



Syria and U.S. Policy

Since 2011, conflict between the government of Syrian President Bashar al Assad and opposition forces seeking his removal has displaced roughly half of the country's population and killed nearly 600,000 people. Although conflict has abated in many areas following military intervention on Assad's behalf from Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, fighting is ongoing in Idlib province, and pockets of armed resistance to the Assad government have re-emerged in Syria's southwest. U.S. officials in 2021 assessed that humanitarian needs in Syria have increased by more than 20% over the last year amid international sanctions, the effects of the Coronavirus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, and Syrian government restrictions on humanitarian access.

U.S. military forces operate in Syria, where U.S. and coalition air operations against the Islamic State (IS) group began in 2014, and partner support operations have continued with specific authorization from Congress since 2015. U.S. operations face challenges from external actors including Iranian-backed militia groups, the Russian military, and Turkish-backed militia groups that control a buffer zone in northeastern Syria. IS fighters lost the last territory under their control in 2019, but remnants of the group remain active. Thousands of IS prisoners remain in the custody of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-led force supported by the United States and coalition partners. The United States seeks a negotiated political settlement to the Syria conflict and the enduring defeat of the Islamic State.

Developments in 2021

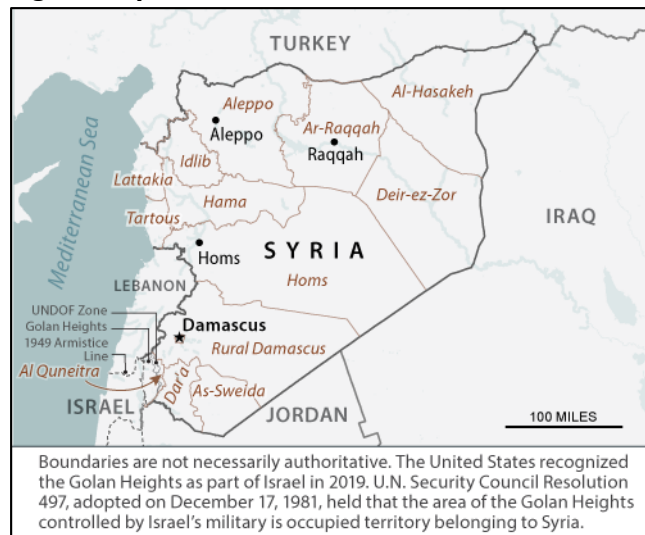
For a conflict chronology, see CRS In Focus IF11080, *Syria Conflict Overview: 2011-2021*, by Carla E. Humud.

Military Developments

Northwest. Northern areas of Idlib province (see **Figure 1**) are the only remaining area of Syria still under the control of armed opposition groups actively seeking the removal of Syrian President Assad, including some affiliated with Al Qaeda. According to U.N. reporting, aerial bombardments and shelling in Idlib increased in mid-2021, in violation of a March 2020 ceasefire agreement negotiated by Russia and Turkey between the Syrian government and opposition groups operating in Idlib. The U.N. reported that June 2021 saw the largest displacement in the area since the ceasefire.

Southwest. In 2021, clashes escalated between regime and opposition forces in the southern province of Dar'a, where the Syrian uprising originated in 2011. Shelling and ground clashes displaced thousands of civilians; U.N. officials in August condemned what they described as a "near siege-like situation." In September 2021, a Russian-brokered ceasefire came into effect.

Figure 1. Syria



Source: CRS, using ESRI and U.S. State Department data.

Political Developments

U.N. Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen has continued to call for a nationwide ceasefire in line with U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254 (2015) that would allow political negotiations—ongoing since 2012—to advance. In May 2021, President Assad won a fourth seven-year term; voting occurred only in regime-held areas. U.S. officials described the election as “an insult to democracy,” noting that UNSCR 2254 calls for Syrian elections to occur under U.N. supervision pursuant to a new constitution.

Economic and Public Health Conditions

Syria is facing a severe drought—viewed as one of the triggers of conflict in 2011—which has reduced harvests and increased poverty. Nine out of ten Syrians live in poverty, according to U.N. reports. In 2021, demand has surged for spots at overcrowded Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in Kurdish-held areas that provide residents with food assistance. Acting U.S. Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS John Godfrey has stated that the Islamic State is “actively seeking to exploit that economic situation to reconstitute ... in areas hardest hit by the economic downturn.” The U.N. estimates a high degree of COVID-19 transmission in Syria, “far exceeding the officially announced infection rates.” Fifty-eight percent of Syrian hospitals are fully functional.

The Islamic State

U.S. military officials assess that the Islamic State remains entrenched as a cohesive, low-level insurgency in rural areas of Syria. The group operates in ungoverned areas of the Syrian desert, from which it continues to launch attacks against Syrian military outposts, oil convoys, and military personnel in transit. In June 2021, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) assessed that, “ISIS likely has sufficient

manpower and resources to operate indefinitely at its present level in the Syrian desert.”

