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

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SUMMARY

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

The Syria conflict, now in its eighth year, presents significant policy challenges for the United States. (For a brief conflict summary, see **Figure 2**). U.S. policy toward Syria since 2014 has prioritized counterterrorism operations against the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIL/ISIS), but also has included nonlethal assistance to Syrian opposition groups, diplomatic efforts to reach a political settlement to the civil war, and humanitarian aid to Syria and regional countries affected by refugee outflows. U.S. forces deployed to Syria have trained, equipped, and advised local partners under special authorization from Congress and, as of December 2018, have worked primarily "by, with, and through" those local partners to retake nearly all areas formerly held by the Islamic State.

Following an internal policy review, Administration officials in late 2018 had described U.S. policy towards Syria as seeking (1) the enduring defeat of the Islamic State; (2) a political settlement to the Syrian civil war; and (3) the withdrawal of Iranian-commanded forces. President Trump's December 2018 announcement that U.S. forces had defeated the Islamic State and would leave Syria, signaled the start of a new U.S. approach. Questions remain about how the withdrawal will be implemented, what effects it will have on existing U.S. programs, and how U.S. priorities in Syria may change.

The United States continues to advocate for a negotiated settlement between the government of Syrian President Bashar al Asad and Syrian opposition forces in accordance with U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254 (which calls for the drafting of a new constitution and U.N.-supervised elections). However, the Asad government use of force to retake most opposition-held areas of Syria has reduced pressure on Damascus to negotiate. U.S. officials have stated that no aid will be contributed to reconstruction in Asad-held areas unless a political solution is reached.

The United States has directed more than $9.1 billion toward Syria-related humanitarian assistance, and Congress has appropriated billions more for security and stabilization initiatives in Syria and neighboring countries. However, the withdrawal of U.S. military forces may affect U.S. involvement in those programs. The Defense Department has not disaggregated the costs of military operations in Syria from the overall cost of the counter-IS campaign in Syria and Iraq (known as Operation Inherent Resolve, OIR), which had reached $26.2 billion by June 2018. President Trump requested $15.3 billion in additional FY2019 defense funding for OIR, but it is unclear how changes to U.S. military operations in Syria may affect the Defense Department's use of appropriated funds. The FY2019 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 115-232) requires the Administration to clarify its Syria strategy and report on current programs in order to obligate FY2019 defense funds for train and equip purposes in Syria.

The 115th Congress considered proposals to authorize or restrict the use of force against the Islamic State and in response to Syrian government chemical weapons attacks, but did not enact any Syria-specific use of force authorizations. The 116th Congress may seek clarification from the Administration concerning its overall Syria policy, plans for the withdrawal of U.S. military forces, the U.S role in ensuring a lasting defeat for the Islamic State, U.S. investments and approaches to post-conflict stabilization, the future of Syrian refugees and U.S. partners inside Syria, and the challenges of dealing with the Iran- and Russia-aligned Asad government.

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Background

In March 2011, antigovernment protests broke out in Syria, which has been ruled by the Asad family for more than four decades. The protests spread, violence escalated (primarily but not exclusively by Syrian government forces), and numerous political and armed opposition groups emerged. In August 2011, President Barack Obama called on Syrian President Bashar al Asad to step down. Over time, the rising death toll from the conflict, and the use of chemical weapons by the Asad government, intensified pressure for the United States and others to assist the opposition. In 2013, Congress debated lethal and nonlethal assistance to vetted Syrian opposition groups, and authorized the latter. Congress also debated, but did not authorize, the use of force in response to an August 2013 chemical weapons attack.

In 2014, the Obama Administration requested authority and funding from Congress to provide lethal support to vetted Syrians for select purposes. The original request sought authority to support vetted Syrians in "defending the Syrian people from attacks by the Syrian regime," but the subsequent advance of the Islamic State organization from Syria across Iraq refocused executive and legislative deliberations onto counterterrorism. Congress authorized a Department of Defense-led train and equip program to combat terrorist groups active in Syria, defend the United States and its partners from Syria-based terrorist threats, and "promote the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria."

In September 2014, the United States began air strikes in Syria, with the stated goal of preventing the Islamic State from using Syria as a base for its operations in neighboring Iraq. In October 2014, the Defense Department established Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) to "formalize ongoing military actions against the rising threat posed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria." CJTF-OIR came to encompass more than 70 countries, and has bolstered the efforts of local Syrian partner forces against the Islamic State. The United States also gradually increased the number of U.S. personnel in Syria from 50 in late 2015 to roughly 2,000 by late 2017. President Trump in early 2018 called for an expedited withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria,[1] but senior Administration officials later stated that U.S. personnel would remain in Syria to ensure the enduring defeat of the Islamic State. National Security Advisor John Bolton also stated that U.S. forces would remain in Syria until the withdrawal of Iranian-led forces.[2] Then, in December 2018, President Trump announced that U.S. troops in Syria would be returning "now."[3]

U.S. and coalition-backed forces in Syria succeeded in retaking, from 2015 through December 2018, nearly all of the territory once held by the Islamic State. Meanwhile, other outside actors (Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia) continued to support the Syrian government's military campaigns against opposition groups. Conflict between the coalition's Syrian Kurdish partners and Turkey has further complicated the situation, as has the entrenchment of Al Qaeda-affiliated groups among the opposition and the ongoing humanitarian crisis. As of late 2018, 5.6 million Syrians are registered as refugees in nearby countries, with 5.7 million more internally displaced.

The collapse of IS and opposition territorial control in most of Syria since 2015 has been matched by significant military and territorial gains by the Syrian government. The U.S. intelligence community's 2018 Worldwide Threat Assessment stated in February 2018 that, "The conflict has

[1] Remarks by President Trump on the Infrastructure Initiative, March 30, 2018; Remarks by President Trump and Heads of the Baltic States in Joint Press Conference, April 3, 2018.

[2] "Bolton: U.S. forces will stay in Syria until Iran and its proxies depart," *Washington Post*, September 24, 2018.

[3] Video poster to Twitter (@realDonald Trump), December 19, 2018, 3:10 PM.

decisively shifted in the Syrian regime's favor, enabling Russia and Iran to further entrench themselves inside the country."[4]

The U.N. has sponsored peace talks in Geneva, but it is unclear when (or whether) the parties might reach a political settlement that could result in a transition away from Asad. With many armed opposition groups weakened, defeated, or geographically isolated, military pressure on the Syrian government to make concessions to the opposition has been reduced. U.S. officials have stated that the United States will not fund reconstruction in Asad-held areas unless a political solution is reached in accordance with U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254.[5]

Figure 1. Syria: Map and Country Data

Geography	*Size:* 185,180 sq km (slightly larger than 1.5 times the size of Pennsylvania)
General Demographics	*Population:* 19.5 million (July 2018 est.) *Religions*: Muslim 87% (Sunni 74% and Alawi, Ismaili, and Shia 13%), Christian 10%, Druze 3% *Ethnic Groups:* Arab 90.3%, Kurdish, Armenian, and other 9.7%
Indicators of Humanitarian Need	*People in need of humanitarian assistance:* 13 million *Internally displaced persons:* 5.7 million *Syrian refugees:* 5.6 million *Unemployment rate:* 50% (2017 est.) *Population living in extreme poverty:* 69% (2018 est., UNOCHA)

Source: CRS using data from U.S. State Department, Esri, CIA World Factbook and the United Nations.

[4] Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, February 13, 2018.

[5] U.S. State Department, Briefing on the Status of Syria Stabilization Assistance and Ongoing Efforts to Achieve an Enduring Defeat of ISIS, August 17, 2018.

Figure 2. Syria Conflict 2011-2017

2011

Mar: Anti-government protests trigger violent state response.

Aug: President Obama calls for Syrian President Asad to step down.

Nov: Members of the Al Qaeda affiliated Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) form the Nusra Front in Syria.

2012

May: U.S. begins nonlethal aid to Syrian rebels under emergency and contingency authorities.

Aug: President Obama describes chemical weapon use as a "red line."

2013

April: ISI leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi announces the merger of ISI and the Nusra Front into the Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham (ISIS/ISIL).

Aug: Sarin gas attack in Damascus suburbs kills 1400. President Obama requests congressional approval for a limited authorization for the use of military force to respond.

Sept: Syria agrees to give up its chemical weapons stockpile.

2014

Jan: ISIS captures Raqqah. Congress authorizes nonlethal aid in Syria for select purposes notwithstanding other provisions of law.

June: ISIS declares establishment of a caliphate in Syria and Iraq with a capital at Raqqah, and changes its name to the Islamic State (IS).

Sept: U.S. begins strikes inside Syria. Congress authorizes Syria Train and Equip program.

Oct: Defense Department establishes Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF – OIR) to coordinate U.S. and Coalition counter-IS operations in Syria and Iraq.

2015

Sept: Russia begins airstrikes in Syria.

Oct: U.S. modifies Syria T&E program to focus on equipping existing units. Kurdish YPG fighters merge with other groups to form the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which become a key U.S. partner in the counter-IS campaign. DoD announces first deployment of Special Operations Forces to Syria.

2016

Aug: Turkey begins operations in northern Syria against IS and YPG forces.

Dec: Syrian government and allied forces recapture Aleppo, Syria's largest city, from opposition forces.

2017

April: Sarin gas attack on Khan Sheikhoun kills 80-100. U.S. fires 59 Tomahawk missiles at Al Shayrat airfield in Homs province in response.

May: Trump Administration authorizes arming Kurdish elements of the SDF. Russia, Iran, and Turkey announce formation of de-escalation areas in Syria.

July: U.S., Russia, and Jordan establish ceasefire area in southwest Syria.

Oct: SDF recaptures IS capital at Raqqah.

Source: CRS.

Figure 3. Syria Areas of Influence 2018

As of December 17, 2018

Source: CRS using area of influence data from IHS Conflict Monitor, last revised December 17, 2018. All areas of influence approximate and subject to change. Other sources include U.N. OCHA, Esri, and social media reports.

Notes: U.S. military officials have acknowledged publicly that U.S. forces are operating in select areas of eastern Syria to train, advise, assist, and equip partner forces. This map does not depict all chemical attacks reported in Syria.

Figure 4. Syria Areas of Influence 2017

As of August 1, 2017

Source: CRS using area of influence data from IHS Conflict Monitor, as of August 1, 2017. *All areas of influence approximate*. Other sources include U.N. OCHA, Esri, and social media reports.

Notes: U.S. military officials have acknowledged publicly that U.S. forces are operating in select areas of eastern Syria to train, advise, assist, and equip partner forces. This map does not depict all chemical attacks reported in Syria.

Issues for Congress

Congress has considered the following key issues since the outbreak of the Syria conflict in 2011:

- What are the core U.S. national interests in Syria? What objectives derive from those interests? How should U.S. goals in Syria be prioritized?
- What financial, military, and personnel resources are required to implement U.S. objectives in Syria? What measures or metrics can be used to gauge progress?
- Should the U.S. military continue to operate in Syria? For what purposes and on what authority? For how long?
- How are developments in Syria affecting other countries in the region, including U.S. partners?
- What potential consequences of U.S. action or inaction should be considered? How might other outside actors respond to U.S. choices?

