, but PYD leader Saleh Muslim Mohammed has stated in 2015 that his party and the forces they command are not cooperating with the Asad government. In June 2015, Muslim called for decentralized democracy for Syria and denied that they PYD seeks partition. The PYD and other Syrian Kurdish forces refer to Syrian populated areas of the country as one entity that they call *Rojava*.

Popular Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG)
The "Popular Protection Units" are a secular militia coalition made up mostly of Kurdish fighters affiliated with the PYD, which is in turn affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a U.S. designated Foreign Terrorist Organization. The YPG's size is undetermined but may include as many as fifty thousand fighters, including Assyrian, Armenian, Circassian, and Arab sub-units. The YPG has played the leading role (with coalition air support) in ejecting Islamic State (IS) fighters from the Syrian-Turkish border areas at Kobane and Tal al Abyad in 2015. Prior to the rise of the Islamic State, YPG forces fought a number of battles with Arab Islamist militia groups for control of towns and strategic border crossings in northern Syria. In 2015, YPG forces aligned with other militias to form the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (aka *Etilaf*, Syrian Opposition Coalition, SOC)
Based in Turkey and considered to be close to foreign opponents of Asad, the SOC has been the focal point for most formal Western and other international engagement with Syrian political opposition members, although the group acknowledges its limitations and has worked to strengthen its relationships with other political and armed groups. The SOC has sought to generate international support for a more forceful intervention to protect civilians in Syria and to build consensus around principles for a negotiated solution to the conflict. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is a member of the Syrian National Council (SNC), which is the SOC's largest constituent group.

National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB)
The NCB is a small Syria-based alliance of leftist groups, Kurdish activists, and individuals associated with the 2005 Damascus Declaration on political reform. The NCB has stated a willingness to negotiate with the Asad regime (predicated on an end to the use of force against civilians) and opposes foreign intervention in Syria's conflict. Repeated attempts to merge the NCB with the Syrian National Council failed, and the NCB has declined to support the SOC. Prominent NCB member Haytham al Manna left the NCB in 2015 to form the *Qamh* Movement, a parallel coalition of Syrian independents seeking to end the conflict.

Sources: Graphic created by CRS. More detailed information available on request.

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