Islamic State Detainees. As of 2021, the SDF continues to hold about 10,000 IS fighters in detention facilities across northern Syria. In addition, roughly 59,000 people (including 31,000 children under the age of 12) remained at the SDF-run Al-Hol IDP camp. U.N. reports assess that security conditions at Al-Hol continue to deteriorate, with over 63 murders at the camp in the first half of 2021. The Islamic State continues to recruit at IDP camps, where it has a strong presence, according to CENTCOM.

U.S. Policy

In a continuation of goals pursued by both the Obama and Trump Administrations in Syria, the Biden Administration seeks the enduring defeat of the Islamic State and advocates a political settlement to the civil war. The Administration also has worked to counter “the destabilizing activities of Iran and its supporters and proxies that threaten U.S. forces in Syria.” The Biden Administration has stated that the United States will not provide reconstruction funding to regime-held areas of Syria until it “ceases to be a state sponsor of terrorism; does not threaten its neighbors; verifiably dismantles and surrenders its weapons of mass destruction; creates conditions for the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of refugees and internally displaced persons; and holds accountable those who have committed war crimes or crimes against humanity.”

U.S. Military Presence: Operation Inherent Resolve

U.S. forces have operated inside Syria since 2015 pursuant to the 2001 and 2002 Authorizations for Use of Military Force (AUMF), despite ongoing debate about the applicability of these authorizations to current operations in Syria. Following a Turkish military incursion into Syria in October 2019 targeting the SDF (Operation Peace Spring), the United States withdrew its military forces from border areas in north-central Syria and relocated them in what military officials have termed the Eastern Syria Security Area (ESSA). As of 2021, the United States maintains roughly 900 troops in Syria, with the majority deployed in the ESSA in support of SDF counter-IS operations. Roughly 100 U.S. personnel are based at the At Tanf garrison in southeast Syria, where they support a local partner force.

Challenges Posed by Iran-Backed Militias in Syria. The Biden Administration on two occasions has carried out airstrikes against Iran-backed militias in eastern Syria, which have used Syria-based facilities to target U.S. forces in Iraq. In June 2021, a U.S. airstrike on Iran-backed militias triggered a militia counterattack against coalition forces in Syria; no U.S. personnel were injured. Iran-backed forces previously had targeted U.S. forces at At Tanf in 2017. Other air strikes not attributed to the United States continue to target Iran-backed militias: press reports often attribute these strikes to Israel; Israel generally does not acknowledge involvement in specific cases.

U.S. Policy Tools

Syria Train and Equip Program

The United States continues to train, advise, and enable partner forces in Syria as part of the Syria Train and Equip

program authorized by Congress in 2014. The program addresses one of OIR’s primary lines of effort, which seeks to help make partner forces in Syria capable of defeating the Islamic State. U.S. military officials in 2021 reported that the SDF has the ability to “win against ISIS,” but that it remains dependent on coalition capabilities including U.S. funding and equipment. The Biden Administration has stated it does not plan to withdraw U.S. forces or support

Sanctions

The United States maintains a range of sanctions on Syria relating to its support for terrorism, interference in Lebanon, use of chemical weapons, and human rights violations. Although U.S. sanctions contain exceptions for humanitarian assistance, U.N. officials report that more than half of international Damascus-based NGOs have reported “serious banking issues” in 2021.

Humanitarian Assistance

The United States is the largest donor of humanitarian assistance in response to the Syria crisis, allocating more than \$13.4 billion since FY2012 (mostly via implementing partners such as U.N. entities and NGOs) to meet humanitarian needs in Syria and the region. That assistance has funded humanitarian efforts inside Syria, as well as activities in neighboring states that host Syrian refugees.

Cross-Border Assistance. The Assad regime has obstructed the delivery of assistance to opposition-held areas. The U.N. Security Council (UNSC) in 2014 authorized U.N. agencies to deliver humanitarian assistance cross-border via four international crossing points, two from Iraq, and one each from Turkey and Jordan, with notification to Syrian authorities. In 2020, the UNSC authorization was reduced to a single crossing point from Turkey (Bab al Hawa) due to pressure from Russia and China, who argued that cross-border aid violated Syrian sovereignty and that, in light of improved security conditions in much of the country, aid should be distributed in coordination with Syrian authorities from government-held to rebel-held areas (termed “cross-line” assistance). Humanitarian actors state that cross-line assistance cannot replace the scale of U.N. cross-border assistance, and have noted the regime’s obstruction of aid.

Stabilization Assistance

The United States has provided more than \$1.3 billion in stabilization assistance for Syria since 2011. The State Department describes such assistance as “a critical element in the OIR mission because it mitigates the economic and social cleavages previously exploited by ISIS, closes gaps in local authority capacity, and supports civil society to advocate for citizen needs.” The Department also has described stabilization assistance as a counterweight to the influence of Iran, Russia, and the Syrian government. Stabilization aid funds projects in non-regime held areas, particularly those liberated from Islamic State control.

Carla E. Humud, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs

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