Amid significant territorial losses by the Islamic State and Syrian opposition groups since 2015 and parallel military gains by the Syrian government and coalition partner forces, U.S. policymakers face a number of questions and potential decision points related to the following factors:

U.S. military operations and the presence of U.S. military personnel in Syria

The announcement by President Trump in December 2018 that U.S. forces would withdraw from Syria was welcomed by the Syrian government and its Russian and Iranian partners, along with observers who question the necessity, utility, and legality of continued U.S. operations. The decision has also drawn domestic and international criticism from those who argue it may enable the re-emergence of the Islamic State and embolden Russia and Iran in Syria (see "President Trump Announces Withdrawal"). Some Members of Congress have called upon President Trump to reconsider his decision to withdraw U.S. forces, stating that the move is premature and "threatens the safety and security of the United States."[6] Others have embraced the decision, citing concerns about the lack of specific authorization for the U.S. campaign and the effectiveness of U.S. efforts.[7]

Members of the 116th Congress may seek clarification on Administration's strategy to ensure the enduring defeat of the Islamic State. Defense Department officials in August stated that the group remained "well-positioned to rebuild and work on enabling its physical caliphate to re-emerge,"[8] and, prior to resigning, the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS stated in December 2018 that a U.S. withdrawal would be "reckless."[9]

[6] "Graham, Shaheen, Ernst, King, Cotton, Rubio Urge Trump Administration To Reconsider Withdrawing U.S. Forces From Syria," Press Release, Office of Sen. Lindsey Graham, December 19, 2018.

[7] Hon. Ted Lieu, "Statement on Withdrawal of U.S. Forces from Syria," December 19, 2018; and, Hon. Ro Khanna, "Trump was right to pull out of Syria and Afghanistan. This is what he should do next." Washington Post, December 22, 2018.

[8] Defense Department Spokesman Cmdr. Sean Robertson quoted in Jeff Seldin, "Islamic State 'Well-Positioned' to Rebuild Caliphate," Voice of America, August 16, 2018.

[9] State Department Press Briefing, December 11, 2018.

The future of the Syria Train and Equip program

The Islamic State has lost the territory it once held in Syria, and much of that territory is now controlled by local forces that have received U.S. training and assistance since 2014. (See **Figure 3** and **Figure 4**.) In 2017 and 2018, significant reductions in IS territorial control prompted some reevaluation of the Syria Train and Equip (T&E) program, whose primary purpose had been to support offensive campaigns against Islamic State forces. The Trump Administration requested $300 million in FY2019 Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) monies for Syria programs, largely intended to shift toward training local partners as a hold force. The Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2019 (P.L. 115-245) provided $1.35 billion for the CTEF account, slightly less than the Administration's requested amount for the overall account ($1.4 billion) based on congressional concerns about some Syria-related funds.

The FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) extended the Syria T&E program's authority through the end of 2018, but the FY2018 NDAA did not extend it further, asking instead for the Trump Administration to submit a report on its proposed strategy for Syria by February 2018. The FY2019 NDAA (P.L. 115-232) prohibits the obligation of FY2019 defense funds for the program until the strategy required by the FY2018 NDAA and an additional update report on train and equip efforts are submitted to Congress. The FY2019 act extended the Syria T&E authority through December 2019 but did not adjust the program's authorized scope or purposes.

The U.S. withdrawal from Syria may challenge the ability of the United States to implement its previously stated goal of training local partners to manage any local Islamic State resurgence. The primary U.S. local partner in Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), includes a significant contingent of Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). Turkey considers the YPG to be a terrorist group, and has stated its intent to launch an expanded military campaign in northern Syria targeting YPG forces. Likely judging that the withdrawal of U.S. troops would remove the final impediment to a Turkish strike, the YPG has requested support from the Syrian military—potentially paving the way for a reconciliation between Syrian Kurds and the Asad-led Syrian government.[10]

President Trump has stated that U.S. forces could use Iraq as a base from which to engage any IS remnants in Syria.[11] However, cooperation or partnership between the Syrian military and Kurdish forces would limit the ability of the United States to work with its former Kurdish allies against the Islamic State. For their part, Kurdish forces may also be reluctant to cooperate with the United States. Responding to news of the U.S. withdrawal, the Kurdish commander of the SDF stated in an interview, "All the credibility and trust that was built, we have lost."[12] While the United States has also partnered with Syrian Arab militias in the counter-IS campaign, these are generally seen as less capable than Kurdish forces.

The future of U.S. relations with the Asad government

Strained U.S.-Syria ties prior to the start of the conflict, including Syria's designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, are reflected in a series of U.S. sanctions and legal restrictions that remain in place today. U.S. policy toward Syria since August 2011 has been predicated on a stated desire to see Bashar al Asad leave office, preferably through a negotiated political settlement. However,

[10] "Syria's Kurds, Abandoned by U.S., Ask Assad Government for Protection," *New York Times*, December 28, 2018.

[11] "U.S. forces will stay in Iraq and could reenter Syria from there, Trump says," *Washington Post*, December 26, 2018.

[12] "What Trump's Syria decision means on the front lines of the fight against the Islamic State," *Washington Post*, December 23, 2018.

the Asad government—backed by Russia and Iran—has reasserted control over much of western Syria since 2015, and appears poised to claim victory in the conflict. In an acknowledgement of the conflict's trajectory, U.S. calls for Asad's departure have largely faded. In late 2018, senior Administration officials stated that while "America will never have good relations with Bashar al Asad," the Syrian people ultimately "get to decide who will lead them and what kind of a government they will have. We are not committed to any kind of regime change."[13] Nevertheless, the Trump Administration has stated its intent to refrain from supporting reconstruction efforts in Syria until a political solution is reached in accordance with UNSCR 2254, which calls for constitutional reform and U.N.-supervised elections.

The future of U.S. assistance and stabilization programs in Asad-led Syria

In the short term, policy discussions may focus on whether or how the Syrian government's reassertion of de facto control should affect U.S. military and assistance policy. The Trump Administration has directed a reorientation in U.S. assistance programs in Syria and has sought and arranged for new foreign contributions to support the stabilization of areas liberated from Islamic State control. The practical effect of this approach to date has been the drawdown of some assistance programs in opposition-held areas of northwestern Syria and the reprogramming of some U.S. funds appropriated by Congress for stabilization programs in Syria to other priorities. The future of U.S.-administered stabilization and other assistance programs in formerly opposition-held areas of Syria and areas currently held by U.S. partner forces is in question, in light of both the Asad government's reassertion of control in many areas and the planned withdrawal of U.S. military forces.

As noted above, the Administration has stated its intention to end U.S. nonhumanitarian assistance to Asad-controlled areas of the country until the Syrian government fulfills the terms of UNSCR 2254. The Administration also has stated its intent to use U.S. diplomatic influence to discourage other international assistance to government-controlled Syria in the absence of a credible political process.[14]

Then-U.N. Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura said in 2017 that Syria reconstruction will cost at least $250 billion,[15] and a group of U.N.-convened experts estimated in August 2018 that the cost of conflict damage could exceed $388 billion.[16] Congress may debate how the United States might best assist Syrian civilians in need, most of whom live in areas under Syrian government control, without inadvertently strengthening the Asad government or its Russian and Iranian patrons.

Select Proposed Syria-Related Legislation

In addition to provisions of FY2018 and FY2019 Foreign Operations and Defense Appropriations Acts and National Defense Authorization Acts that address some of the questions and issues

[13] Transcript, Ambassador James F. Jeffrey, Special Representative for Syria Engagement, Interview with RIA Novosti and Kommersant, November 21, 2018.

[14] Briefing on the Status of Syria Stabilization Assistance and Ongoing Efforts to Achieve an Enduring Defeat of ISIS, David M. Satterfield, Acting Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and Brett McGurk, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition To Counter ISIS, August 17, 2018.

[15] Security Council Briefing on the Situation in Syria, Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, November 27, 2017.

[16] Security Council Briefing on the Situation in Syria, Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, November 27, 2017; and, U.N. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, "Experts discuss post-conflict reconstruction policies after political agreement in Syria," August 7, 2018.

described above, the 115th Congress considered other legislation related to Syria, including the following:

No Assistance for Assad Act (H.R. 4681)

Passed by the House in April 2018, the bill would state that it is the policy of the United States that reconstruction and stabilization assistance is to be provided only to "a democratic Syria" or to areas of Syria not controlled by the Asad government, as determined by the Secretary of State. Reconstruction aid appropriated or otherwise available from FY2019 through FY2023 could be provided "directly or indirectly" to areas under Syrian government control only if the President certifies to Congress that the government of Syria

- has ceased attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure,
- is taking steps to release all political prisoners,
- is taking steps to remove senior officials complicit in human rights abuses,
- is in the process of organizing free and fair elections,
- is making progress toward establishing an independent judiciary,
- is complying with human rights,
- is taking steps toward fulfilling its commitments under international agreements that regulate the proliferation of chemical and nuclear weapons,
- has halted the development and deployment of ballistic and cruise missiles,
- is taking steps to remove government officials complicit in torture, extrajudicial killings, or chemical weapons use,
- is reforming the military and security services to minimize the role of Iran and Iranian proxies, and
- is in the process of securing the voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons.

By noting restrictions on U.S. aid provided "directly or indirectly," the bill also would limit U.S. funds that could flow into Syria via multilateral institutions and international organizations, including the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. From 2014 through 2017, appropriations acts authorized the provision of certain types of U.S. assistance to Syria for stated purposes notwithstanding any other provisions of law, without limits based on territorial control or Syrian government policy. A range of restrictions on U.S. assistance to Syria otherwise remains in place as a result of preconflict U.S. sanctions on the Asad government.

The bill would permit exceptions to the above restrictions on aid to government-held areas for

- projects intended to meet humanitarian needs (including food, medicine, health services, and assistance to displaced persons, refugees, and conflict victims);
- assistance to further WMD disarmament projects; and
- projects administered by local organizations to meet the needs of local communities.

Such projects would require the President to submit a report to appropriate congressional committees.

Additionally, the bill would require a report from the State Department and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) describing the delivery of U.S. humanitarian

assistance to Syria, including access restrictions and the monitoring and evaluation of implementing partners.

Authorization for Use of Military Force of 2018 (AUMF, S.J.Res. 59).

Introduced in April 2018, S.J.Res. 59 would include an authorization that is intended to provide the President the authority and flexibility he determines is necessary to carry out counterterrorism operations and protect U.S. national security by continuing to respond to the threat posed by Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, the Taliban, and other groups. It also aims to ensure that Congress exercises its legislative and oversight responsibilities with regard to war powers enshrined in the Constitution and shared between the legislative and executive branches. Section 5(a) of S.J.Res. 59 would provide a specific list of additional designated associated forces targetable under its authorization, including Al Qaeda in Syria and the Nusra Front. The resolution would recognize Syria as a country where the use of military force is already taking place.

Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2017 (H.R. 1677)

Passed by the House in May 2017, the bill updates and revises a bill (H.R. 5732) passed by the House in the 114th Congress, incorporating provisions from other proposed legislation and appearing to address some concerns expressed by various Syria policy stakeholders.

As passed by the House, H.R. 1677 would state that "It is the policy of the United States that all diplomatic and coercive economic means should be utilized to compel the government of Bashar al-Assad to immediately halt the wholesale slaughter of the Syrian people and to support an immediate transition to a democratic government in Syria that respects the rule of law, human rights, and peaceful coexistence with its neighbors." The bill would authorize the imposition of certain sanctions by the President and amend current law to require the President to impose other sanctions on individuals he designates as eligible. The bill would require the President to submit an updated report on individuals alleged to be responsible for "serious human rights abuses" in Syria, which the bill would amend current law to define. In defining "serious human rights abuses" and requiring the Administration to report on the responsibility of dozens of named individuals for such abuses, the bill appears to create a dynamic that would make it more difficult for the executive branch to decline to designate Syrian individuals for human rights-based sanctions.

The bill would expand the potential scope of existing U.S. sanctions on Syria by making parties engaged in certain transactions with, or in support of, the government of Syria eligible for sanctions. Current executive orders impose such sanctions in some cases. The sanctions authorized in the bill could be imposed on individuals determined by the President to have met designated criteria because of knowing engagement in actions "on or after" the date of enactment. The sanctions would thus be prospective rather than retrospective. The sanctions authorized could be imposed on U.S. nationals and non-nationals. A large number of individuals are already subject to U.S. Syria-related sanctions, and in some cases individuals may already be subject to U.S. sanctions for engaging in transactions with sanctioned individuals, including entities in Russia and Iran that provide military support to the Syrian government.

The bill would require a report within 90 days assessing the potential effectiveness, risks, and operational requirements of establishing and maintaining a no-fly zone over part or all of Syria, and establishing one or more safe zones in Syria for internally displaced persons or for facilitating humanitarian assistance. It would also codify authorization for certain services in support of nongovernmental organizations' activities in Syria.

The bill includes a national security waiver and negotiation or transition scenario-specific waiver authorities for the President. Its provisions would expire after December 31, 2021.

The Senate Committee on Foreign Relations reported a version of the bill in October 2018 with an amendment in the nature of a substitute. The Senate version reflects the increased role of outside powers in Syria, as well as concerns regarding external funding for reconstruction in areas controlled by the Asad government. Unlike the House bill, it would identify categories of Syrian persons that the President shall consider for human rights-based economic and travel sanctions, but does not list individuals by name.

The Senate version would require the Secretary of the Treasury to make a determination within 180 days of enactment on whether the Central Bank of Syria is a financial institution of primary money laundering concern. If so, the bill would require the Secretary to impose one or more of the special measures described in section 5318A(b) of title 31, United States Code. The House version would not require an initial determination, and specifically calls for the application of the measures described in section 5318A(b)(5)—prohibitions or conditions on opening or maintaining certain correspondent or payable-through accounts.

The Senate bill would expand the scope of secondary sanctions to include foreign persons who knowingly provide support to Russian or Iranian entities operating on behalf of the Syrian government. It would also make eligible for sanctions foreign persons who knowingly sell or provide military aircraft and energy sector goods or services, or who knowingly provide significant construction or engineering services, to the government of Syria. The bill states that its strategy is "to deter foreign persons from entering into contracts related to reconstruction" in areas of Syria determined by the President to be under the control of the Asad government (and foreign allies), as well as in areas in which civilians have been subject to forced displacements.

As an alternative to the House assessment on a no fly zone, safe zones, and partner training and retention, the Senate bill would require an assessment of "the potential effectiveness, risks, and operational requirements of military and non-military means to enhance the protection of civilians inside Syria, especially civilians who are in besieged areas, trapped at borders, or internally displaced."

The bill includes several suspension and waiver authorities for the President. Its provisions would expire five years after the date of enactment.

Preventing Destabilization of Iraq and Syria Act of 2017 (S. 138)

In January 2017, Senators Rubio and Casey introduced S. 138, known as the Preventing Destabilization of Iraq and Syria Act of 2017. They had previously introduced the bill in December 2016 as S. 3536 (114th Congress), known as the Preventing Destabilization of Iraq and Syria Act of 2016. The bill incorporated many aspects of H.R. 5732 (114th Congress), including the requirement for the imposition of sanctions on the Central Bank of Syria as well as on foreign individuals that provide support for the Syrian government or for the maintenance or expansion of natural gas and petroleum production in Syria. In addition, it would require the imposition of sanctions on Syrians complicit in the blocking of humanitarian aid.

The bill also would authorize the President to provide enhanced support for humanitarian activities in Syria, including the provision of food, shelter, water, health care, and medical supplies. It would prohibit the President from imposing sanctions on a foreign financial institution for engaging in a transaction with the Central Bank of Syria for the sale of food, medicine, medical devices, donations intended to relieve human suffering, or nonlethal aid to the people of Syria. It further would prohibit the President from imposing sanctions on internationally

recognized humanitarian organizations for engaging in financial transactions related to the provision of humanitarian assistance, or for having incidental contact (in the course of providing humanitarian aid) with individuals under the control of foreign persons subject to sanctions under the act.

2018 Conflict Developments

Military

Idlib: The Final Opposition Stronghold

Idlib province, in Syria's northwest, has been a stronghold of opposition support since the early months of the conflict; opposition fighters seized control of the entire province in March 2015. U.S. officials have described the province as a safe haven for Al Qaeda, while highlighting the significant civilian presence.

In May 2017, an agreement between Russia, Iran, and Turkey established the Idlib de-escalation area (encompassing all of Idlib province as well as portions of neighboring Lattakia, Aleppo and Hama provinces).[17] The agreement was designed to reduce violence between regime and opposition forces. However, regime forces continued to pursue military operations in the area, recapturing about half of the de-escalation area by mid-2018. Both regime and armed opposition forces have expressed determination to control the remaining portions of Idlib, raising fears that a large-scale offensive pitting Syrian government forces against a mix of armed opposition and jihadist forces could trigger a humanitarian crisis for civilians in the area. In October 2018, Russia and Turkey created a demilitarized zone in parts of Idlib province to separate the two sides.

Potential Humanitarian Crisis

The Syrian government has transferred thousands of Islamist and other fighters and their families to Idlib as part of surrender agreements with opposition-held towns in other parts of the country. A U.N. official in June 2018 described Idlib as a regime "dumping ground" for civilians and fighters evacuated from other opposition-controlled areas.[18] In September, U.N. Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock stated that a mass assault on Idlib could result in "the biggest humanitarian catastrophe we've seen for decades—certainly the biggest in the 21st century."[19] The U.N.'s Commission of Inquiry on Syria has described conditions for civilians in Idlib as "dire," and stated, "Conflicting parties must cease and refrain from the future use of indiscriminate weapons or tactics to target thousands of fighters interspersed among 2.9 million civilians, including one million children."[20]

[17] The agreement also established de-escalation areas in northern Homs and northern Rural Damascus province. Both of these areas have since been re-taken by the Syrian government.

[18] "U.N. fears for 2.5 million in Syria's rebel-held Idlib as fighting escalates," *Reuters*, June 11, 2018.

[19] Deutsche Welle, "Russia relaunches Idlib bombing campaign," September 4, 2018.

[20] Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, "Statement by the Commission of Inquiry on Syria on the situation in Idlib," September 12, 2018.

Al Qaeda in Idlib

U.S. officials in mid-2017 described Idlib province as "the largest Al Qaeda safe haven since 9/11."[21] Beginning in 2014, the United States conducted a series of airstrikes, largely in Idlib province, against Al Qaeda targets. These strikes fell outside the framework of Operation Inherent Resolve (which focuses on the Islamic State), and U.S. officials stated that they were conducted on the basis of the 2001 AUMF.[22] At least a dozen foreign Al Qaeda leaders have been killed in Syria since 2014, mostly in Idlib. A February 2017 U.S. drone strike in Idlib killed the deputy leader of Al Qaeda, and a U.S. strike on an Al Qaeda training camp in Idlib the previous month killed more than 100 Al Qaeda fighters.[23] As of 2018, Al Qaeda fighters and supporters appear to have merged into various opposition coalitions.

Select Armed Coalition Groups Operating in Idlib

Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS). Established in 2017 as a successor to the Al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front. U.S. officials have stated that "The core of HTS is Nusra,"[24] and amended the FTO designation of the Nusra Front in May 2018 to include HTS as an alias. However, some analysts argue that statements by Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri and actions by Nusra and HTS members point to the emergence of a genuine rift within the two groups. This rift can be seen, they argue, in the defection of former Nusra Front members from HTS, and the arrests by HTS of senior Al Qaeda figures.[25] In addition to its military operations, HTS also runs a civilian-led "Salvation Government," based in Idlib, which provides services such as education, health care, electricity, and water.

National Liberation Front (NLF). In May 2018, 11 Syrian armed groups established the NLF coalition. A NLF spokesperson described the coalition as unifying a number of "Free Syrian Army factions."[26] The group has been described as one of the largest coalitions fighting the Asad government, reportedly reaching nearly 30,000 fighters.[27] In August, the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF), composed of fighters from armed Islamist groups Ahrar al Sham (Free Men of the Levant) and the Nour al Din al Zinki Movement, merged into the NLF.

Hilf Nusra al Islam. In April 2018, Horas al Din (Guardians of Religion) and Ansar al Tawhid (Supporters of Monotheism, merged to form Hilf Nusra al Islam (Alliance for the Support of Islam).[28] The group is viewed as sympathetic to Al Qaeda.

The Role of External Actors

The May 2017 agreement at Astana that established Idlib as a de-escalation area set Russia, Turkey, and Iran as guarantors. The situation in Idlib has highlighted potentially diverging interests among them, with Turkey seeking to prevent a Syrian military operation that could result in a large-scale refugee influx across its border, and Russia and Iran focusing on the eradication of armed opposition groups in the province.

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[21] Brett McGurk, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, at the Middle East Institute, July 27, 2017.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Statement by Pentagon Spokesman Captain Jeff Davis on US strike against al-Qaida Training Camp in Syria, January 20, 2017.

[24] https://twitter.com/USEmbassySyria/status/864133630410584064.

[25] Hassan Hassan, "Zawahiri's statements reveal plenty about Syria's fractured jihadi scene," *The National*, November 29, 2017; Tore Refslund Hamming, Pieter Van Ostaeyen, "The True Story of al-Qaeda's Demise and Resurgence in Syria," *Lawfare*, April 8, 2018; Charles Lister, "US Officials Just Mislabeled a Syrian Terror Group as al Qaeda. Worse, They're Missing a Far Bigger Threat," Defense One, June 1, 2018.

[26] "Armed factions join forces to counter Syrian regime gains," *Al Monitor*, June 6, 2018.

[27] "11 Syrian opposition groups form new front in Idlib," *Anadolu Agency*, May 28, 2018.

[28] https://twitter.com/ibnnabih1/status/990582230744535041?lang=en.

Turkey. Idlib lies along Turkey's southern border. U.N. officials have expressed concern that a military offensive by Syria to retake the province could force as many as 2.5 million people to seek refuge in Turkey, which already hosts around 3.5 million Syrian refugees. Turkey has played a significant role in Idlib, maintaining 12 military observation posts in and around Idlib province along the "separation line" between pro-Syrian government and opposition forces.

Turkey maintains ties with a range of Syrian opposition groups in the province—reportedly including Free Syrian Army elements as well as HTS, a U.S.-designated FTO.[29] Turkey's coordination with rebel groups in northern Syria appears to be driven primarily by Ankara's desire to minimize, if not completely roll back, Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) control of areas along Turkey's border. Some analysts argue that Turkey may seek to fracture and eventually dissolve HTS by peeling off "moderate" fighters from the group.[30]

Russia. In September, Russia's foreign minister stated that Russia would continue to target what he described as "terrorist weapons-making facilities" in Idlib, while also encouraging local reconciliation deals.[31] Since early 2018, Russian officials have expressed concern about drone strikes, launched from Idlib, which have targeted Russian military facilities in neighboring Lattakia province. However, a wide-scale offensive on Idlib province could pose significant challenges for Russia, and Russian officials have at times described such an operation as "out of the question."[32] According to one analysis

> Given the mountainous terrain; the broadly dispersed and largely rural population; the scale of armed opposition numbers and marbled presence of experienced and committed jihadists; and the sheer size of the civilian and internally displaced population, any campaign to retake Idlib by force would likely require a far greater Russian military effort than anything Moscow has undertaken in Syria thus far.[33]

However, Russian strikes in Idlib in late 2018 suggest that Moscow may be prepared to undertake a limited military campaign against some opposition forces. In November 2018, Russia launched air strikes inside the Idlib de-escalation area. The strikes followed a statement released by Russia's foreign ministry accusing Nusra Front militants (as HTS fighters are sometimes referred to) located in the de-escalation area of launching a chlorine gas attack on a residential zone of Aleppo, injuring over 70 civilians.[34] The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has announced it will investigate the allegations.

The Idlib De-militarized Zone

On September 17, Russia and Turkey announced plans to establish a 9- to 12-mile-wide demilitarized zone in Idlib province by October 15. The zone reportedly would separate areas controlled by the regime from areas controlled by armed opposition forces, and would be monitored by coordinated patrols by Russian and Turkish military police.[35] The agreement called

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[29] "The Urgency of Idlib: The Impending Regime Offensive and the Delicate Balance in Syria's Northwest," *War on the Rocks*, August 3, 2018.

[30] "Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province," International Crisis Group, February 9, 2018.

[31] "Russia says will keep bombing Syria's Idlib if need be: Interfax," *Reuters*, September 14, 2018.

[32] "Large-scale operation in Syria's Idlib out of question, says Russia's chief negotiator," *TASS*, July 31, 2018.

[33] "The Urgency of Idlib: The Impending Regime Offensive and the Delicate Balance in Syria's Northwest," *War on the Rocks*, August 3, 2018.

[34] Comment by the Foreign Ministry's Information and Press Department on the chemical attack in Aleppo, November 26, 2018.

[35] "Idlib assault on hold as Russia, Turkey agree on buffer zone," *Al Jazeera*, September 17, 2018.

for the removal of heavy weapons and "radical terrorist groups" and from the de-militarized zone by October 10 and October 15, respectively.[36]

On October 10, Turkey's defense ministry announced that the withdrawal of all heavy weapons from the zone had been completed. However, some militants groups—reportedly including HTS and the AQ-linked Horas al Din—continue to operate in the zone.[37] Groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) reported that they removed heavy weapons but that FSA positions within the zone remain in place.[38]

The Russia-Turkey agreement also calls for the restoration of traffic along the M4 (Aleppo-Lattakia) and M5 (Aleppo-Hamah) highways by 2018. As of late 2018, traffic had been partially restored.[39] Full restoration of regime control over these transit arteries would effectively split opposition-held areas of Idlib into three sectors, facilitating any eventual military campaign in the province. President Asad has stated that he views the Idlib de-militarized zone as a temporary measure, and stressed his intention to restore government control over the entire country.

Turkish Operations in Northern Syria[40]

Direct Turkish military involvement inside Syria dates to 2016, with the onset of Operation Euphrates Shield (August 2016 – March 2017). While the operation targeted areas of northern Syria then held by the Islamic State, it was also designed to prevent the YPG from establishing an autonomous area along the northern Syrian border with Turkey. Turkey appears to view the YPG and its political counterpart, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), as the primary threat to its security (see "Dispute Over PKK-YPG Ties.")

Dispute Over PKK-YPG Ties

Disagreement regarding the status of the YPG remains a key point of discord between Turkey and the United States. Turkey considers the YPG to be the Syrian branch of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), and thus a terrorist organization. (The PKK has battled the Turkish government on and off since the 1980s.) While both Turkey and the United States have designated the PKK a terrorist organization, the United States has not extended this designation to the YPG, which has been one of the United States' most prominent local partners in the counter-IS campaign. Turkey has accused the United States of backing a terrorist group along Turkey's southern border.

The YPG plays a leading role in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which has been the main U.S. ground force partner against the Islamic State in Syria. U.S. officials have stated that the SDF "has done the bulk of the fighting in Syria."[41] As part of SDF operations to expel the Islamic State from Raqqah in 2017, the U.S. government pursued a policy of arming the YPG directly while preventing the use of such arms against Turkey,[42] but later announced an end to the direct

[36] "Full text of Turkey-Russia memorandum on Idlib revealed," *The National*, September 19, 2018.

[37] "Will Idlib buffer zone agreement see the light?" Al Monitor, November 8, 2018.

[38] Ibid.

[39] "Crossing between opposing forces opens near Idlib, Syria," *Al Monitor*, November 15, 2018.

[40] For additional information on Turkish policy in Syria, see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

[41] Secretary Mattis Remarks on the National Defense Strategy in Conversation with the United States Institute for Peace, October 30, 2018.

[42] Pentagon statement quoted in Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "Trump to Arm Syrian Kurds, Even as Turkey Strongly Objects," *New York Times*, May 9, 2017; Anne Barnard and Patrick Kingsley, "Arming Syrian Kurds Could Come at a Cost," *New York Times*, May 11, 2017.

arming of the YPG.[43] U.S. officials have contrasted their longstanding alliance with Turkey with their temporary cooperation with the YPG.[44]

Following Operation Euphrates Shield, Turkey in January 2018 launched an offensive directly targeting the YPG in the Afrin district of northern Aleppo province (Operation Olive Branch). Some U.S. officials expressed concern during the operation as several YPG units went to the aid of Kurds in Afrin, resulting in a manpower drain from the counter-IS campaign east of the Euphrates.[45] By March, the YPG had abandoned control of the district to Turkish forces and their Syrian rebel allies.[46] In Afrin and the other areas Turkey has occupied since 2016, Turkey has set up local councils, though questions persist about future governance and Turkey's overarching role.[47]

In October 2018, Turkish shelling of Kurdish-controlled areas of northern Syria prompted a temporary pause in SDF operations against the Islamic State. U.S. officials expressed concern about the Turkish strikes, given the presence of U.S. personnel in the area.[48] By November, SDF forces had resumed ground operations against the Islamic State in eastern Syria,[49] and by December they had captured the town of Hajin from IS fighters.[50]

[43] Lead Inspector General Report to the U.S. Congress, *Overseas Contingency Operations: Operation Inherent Resolve, Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines*, October 1, 2017-December 31, 2017, p. 25.

[44] Selva Unal, "US determined to keep its word about YPG in Manbij, official says," *Daily Sabah*, March 1, 2018.

[45] Eric Schmitt and Rod Nordland, "Amid Turkish Assault, Kurdish Forces Are Drawn Away From U.S. Fight with ISIS," *New York Times*, February 28, 2018.

[46] U.S. officials voiced concerns about possible adverse effects on U.S.-supported anti-IS efforts in eastern Syria. State Department Press Briefing, February 22, 2018.

[47] Khaled al-Khateb, "Turkey backs new opposition governance to mend Afrin," *Al-Monitor Syria Pulse*, April 25, 2018; Haid, "Post-ISIS Governance in Jarablus: A Turkish-led Strategy," Chatham House, September 26, 2017.

[48] "Turkish forces shell northern Syria, Kurdish-led force responds," *Reuters*, October 31, 2018.

[49] Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve Press Briefing by U.K. Army Maj. Gen. Christopher Ghika via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq, November 13, 2018.

[50] "Syrian Kurdish-Led Fighters Take Hajin, Last Town Held by IS," *Associated Press*, December 14, 2018.

Figure 5. Northern Syria Areas of Control

As of December 17, 2018

Source: CRS, based on data from IHS Conflict Monitor, UN OCHA, and Esri.

Notes: All designations are approximate and subject to change.

Agreement in Manbij

The town of Manbij, which the SDF seized from the Islamic State in 2016 with U.S. support, is a focal point of U.S.-Turkey tensions in Syria because of the YPG's presence in the area. In early 2018, concerns grew that any Turkish advance on Manbij could potentially bring Turkish forces into conflict with U.S. Special Operations personnel patrolling in the area. Since then, the two countries have sought to deconflict their forces.[51]

In June 2018, the United States and Turkey endorsed what U.S. officials described as a "broad political framework designed to fulfill the commitment that the United States had made to move the YPG east of the Euphrates."[52] In September 2018, U.S. military officials stated that "very little YPG if any at all" remained inside Manbij.[53] In November, U.S. and Turkish forces began

[51] Remarks by Secretary Tillerson, Press Availability with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, Ankara, Turkey, February 16, 2018; Rebecca Kheel, "US 'deeply concerned' with situation in Syrian city taken by Turkey," thehill.com, March 19, 2018.

[52] Transcript, "Senior State Department Officials on the U.S.-Turkish Working Group on Syria," June 5, 2018.

[53] Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve Press Briefing By Col. Ryan via Teleconference from

combined joint patrols around Manbij in accordance with the June 2018 "Manbij roadmap."[54] The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Manbij could be followed by changes in the YPG presence in the area, and may prompt new initiatives by Turkey, its local partners, and/or the Syrian government and allied forces.

Turkey May Expand Role, Target YPG, Following U.S. Troop Withdrawal

In late December, President Trump stated that Turkish President Erdogan "has very strongly informed me that he will eradicate whatever is left of ISIS in Syria," noting that Turkey is "right next door."[55] Turkey sent additional troops and equipment to the Syrian border in late December, according to state press.[56] However, Turkish officials have openly stated that their objectives are not limited to IS militants, and that they also intend to target Kurdish forces. Turkish officials have said that they plan to coordinate with both the United States and Russia to prevent YPG fighters—many of whom have been closely allied with the United States—from filling in the void left by departing U.S. forces.[57] Turkish President Erdogan had previously announced his intent to launch an expanded military offensive against YPG forces east of the Euphrates. In December, Turkish officials stated that this operation would be delayed in response to the U.S. withdrawal.[58] It is unclear what, if any steps the Administration plans to take to dissuade Turkey from targeting Kurdish components of the SDF following the U.S. withdrawal. In December 2018, YPG officials called on Syrian military forces to advance into northern Syria "to protect these areas against a Turkish invasion."[59]

Ongoing Counter-IS Operations in Northeast Syria

As of late 2018, U.S.-backed SDF forces were conducting what officials have described as the "final phase" of offensive operations against Islamic State-held territory in Syria.[60] Operations have targeted the area of Hajin and surrounding villages in the Middle Euphrates River Valley (MERV), which U.S. military officials have described as "the last remaining territory acquired by ISIS in the coalition's area of responsibility."[61] Coalition officials previously have stated that they do not intend to operate in Syrian-government controlled territory,[62] despite reports that IS militants remain present in those areas.[63]

Baghdad, Iraq, September 18, 2018.

[54] "U.S. and Turkish Military Begin Joint Patrols," CJTF-OIR News Release, November 1, 2018.

[55] Trump, Donald (@realDonaldTrump). "President @RT_Erdogan of Turkey has very strongly informed me that he will eradicate whatever is left of ISIS in Syria....and he is a man who can do it plus, Turkey is right "next door." Our troops are coming home!" December 23, 2018, 8:54 PM. Tweet.

[56] "Turkey sends more troops, tanks on Syria border," *Hurriyet Daily News*, December 26, 2018.

[57] "Turkey in talks with Russia, US to stop YPG from filling east Syria void," *Hurriyet Daily News*, December 25, 2018.

[58] "Turkey Delays Military Operation on Syria Over U.S. Pullout," *Bloomberg*, December 21, 2018.

[59] Rojava Defense Units | YPG (@DefenseUnits). "We invite the Syrian government forces to assert control over the areas our forces have withdrawn from, in particularly Manbij, and to protect these areas against a Turkish invasion." December 28, 2018, 12:48 AM. Tweet.

[60] U.S. State Department, Briefing on the Status of Syria Stabilization Assistance and Ongoing Efforts to Achieve an Enduring Defeat of ISIS, August 17, 2018.

[61] Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve Press Briefing By Col. Ryan via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq, September 18, 2018.

[62] Department Of Defense Press Briefing By Maj. Gen. Gedney Via Teleconference, December 27, 2017.

[63] Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve I Quarterly Report to the United States Congress I July 1,

In November 2018, U.S. military officials estimated that between 1,500 and 2,000 IS fighters remained in the MERV.[64] On December 11, U.S. officials assessed that "a couple thousand very hardened fighters remain in that area," and estimated that the conventional military fight to defeat them would take "a period of months."[65] On December 19, President Trump announced that the Islamic State had been defeated in Syria. On December 25, a news release by Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) stated that CJTF-OIR "continued supporting Coalition partner forces with precision air strikes and coordinated fires to make further progress in the fight against ISIS in the Middle Euphrates River Valley, Syria, Dec. 16 – 22."[66]

Islamic State Detainees in Syria

U.S. officials have reported that over 700 detainees from about 40 different countries are currently in SDF custody, and that the State Department is engaged in ongoing discussions to secure the repatriation of detainees to their home countries.[67] U.S. officials have stated that both the ongoing detention and the eventual repatriation of these individuals must be handled with care, noting that the early leaders of Islamic State were former detainees (from the 2003-2011 U.S. war in Iraq). Following the Trump Administration's announcement in December 2018 of its intention to withdraw military forces from Syria, SDF officials reportedly discussed the possibility of releasing IS prisoners (roughly 1,100 fighters and an additional 2,080 family members) from custody.[68] Neither their home countries nor the SDF wish to assume long-term responsibility for the detainees, which are viewed as a security risk.[69]

Prior to the Administration's withdrawal announcement in December 2018, U.S. officials had stated that once the conventional fight against the Islamic State was completed, the coalition would shift to a "new phase" focused on stabilization, including the training of local forces to hold liberated areas.[70] These plans were reflected in the Defense Department and State Department requests for appropriations for FY2019.

Officials also stressed that the Islamic State—which is seeing to regenerate—has "atomized," becoming more disperse in its command and control, and posing a more decentralized threat.[71] Former U.S. Special Envoy Brett McGurk, who resigned in December 2018 (see p. 28), had stated that the "defeat of the physical space is not the defeat of ISIS," noting that the group is less vulnerable to conventional military operations once it no longer holds large areas of territory.[72]

Israeli Strikes in Syria

Israel has conducted dozens of air strikes inside Syria since 2012—mostly on locations and convoys near the Lebanese border associated with weapons shipments to Lebanese Hezbollah.[73]

2018 - September 30, 2018 (p49).

[64] Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve Press Briefing by U.K. Army Maj. Gen. Christopher Ghika via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq, November 13, 2018.

[65] State Department Press Briefing, December 11, 2018.

[66] "CJTF-OIR continues partner support to Defeat ISIS," December 25, 2018 <www.inherentresolve.mil>

[67] Media Roundtable with General Joseph F. Dunford and Special Envoy Brett McGurk, October 16, 2018.

[68] "Kurdish Fighters Discuss Releasing Almost 3,200 ISIS Prisoners," *New York Times*, December 20, 2018.

[69] "The jihadists no one wants," *Washington Post*, December 21, 2018.

[70] U.S. State Department, Briefing on the Status of Syria Stabilization Assistance and Ongoing Efforts to Achieve an Enduring Defeat of ISIS, August 17, 2018; Media Roundtable with General Joseph F. Dunford and Special Envoy Brett McGurk, October 16, 2018.

[71] Media Roundtable with General Joseph F. Dunford and Special Envoy Brett McGurk, October 16, 2018.

[72] Ibid.

[73] "Israel said to have hit Hezbollah convoys dozens of times," *Times of Israel*, August 17, 2017.

In September 2018, Israeli Intelligence Minister Israel Katz said, "in the last two years Israel has taken military action more than 200 times within Syria itself."[74] In 2018, strikes widely attributed to Israel have, for the first time, directly targeted Iranian facilities and personnel in Syria.[75]

The expanding presence of Iranian and Iranian-backed personnel in Syria has remained a consistent point of tension between Israel and Iran. In June 2018, Israel conducted a strike near Abu Kamal,[76] along Syria's eastern border with Iraq. The strike was far beyond Israel's usual operational range—Israel had not struck inside Deir ez Zor province since its 2007 strike on the Al Kibar nuclear reactor.[77] The June strike appeared to target Iran-backed militia fighters.

On September 17, Israel struck military targets in Syria's coastal province of Lattakia. A Syrian antiaircraft battery responding to the Israeli strikes downed a Russian military plane, killing 15 Russian personnel.[78] An IDF spokesperson stated that Israeli jets were targeting "a facility of the Syrian Armed Forces from which systems to manufacture accurate and lethal weapons were about to be transferred on behalf of Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon."[79] The spokesperson added that the IDF and the Russian military maintain a deconfliction system in Syria, stating that the Russian plane was not in the area of operation during the Lattakia strike and blaming "extensive and inaccurate" Syrian antiaircraft fire for the incident.

In response to the downing of their plane, Russian defense officials announced plans to provide an S-300 air defense system to Syria. Syria accused Israel of conducting a strike on its territory in late November 2018. In late December, Russia's Defense Ministry stated that Israeli airstrikes near Damascus endangered two civilian flights attempting to land at Damascus and Beirut airports.[80] The Israeli strikes reportedly targeted an arms depot and a weapons storage facility controlled by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

In response to the U.S. announcement of plans to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria, Prime Minister Netanyahu stated that the decision "won't change our consistent policy" and, "We will continue to act against Iran's attempt to establish a military presence in Syria, and if the need arises, we will even expand our activities there."[81] Israeli media reported that Netanyahu said he was trying to "calm those concerned" about the U.S. pullout announcement.[82]

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[74] Dan Williams, "Israel says struck Iranian targets in Syria 200 times in last two years," *Reuters*, September 4, 2018.

[75] An unnamed Israeli military source told Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* that a strike on April 9 was the first time Israel "attacked live Iranian targets—both facilities and people." On April 17, the *New York Times* subsequently amended Friedman's commentary as published on April 15 to reflect the Israeli government's official position. According to Friedman, "After the story appeared, the Israeli Army's spokesman's office disputed the characterization and accuracy of the raid by my Israeli source, and emphasized that Israel maintains its policy to avoid commenting on media reports regarding the raid on the T4 airfield and other events. He would not comment further." See, Thomas Friedman, "The Real Next War in Syria: Iran vs. Israel," *New York Times*, April 15 and 17, 2018; Reuters, "Israel conducted April 9 strike on Syrian airbase: NYT quotes Israeli military source," April 16, 2018; *Haaretz*, "Israel Admits to Striking Syria: 'It Was the First Time We Attacked Live Iranian Targets,'" April 16, 2018; and, *Jewish Voice*, "IDF Source Credits Israel with Attack on Iranians in Syria," April 20, 2018.

[76] Also known as Al Bukamal/Albu Kamal.

[77] "Israel admits striking suspected Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007," *BBC*, March 21, 2018.

[78] "Putin Calls Downing of Russian Plane in Syria 'Tragic,' Absolves Israel," *New York Times*, September 18, 2018.

[79] https://twitter.com/IDFSpokesperson/status/1042016239449722882

[80] "Israeli airstrikes near Syria's capital endangered civilian airliners, Russia says," *Washington Post*, December 26, 2018.

[81] "Israel sees limits of Trump support with Syria pullout," *AFP*, December 24, 2018.

[82] "Netanyahu seeks to calm Israeli concerns over Trump's Syria pullout," *AFP*, December 23, 2018.

For additional information, see CRS In Focus IF10858, *Iran and Israel: Tension Over Syria*, by Carla E. Humud, Kenneth Katzman, and Jim Zanotti.

Asad Forces Violate Ceasefire Agreements, Recapture Territory

Southwest Cease-fire Area

In July 2018, Syrian military forces recaptured the southwest cease-fire area, established in July 2017 through an agreement between the United States, Russia, and Jordan. The area covered the majority of Dar'a province, including areas adjacent to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and the Jordanian border. Armed groups formerly operating in the area included U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations such as HTS and Jaysh Khalid Ibn al Walid,[83] but also the Southern Front—a coalition of roughly 50 factions which reportedly had received Western support.[84] Prior to the area's recapture by Syrian forces, U.S. officials had stated, "As a guarantor of this de-escalation area with Russia and Jordan, the United States will take firm and appropriate measures in response to Asad regime violations."[85] According to some reports, U.S. officials also privately warned Southern Front rebels not to expect U.S. backing if they broke the terms of the cease-fire agreement.[86] In July 2018, following weeks of government airstrikes, artillery, and rocket attacks in the cease-fire area, most opposition forces accepted a surrender accord and agreed to relinquish heavy weapons to the Syrian government.[87] The Syrian military reportedly granted safe passage to dozens of IS-affiliated fighters from Jaysh Khalid Ibn al Walid to the Badia desert area in southeastern Syria, in exchange for hostages held by the group.[88]

Astana De-Escalation Areas

In May 2017, Russia, Iran, and Turkey designated three opposition-held areas as "de-escalation" zones: eastern Ghouta in the Damascus suburbs, some parts of northern Homs province, and Idlib province and its surroundings. (See "The Astana Process.") The May 2017 agreement, designed to reduce violence in those areas between regime and opposition forces, allowed for states to "continue the fight" against extremist groups. Syria traditionally has labeled all groups opposing it as "terrorist." On that basis, Syrian forces escalated military operations against opposition groups based in the de-escalation areas, including via a suspected chemical attack in April 2018 (see "2018 Chemical Attack (Douma) and U.S. Response"). Eastern Ghouta previously had been subject to a Syrian government sarin gas attack that killed 1,400 people (see "Overview: Syria Chemical Weapons and Disarmament"). By late 2018, Syrian and allied forces had recaptured eastern Ghouta, northern Homs, and roughly half of the Idlib de-escalation zone.

[83] Widely viewed as linked to the Islamic State, Jaysh Khalid Ibn al Walid was designated as an FTO in July 2017.

[84] "Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria," International Crisis Group Middle East Report no.187, June 21, 2018.

[85] "Assad Regime Intentions in the Southwest De-escalation Zone," State Department Press Statement, May 25, 2018.

[86] "Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria," International Crisis Group Middle East Report no.187, June 21, 2018.

[87] "South Syrian rebels agree surrender deal, Assad takes crossing," *Reuters*, July 6, 2018.

[88] "ISIS fighters offered safe passage out of Deraa in Syria," *The National*, July 31, 2018.

Political Negotiations

The Geneva Process

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."[89] 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,[90] 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, which his government defines broadly to include all armed opposition groups.

As part of the Geneva Process, U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254, adopted in 2015, endorsed a "road map" for a political settlement in Syria, including the drafting of a new constitution and the administration of U.N.-supervised elections. U.S. officials continue to stress that a political solution to the conflict must be based on the principles of UNSCR 2254.

The last formal round of Geneva talks, facilitated by U.N. Envoy Staffan de Mistura, closed in late January 2018. In February 2018, the U.S. intelligence community assessed that Asad was unlikely to negotiate a political transition with the opposition:

> Moscow probably cannot force President Asad to agree to a political settlement that he believes significantly weakens him, unless Moscow is willing to remove Asad by force. While Asad may engage in peace talks, he is unlikely to negotiate himself from power or offer meaningful concessions to the opposition.[91]

The United States has repeatedly expressed its view that Geneva should be the sole forum for a political settlement to the Syria conflict, possibly reflecting concern regarding the Russia-led Astana Process. However, the United States supported de Mistura's efforts throughout 2018 to stand up a Syrian Constitutional Committee, an initiative originally stemming from the Russian-led Sochi conference in January 2018 (see below).[92]

The Astana Process

Since January 2017, peace talks hosted by Russia, Iran, and Turkey have convened in the Kazakh capital of Astana. These talks were the forum through which three "de-escalation areas" were established—two of which have since been retaken by Syrian military forces. The United States

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

[90] "Syrian President Bashar al-Assad Wins Third Term," *BBC*, June 5, 2014.

[91] Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, February 13, 2018.

[92] Media Note, "The Secretary's Special Representative for Syria Engagement, Ambassador James Jeffrey Travels to Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia," October 15, 2018.

is not a party to the Astana talks but has attended as an observer delegation. The 11th round of Astana talks was held in November 2018.

Russia has played a leading role in the Astana process, which some have described as an alternate track to the Geneva process. The United States has strongly opposed the prospect of Astana superseding Geneva. Following the release of the Joint Statement by President Trump and Russian President Putin on November 11, 2017 (in which the two presidents confirmed that a political solution to the conflict must be forged through the Geneva process pursuant to UNSCR 2254), U.S. officials stated that

> We have started to see signs that the Russians and the regime wanted to draw the political process away from Geneva to a format that might be easier for the regime to manipulate. Today makes clear and the [Joint Statement] makes clear that 2254 and Geneva remains the exclusive platform for the political process.[93]

Constitutional Committee. Despite the November 2017 agreement, Russia persisted in its attempts to host, alongside Iran and Turkey, a "Syrian People's Congress" in Sochi, intended to bring together Syrian government and various opposition forces to negotiate a postwar settlement. The conference, held in January 2018, was boycotted by most Syrian opposition groups and included mainly delegates friendly to the Asad government.[94] Participants agreed to form a constitutional committee comprising delegates from the Syrian government and the opposition "for drafting of a constitutional reform," in accordance with UNSCR 2254.[95] The statement noted that final agreement regarding the mandate, rules of procedure, and selection criteria for delegates would be reached under the framework of the Geneva process. The United States supports the formation of the committee under U.N. auspices, but has emphasized that "the United Nations must be given a free hand to determine the composition of the committee, its scope of work, and schedule."[96]

Since the conclusion of the Sochi Conference, de Mistura has worked to reach consensus among the parties regarding delegates for the constitutional committee. The committee's membership is to be divided in equal thirds between delegates from the Syrian government, Syrian opposition, and delegates selected by the U.N. comprising Syrian experts, civil society, independents, tribal leaders, and women. The sticking point remains this latter, U.N.-selected group, known as the "middle third list." The Syrian government has objected to the U.N.'s role in naming delegates to the list, describing the constitution as "a highly sensitive matter of national sovereignty."[97] Following the latest round of Astana talks in November 2018, de Mistura expressed dissatisfaction that there was "no tangible progress in overcoming the ten-month stalemate on the composition of the constitutional committee."[98] De Mistura has announced plans to resign in December 2018, and will be succeeded in January 2019 by veteran Norwegian diplomat Geir Pederson.

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[93] Background Briefing on the Joint Statement by the President of the United States and the President of the Russian Federation on Syria, November 11, 2017.

[94] "Syrian Peace Talks in Russia; 1,500 Delegates, Mostly Pro-Assad," *New York Times*, January 30, 2018.

[95] Final statement of the Congress of the Syrian national dialogue, Sochi, January 30, 2018.

[96] "Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Situation in Syria," Jonathan Cohen, U.S. Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations, June 27, 2018.

[97] "Syrian Government's 'different understanding' of UN role, a 'very serious challenge' - Special Envoy," *UN News*, October 26, 2018.

[98] "U.N. Says Astana Meeting on Syria a Missed Opportunity, No Progress," *New York Times*, November 29, 2018.

Humanitarian Situation

As of late 2018, the United Nations estimated that 13 million people in Syria were in need of humanitarian assistance, out of a total estimated population of 19.5 million. 5.7 million Syrians are internally displaced, and an additional 5.6 million Syrians are registered with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as refugees in nearby countries.[99]

The Syrian government has long opposed the provision of humanitarian assistance across Syria's border and across internal lines of conflict outside of channels under Syrian government control. Successive U.N. Security Council resolutions have nevertheless authorized the provision of such assistance. The Syrian government further seeks the prompt return of Syrian refugees from neighboring countries, while humanitarian advocates and practitioners raise concern about forced returns and the protection of returnees from political persecution and the difficult conditions prevailing in Syria. In July 2018, a State Department spokesperson said, "We support refugees going home under these conditions—safe, voluntary, dignified returns at the time of their choosing and when it is safe to do so. I don't think the situation, as UNHCR backs up right now, allows for that at this time."[100]

The U.N. Secretary-General regularly reports to the Security Council on humanitarian issues and challenges in and related to Syria pursuant to Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), and 2449 (2018).[101]

U.S. Humanitarian Funding

The United States is the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to the Syria crisis, drawing from existing funding from global humanitarian accounts and some reprogrammed funding.[102] As of December 2018, total U.S. humanitarian assistance for the Syria crisis since 2011 had reached over $9.1 billion.[103]

The Trump Administration's FY2019 request seeks $1.78 billion in IDA-OCO funding and $2.35 billion for Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) overseas operations—these totals include funds for responses to the Iraq and Syria crises. Both the House and Senate committee-reported versions of the FY2019 foreign operations appropriations act (H.R. 6385 and S. 3108) would provide amounts exceeding these requests on different terms.

International Humanitarian Funding

Multilateral humanitarian assistance in response to the Syria crisis includes both the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) and the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP). The 3RP is designed to address the impact of the conflict on Syria's neighbors, and encompasses the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, the Jordan Response Plan, and country chapters in Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt. It includes a refugee/humanitarian response coordinated by UNHCR and a

[99] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA): Syria Arab Republic; UNHCR data portal: Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response.

[100] Department of State Press Briefing, July 24, 2018.

[101] Reports submitted by/transmitted by the Secretary-General to the Security Council available at http://www.un.org/en/sc/documents/sgreports/.

[102] USAID Fact Sheet: U.S. Assistance for the People of Syria, January 26, 2018.

[103] USAID, Syria–Complex Emergency, Fact Sheet #2, Fiscal Year (FY) 2019, December 7, 2018.

"resilience" response (stabilization-based development assistance) led by the U.N. Development Program (UNDP).[104]

In parallel to the 3RP, the HRP for Syria is designed to address the crisis inside the country through a focus on humanitarian assistance, civilian protection, and increasing resilience and livelihood opportunities, in part by improving access to basic services. This includes the reconstruction of damaged infrastructure (water, sewage, electricity) as well as the restoration of medical and education facilities and infrastructure for the production of inputs for sectors such as agriculture.[105] The 2017 3RP appeal sought $5.6 billion, and the HRP for Syria sought $3.4 billion. By the end of 2017, the two appeals had been funded at approximately 54% and 51%, respectively. The 2018 3RP appeal seeks $5.6 billion, and the 2018 HRP appeal for Syria seeks $3.5 billion.[106] As of December 2018, the two 2018 appeals were funded at 49% and 63%, respectively.[107]

U.S. Policy

Since 2011, U.S. policy toward the unrest and conflict in Syria has attempted to pursue parallel interests and manage interconnected challenges, with varying degrees of success. Among the objectives identified by successive Administrations and by many Members in successive sessions of Congress have been

- supporting Syrian-led efforts to demand more representative, accountable, and effective governance;
- seeking a negotiated settlement that includes a transition in Syria away from the leadership of Bashar al Asad and his supporters;
- limiting or preventing the use of military force by state and nonstate actors against civilian populations;
- mitigating transnational threats posed by Syria-based Islamist extremist groups;
- meeting the humanitarian needs of internally and externally displaced Syrians;
- preventing the presence and needs of Syrian refugees from destabilizing neighboring countries;
- limiting the negative effects of other third party interventions on regional and international balances of power; and
- responding to and preventing the use of chemical weapons.

As Syria's conflict has changed over time from a situation of civil unrest and low-intensity conflict to one of nationwide military conflict involving multiple internal and external actors, the policies, approaches, and priorities of the United States and others also have changed. As of late 2018, the United States and its Syrian and regional partners have not succeeded in inducing or compelling Syrian President Bashar al Asad to leave office or secured a fundamental reorientation of Syria's political system as part of a negotiated settlement process. The United States continues to advocate for an inclusive negotiated solution, but has largely acquiesced to Asad's resumption

[104] For additional details, see UNDP and UNHCR, *3RP Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan 2017 – 2018: In Response to the Syria Crisis: Regional Strategic Overview*, December 5, 2016.

[105] For additional details, see UNOCHA, *2017 Syrian Arab Republic Humanitarian Response Plan: January - December 2017*.

[106] UNOCHA Financial Tracking Service.

[107] https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/overview/2018.

of political and security control. Forceful interventions in Syria by Russia, Iran, Turkey, the United States, and Israel have created a fundamentally different set of calculations for policymakers to consider relative to those that prevailed prior to the conflict. Similarly, the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government in the conflict and the U.S. and international responses to that use have reshaped international norms and mechanisms for responding to chemical weapons threats.

Trump Administration Syria Policy Evolves in 2018

In 2018, the Administration's Syria policy underwent significant changes, reflecting an internal policy review as well as apparent differences of opinion between President Trump and senior military and diplomatic officials. In January 2018, then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated that "the United States will maintain a military presence in Syria focused on ensuring that ISIS cannot re-emerge."[108] Tillerson stated that the United States intended to carry out stabilization initiatives in areas liberated from IS control, pursue measures to de-escalate the conflict, partner with allies to address counterterrorism goals, encourage U.N.-mediated peace efforts, and provide targeted reconstruction in areas liberated from the Islamic State. This approach was echoed by CENTCOM Commander Gen. Votel, who said in testimony that, "after we have removed [ISIS] from their control of the terrain, we have to consolidate our gains and we have to ensure that the right security and stability is in place so that they cannot resurge."[109]

In March, President Trump fired Secretary Tillerson. The President later stated that U.S. troops in Syria would be "coming out of Syria, like, very soon."[110] Speaking about Syria on April 3, Trump reiterated, "I want to get out. I want to bring our troops back home."[111] Military officials sought to downplay any divisions within the Administration, stating, "... as we reach finality against ISIS in Syria, we're going to adjust the level of our presence there. So in that sense, nothing actually has changed."[112] An April 7 chemical weapons attack by the Syrian government and subsequent U.S., British, and French airstrikes on Syrian CW facilities also appeared to temper the President's calls for a quick U.S. military withdrawal from the country.

However, by May 2018, the Administration had begun to shift away from direct U.S. funding of stabilization programs in areas of Syria recently liberated from IS control. The Administration moved to end a range of U.S. nonlethal, nonhumanitarian assistance programs for opposition-held communities in southern and northwestern Syria, including in Idlib province.[113] At the same time, officials continued to stress the importance of a sustained U.S. presence in the country. In July, Secretary Mattis stated that U.S. military forces were focused on the "last bastions" of the Islamic State in Syria, adding, "As that falls, then we'll sort out a new situation. But what you don't do is simply walk away and -- and leave the place as devastated as it is, based on this war. You don't just leave it, and then ISIS comes back."

In August, Administration officials announced that the State Department would reprogram nearly $200 million in funds appropriated in FY2017 for Syria stabilization programs to priorities in

[108] Rex Tillerson, "Remarks on the Way Forward for the United States Regarding Syria," Hoover Institute at Stanford University, January 17, 2018.

[109] Gen. Joseph Votel before the House Armed Services Committee, February 27, 2018.

[110] Remarks by President Trump on the Infrastructure Initiative, March 30, 2018.

[111] Remarks by President Trump and Heads of the Baltic States in Joint Press Conference, April 3, 2018.

[112] Department Of Defense Press Briefing By Pentagon Chief Spokesperson Dana W. White And Joint Staff Director Lt. Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. In The Pentagon Briefing Room, April 5, 2018.

[113] "Trump administration ends aid for northwestern Syria," *CBS News*, May 18, 2018.

other countries. They also stated that the United States intended to rely on contributions from foreign partners, including a $100 million contribution from Saudi Arabia and contributions from the United Arab Emirates and Germany, to continue stabilization efforts in northeastern Syria.[114]

In the fall of 2018, Administration officials began to articulate a three-track Syria strategy which included seeking the enduring defeat of the Islamic State, achieving a political settlement to the Syrian civil war based on the terms of UNSCR 2254, and inducing the departure of all Iranian-commanded forces from Syria.[115] In September 2018, U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton stated, "We're not going to leave [Syria] as long as Iranian troops are outside Iranian borders and that includes Iranian proxies and militias."[116]

In November 2018, Ambassador Jeffrey—appointed in August as the Secretary of State's Special Representative for Syria Engagement—stated that, "U.S. troops will stay on in Syria we say until the enduring defeat of ISIS which means to establish the conditions so that local forces, local populations, local governments, can deal with ISIS as a terrorist or as an insurgent movement."[117] In December, then-Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Brett McGurk stated that, "Even as the end of the physical caliphate is clearly now coming into sight, the end of ISIS will be a much more long-term initiative," adding, "Nobody is declaring a mission accomplished." McGurk also stated that,

> …if we've learned one thing over the years, enduring defeat of a group like this means you can't just defeat their physical space and then leave; you have to make sure the internal security forces are in place to ensure that those gains, security gains, are enduring.[118]

President Trump Announces Withdrawal of U.S. Forces

President Trump announced on December 19 that U.S. forces would be returning from Syria "now."[119] He stated, "We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency."[120] Pentagon Spokesperson Dana White later stated that while the U.S.-led coalition had liberated IS-held territory, the campaign against the group was not over.[121]

The precise timeline for withdrawal has not been formally announced; one plan under consideration reportedly would include a 120-day withdrawal period.[122] A Pentagon spokesperson confirmed that the Defense Department had "started the process of returning U.S. troops home" from Syria, but stated that no further details would be released for force protection and

[114] Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Satterfield and Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition To Counter ISIS Brett McGurk, Briefing on the Status of Syria Stabilization Assistance and Ongoing Efforts To Achieve an Enduring Defeat of ISIS, State Department, August 17, 2018.

[115] See Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Remarks at the 36th Annual Jewish Institute for National Security of America Awards Dinner, October 10, 2018; Telephonic Press Briefing with James Jeffrey, Special Representative for Syria Engagement, November 7, 2018.

[116] "Bolton: U.S. forces will stay in Syria until Iran and its proxies depart," *Washington Post*, September 24, 2018.

[117] Telephonic Press Briefing with James Jeffrey, Special Representative for Syria Engagement, November 7, 2018.

[118] State Department Press Briefing, December 11, 2018.

[119] Video poster to Twitter (@realDonald Trump), December 19, 2018, 3:10 PM.

[120] Trump, Donald (@realDonaldTrump). "We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency." December 19, 2018, 6:29 AM. Tweet.

[121] White, Dana (@ChiefPentSpox). "The #Coalition has liberated ISIS-held territory, but the campaign against #ISIS is not over." December 19, 2018, 9:33 AM. Tweet.

[122] "Syrian surprise: How Trump's phone call changed the war," *Reuters*, December 28, 2018.

operational security reasons.[123] An unnamed Defense Department official stated that the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria would likely mean an end to U.S. airstrikes in the country, although unmanned drone strikes could continue.[124] State Department personnel reportedly were evacuated from Syria within 24 hours of the announcement.[125]

The announced troop withdrawal appeared to come as a surprise to some senior military and diplomatic officials, who, as noted above, had publicly stated that the United States intended to remain inside Syria to carry out stabilization operations. The week prior to the announcement, Brett McGurk had emphasized that the Islamic State is likely to be a resilient force, stating, "There's clandestine cells. Nobody is saying that they are going to disappear. Nobody is that naive. So we want to stay on the ground and make sure that stability can be maintained in these areas."[126] Noting the potential danger to the United States and its allies if the Islamic State is able to regain the use of ungoverned territory in Syria to plot external attacks, McGurk concluded, "So obviously, it would be reckless if we were just to say, well, the physical caliphate is defeated, so we can just leave now. I think anyone who's looked at a conflict like this would agree with that."

Defense and State Department officials did not immediately comment on the announcement, and reportedly sought to persuade the White House to reconsider the withdrawal.[127] On December 20, Defense Secretary Mattis submitted his resignation.[128] His letter, which was released by the Defense Department, stated in part, "you have the right to have a Secretary of Defense whose views are better aligned with yours."[129] On December 22, Brett McGurk announced that he would accelerate his resignation as Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. In an email to colleagues obtained by the *New York Times*, McGurk stated that, "The recent decision by the president came as a shock and was a complete reversal of policy that was articulated to us […] I ultimately concluded that I could not carry out these new instructions and maintain my integrity."[130]

The Syria withdrawal announcement was criticized by many Members of Congress, but some Members embraced the decision as overdue. Senators Graham, Shaheen, Ernst, King, Cotton, and Rubio drafted an open letter to President Trump, stating, "We believe that such action at this time is a premature and costly mistake that not only threatens the safety and security of the United States, but also emboldens ISIS, Bashar al Assad, Iran, and Russia."[131] Senator Graham also drafted a nonbinding resolution (S.Res. 738) calling on the President to reconsider his decision. In contrast, Senator Rand Paul and Representatives Ted Lieu and Ro Khanna praised the President's decision, citing concerns about the wisdom, effectiveness, and authorization for U.S. operations.

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[123] White, Dana (@ChiefPentSpox). "For force protection and operational security reasons we will not provide further details." December 19, 2018, 9:33 AM. Tweet.

[124] "US withdrawal from Syria means likely an end to airstrikes, official says," *CNN*, December 20, 2018.

[125] "U.S. State Department personnel being evacuated from Syria - U.S. official," *Reuters*, December 19, 2018.

[126] State Department Press Briefing, December 11, 2018.

[127] "Trump Withdraws U.S. Forces From Syria, Declaring 'We Have Won Against ISIS,'" *New York Times*, December 19, 2018.

[128] President Trump appointed Patrick Shanahan as Acting Secretary of Defense as of January 1.

[129] "Read Jim Mattis's Letter to Trump: Full Text," *New York Times*, December 20, 2018.

[130] "Splitting With Trump Over Syria, American Leading ISIS Fight Steps Down," *New York Times*, December 22, 2018.

[131] "Graham, Shaheen, Ernst, King, Cotton, Rubio Urge Trump Administration To Reconsider Withdrawing U.S. Forces From Syria," Press Release, Office of Sen. Lindsey Graham, December 19, 2018.

Some U.S. allies also have criticized the decision, including coalition partners in the counter-IS campaign such as France and the United Kingdom. A spokesperson for the French Defense Ministry stated that French airstrikes against the Islamic State in Syria would continue.[132] Britain's defense minister disputed the claim that the Islamic State had been defeated, saying that the group had morphed into another form and was "very much alive."[133] In contrast, Russian President Putin praised the U.S. move towards withdrawal, calling it "correct."[134] Turkish leaders also welcomed the U.S. decision, which some reports described as having been influenced by a call between President Trump and Turkish President Erdogan.[135]

Potential Cooperation with Russia

Russia has provided support to the Asad regime since the onset of conflict in 2011. Over the summer of 2015, Moscow began a gradual buildup of personnel, combat aircraft, and military equipment, and launched its active military intervention in September 2015. Russia's military intervention on behalf of the Asad government created immediate military operational and technical challenges for U.S. forces operating in Syria. It also has generated a series of evolving strategic challenges and questions for U.S. policymakers. Key issues with regard to Russia's role and military operations in Syria include

- Russian support for Syrian military operations, including a potential assault against opposition held areas in Idlib province in northwestern Syria;
- Russian-U.S. military de-confliction;
- Russian diplomacy and views on conflict settlement;
- Russian proposals for supporting the return to Syria of refugees from neighboring countries;
- Russia's policy toward the presence and operation of Iranian security personnel in Syria as well as Israeli military operations; and
- Russia's role in ensuring security in areas adjacent to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

Military Deconfliction

In late 2015, the United States established air safety protocols with Russia to de-conflict air operations over Syria and avoid confrontations or incidents that could provoke a broader bilateral crisis. In 2017, U.S. and Russian ground forces in Syria began to operate in close proximity to one another as part of operations to defeat the Islamic State, requiring additional de-confliction measures for ground movements. This formed what U.S. military officials described as "two nodes for de-confliction with the Russians," one for the U.S. air component of the counter-IS campaign (based at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar) and one for the ground component (at CJTF-OIR headquarters at Camp Arifjan in Kuwait).[136] In 2018, Secretary Mattis referenced an additional

[132] "US withdrawal from Syria means likely an end to airstrikes, official says," *CNN*, December 20, 2018.

[133] "Isis not defeated in Syria despite Trump claim, says UK," *The Guardian*, December 19, 2018.

[134] "Putin Welcomes U.S. Withdrawal From Syria as 'Correct'," *New York Times*, December 20, 2018.

[135] "Turkish foreign minister: Turkey welcomes U.S. decision to withdraw troops from Syria," *Associated Press*, December 21, 2018; "Syrian surprise: How Trump's phone call changed the war," *Reuters*, December 28, 2018.

[136] Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Townsend via teleconference from Baghdad, August 31, 2017; "In Syria's Skies, Close Calls With Russian Warplanes," *New York Times*, December 8, 2017.

line of communication between the Joint Staff J5 (Strategic Plans and Policy) and the Russian General Staff in Moscow.[137] Secretary Mattis has also emphasized that "in regard to Syria, what we do with the Russian Federation is we deconflict our operations. We do not coordinate them."[138]

U.S. officials have described de-confliction measures with Russia as generally successful. Ambassador Jeffrey in late 2019 stated, "…our contacts with the Russians on Syria work very, very well and we see no need to change it. Now, are we producing results? Slower than we would have hoped. But that's not because we don't have the right mechanism, it's because nations have different objectives."[139] U.S.-Russian de-confliction measures were tested in February 2018, when pro-Asad fighters carried out an attack on an outpost in the eastern province of Deir ez Zor where a team of U.S. special forces was colocated with local partner forces for operations against the Islamic State. The U.S. special forces and partner ground forces repelled the attack, and U.S.-led coalition forces launched defensive airstrikes on the attacking party.[140] Reports indicated that Russian military contractors (or mercenaries) were with the proregime forces and that potentially dozens were killed.[141] Secretary of Defense James Mattis testified that "The Russian high command in Syria assured us it was not their people. And my direction to the chairman was—for the force, then, was to be annihilated. And it was."[142]

Russian Humanitarian Proposals

At the July 2018 U.S.-Russia summit, President Putin stated his view that the two countries might cooperate on refugee return.[143] U.S. officials later emphasized that any cooperation with Russia on political and humanitarian issues in Syria, including refugee return, should occur within the framework of the U.N.-brokered Geneva process.[144] Reports suggest that Russian officials have circulated detailed logistical plans for facilitating the return of refugees from neighboring countries to Syria under Syrian government auspices. Efforts would include the preparation of special crossing points and camps for accommodation paired with requests for increased international contributions to reconstruction efforts. In June 2018, a UNHCR spokesperson stated, "in our view, conditions in Syria are not yet conducive for an assisted return."[145]

In July, General Joseph Votel, Commander, U.S. Central Command, observed when asked about working directly with Russia on refugee return that he had "not recommend[ed] that" and "would

[137] Media Availability by Secretary Mattis, July 27, 2018.

[138] Remarks by Secretary of State Pompeo, "Press Availability With Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, and Australian Defense Minister Marise Payne," Palo Alto, CA, July 24, 2018.

[139] Special Representative for Syria Engagement Jeffrey in Interview with RIA Novosti and Kommersant, November 21, 2018.

[140] "Unprovoked attack by Syrian pro-regime forces prompts Coalition defensive strikes," CENTCOM Release # 20180208-01, February 8, 2018.

[141] Tom O'Connor, "U.S. Coalition Kills Russians in Airstrikes Against Assad Supporters in Syria, Reports Say," *Newsweek*, February 12, 2018; Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria," *New York Times*, May 24, 2018.

[142] Secretary Mattis before the Senate Armed Services Committee, April 26, 2018.

[143] The White House, "Remarks by President Trump and President Putin of the Russian Federation in Joint Press Conference," July 16, 2018.

[144] Press Gaggle at the Pentagon with Secretary of Defense Mattis, July 27, 2018; Secretary of State Mike Pompeo before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, July 25, 2018.

[145] "Lebanon blocks UNHCR residency permits over Syria refugee spat," *France24*, June 8, 2018.

want to make sure that this isn't something that we stepped into lightly."[146] The Russian Ministry of Defense criticized General Votel for, they said, "discredit[ing] the official position of his supreme commander-in-chief."[147] In the weeks following the summit, U.S. officials minimized the impact of the summit on U.S. policy. Secretary Mattis stated that "there have been no policy changes."[148]

Russia, Israel, Iran, and Security in Southwest Syria

Reportedly, Israeli officials continue to consult with Russian counterparts about deconflicting Israeli military operations in Syria and ways to limit Iran's presence there.[149] In April, Russia's ambassador to Israel said

> Russia constantly takes into account Israel's concerns and interests vis-à-vis preserving its national security. We are, of course, concerned with the state [which] the bilateral relations between Israel and Iran are in, in light of mutual threats and rejection by both countries. We must also be concerned with Iran's presence in Syria now. It may lead to a worsening of the situation and a conflagration in the entire Middle East.[150]

Israeli officials have communicated to Russian counterparts that they will accept Asad's control over Syria if Iran-backed forces vacate the country.[151] After a meeting with Putin in July, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu reiterated this position, citing a long history of stability between Israel and Syria in the Golan Heights.[152] Later, as Syrian government troops consolidated their control over the area opposite the Israeli-occupied part of the Golan, Russian officials said that they could not compel Iran to leave Syria, but announced that heavy Iranian weaponry was being pulled back to at least 85 km from Israeli-controlled areas. Some observers have assessed that Russian officials view Israel's engagement with Russia as recognition that Russia has more influence than the United States in Syria.[153] Israel continues to insist on no Iranian intervention or entrenchment in Syria in order to prevent a "new Hezbollah front" on its northern border.[154]

In a press conference following a July 16 summit with President Trump, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated a desire to have the situation between Israel and Syria in the Golan return to what it had been before Syria's civil war,[155] echoing an earlier statement from Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman.[156] That prewar status quo was based on a 1974 agreement in which

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[146] Luis Martinez, "US Commander in Middle East Hesitant To Cooperate With Russians in Syria on Refugees," ABC News, July 22, 2018.

[147] Nancy A. Youseff, "Russia Says U.S. General's Remarks Discredited Trump's Position," *Wall Street Journal*, July 24, 2018.

[148] Media Availability by Secretary Mattis, July 27, 2018.

[149] "Israel rejects Russian offer to keep Iranian forces 100 km from Golan: official," Reuters, July 23, 2018; Itamar Eichner, et al., "Russian SC chief meets Israeli, Iranian counterparts," Ynetnews, April 25, 2018.

[150] Eichner, et al., op. cit.

[151] See, e.g., Jacob Nagel, "Iran, Syria, and Israel's Red Line," Real Clear Defense, June 18, 2018.

[152] Noa Landau, "Netanyahu: Israel Has No Problem with Assad, but Cease-fire Agreements Must Be Upheld," *Ha'aretz*, July 12, 2018.

[153] Damien Sharkov, "Why Is Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu Warming to Russia's Vladimir Putin?" Newsweek, June 7, 2016.

[154] Polina Nikolskaya and Dan Williams, "Russia says Iranian forces pulled back from Golan in Syria; Israel unsatisfied," Reuters, August 1, 2018.

[155] White House, Remarks by President Trump and President Putin of the Russian Federation in Joint Press Conference, Helsinki, Finland, July 16, 2018.

[156] "Liberman vows 'strong response' if Syrian military enters Golan DMZ," *Times of Israel*, July 9, 2018.

the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) took responsibility for patrolling a demilitarized area separating Israeli- and Syrian-controlled zones.[157]

In early August, a Russian military general staff officer announced that UNDOF peacekeepers returned to patrol the demilitarized area for the first time since a general pullback to the Israeli-controlled side in 2014.[158] Russia has deployed military police near the demilitarized area on the Syrian-controlled side to prevent "provocations" until the situation stabilizes sufficiently to allow Syrian government forces to take over the Russian observation posts.[159] As of mid-August, Russian military police had established four posts along the Syrian side of the disengagement zone (the Bravo line). Russian officials stated the posts could be expanded to eight.[160] In October 2018, Syrian military forces retook control of the Quneitra border crossing between Syria and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

Syria and NDAA Prohibition on U.S.-Russia Cooperation

Section 1242 of the FY2015 NDAA (P.L. 113-291) states that none of the funds to be appropriated by the act may be used for bilateral military-to-military cooperation between the United States and Russia until the Secretary of State certifies that Russia has ceased its occupation of Ukraine and other "aggressive activities" that threaten NATO states. This prohibition has been extended in annual defense authorization legislation. Section 1231 of the FY2018 NDAA (P.L. 115-91) extended that limitation to include FY2018 funds. The FY2019 NDAA (P.L. 115-232) further extends the limitation to FY2019 funds, and adds that "Nothing in sub-section (a) shall be construed to limit bilateral military-to-military dialogue between the United States and the Russian Federation for the purpose of reducing the risk of conflict." Section 1232 of the FY2017 NDAA states that the Secretary of Defense may waive the limitation restricting bilateral cooperation if he determines that the waiver is in the national security interests of the United States, and submits a notification and report to the appropriate congressional committees.

Presidential Authority to Strike Syria Under U.S. Law[161]

Since 2011, Members of Congress and successive Administrations have debated presidential authority to conduct military operations in Syria absent a declaration of war. This has, over time, included debates regarding the potential imposition of no-fly zones over areas of the country to protect civilians, operations against various extremist groups, force protection for U.S. military personnel and partner forces inside Syria, and strikes against Syrian chemical weapons facilities and related forces. In April 2018, U.S. missile strikes targeted chemical weapons-related facilities in Syria, in response to a chemical weapons attack in the city Douma. The strikes occurred just over a year after the U.S. strike on Al Shayrat airbase in Homs province, following the sarin gas attack in Khan Sheikhoun. Describing the Administration's view of the authorities underlying the 2018 operation, Defense Secretary Mattis stated

> As our commander in chief, the president has the authority under Article II of the Constitution to use military force overseas to defend important U.S. national interests. The

[157] UNDOF Fact Sheet, available at https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/undof.

[158] "Russia says UN peacekeepers patrol Israel-Syria border for first time in years," *Times of Israel*, August 2, 2018. The 2014 pullback occurred after clashes had intensified in the area between Syrian government troops and various opposition forces, and had led to the temporary abduction of peacekeepers from Fiji and the Philippines. Louis Charbonneau, "U.N. Golan peacekeepers pull back from Syrian positions amid clashes," Reuters, September 15, 2014.

[159] "Russia says UN peacekeepers patrol Israel-Syria border for first time in years," op. cit.

[160] "Russian military police deploys four posts on Golan heights," *TASS*, August 14, 2018.

[161] Prepared by Matthew Weed, Specialist in Foreign Policy Legislation.

> United States has an important national interest in averting a worsening catastrophe in Syria, and specifically deterring the use and proliferation of chemical weapons.[162]

Similarly, in an April 8, 2017, letter to Congress, President Trump had stated that he had acted "pursuant to my constitutional authority to conduct foreign relations and as Commander in Chief and Chief Executive" in ordering the April 6, 2017, U.S. missile strikes on Al Shayrat airbase. In the letter, President Trump says that he "acted in the vital national security and foreign policy interests of the United States," and that, "the United States will take additional action, as necessary and appropriate, to further its important national interests."[163]

In the past, Presidents have justified the use of military force by relying on presidential powers they assert are inherent under Article II Commander in Chief and Chief Executive authority. The executive branch has claimed that a President may use military force to defend U.S. national security interests (even when an immediate threat to the United States and its Armed Forces is not necessarily apparent) and to promote U.S. foreign policy.

In 2017 and 2018, the U.S. military used force against the Syrian government and its allies on limited occasions for force-protection purposes, including for the protection of U.S. partner forces. In an August 2017 letter to Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Senator Bob Corker, the State Department asserted that "the 2001 AUMF also provides authority to use force to defend U.S., Coalition and partner forces engaged in the campaign to defeat ISIS to the extent such use of force is a necessary and appropriate measure in support of counter-ISIS operations." The letter states the Administration's view that

> The strikes taken by the United States in May and June 2017 against the Syrian Government and pro-Syrian-Government forces were limited and lawful measures to counter immediate threats to U.S. or partner forces engaged in that campaign. The United States does not seek to fight the Syrian Government or pro-Syrian-Government forces. However, the United States will not hesitate to use necessary and proportionate force to defend U.S., Coalition, or partner forces engaged in the campaign against ISIS.[164]

Congress has debated Syria-specific and Islamic State-focused authorization for military force proposals intermittently in recent years. In 2013, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee considered and reported a proposed authorization for the use of military force following a chemical weapons attack in the suburbs of Damascus, Syria (S.J.Res. 21, 113th Congress). The Senate did not consider the measure further.

Since U.S. military action against the Islamic State began in June 2014, starting in Iraq and then spreading to Syria, Congress also has debated the need for enactment of a new IS-specific authorization for use of military force. President Obama asserted that the campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria was authorized by both the Authorization for Use of Military Force (2001 AUMF; P.L. 107-40; claiming that the Islamic State was a successor organization of Al Qaeda and that elements of Al Qaeda were present in Syria) and Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002 (2002 AUMF; P.L. 107-243; claiming authority to defend

[162] Statement by Secretary James N. Mattis on Syria, Department of Defense Press Release No: NR-113-18.

[163] On April 6, the President said he ordered the strikes to protect the "vital national security interest of the United States to prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons." The April 8 letter expands upon this explanation. The letter says the strikes were intended "to degrade the Syrian military's ability to conduct further chemical weapons attacks and to dissuade the Syrian regime from using or proliferating chemical weapons, thereby promoting the stability of the region and averting a worsening of the region's current humanitarian catastrophe."

[164] Letter to Senator Bob Corker from Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Regional, Global and Functional Affairs Charles Faulkner, Bureau of Legislative Affairs, August 2, 2017.

Iraq from the Islamic State threat). As noted above, Senate committees have held hearings on a proposed new AUMF (S.J.Res. 59) in 2018.

U.S. Assistance

U.S. Military Operations in Syria and U.S. Train, Advise, Assist, and Equip Efforts

U.S. Military Presence in Syria

In December 2018, President Trump announced that U.S. troops would withdraw from Syria, where they had been operating in support of the counter-IS campaign. First deployed in 2015, U.S. military forces in Syria reached approximately 2,000 personnel by December 2017.[165] They conducted train and equip program-related activities as well as "advise and assist" operations in support of U.S. partner forces. According to 2018 oversight reporting, U.S. and coalition forces in Syria trained more than 12,500 members of vetted Syrian opposition groups, among them more than 11,000 members of the SDF and members of Internal Security Forces and tribal forces. The FY2019 appropriations request called for the training of tens of thousands of additional local partner forces to hold and secure areas recaptured from the Islamic State. Four U.S. soldiers have died in northern Syria since 2016, some in non-combat related incidents.[166] Unverified local reporting suggests that thousands of U.S. local partner force personnel have died in combat with the Islamic State since 2014.

U.S. forces have operated in northern and eastern Syria in partnership with the SDF and in southwest Syria in partnership with the Maghawir al Thawra militia near the At Tanf garrison adjacent to the tri-border area shared by Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. U.S. operations in Syria were supported in part by the 2014 request of the Iraqi government to the U.N. Security Council for military support to address the threat of terrorism emanating from Syria.

The Special Operations Joint Task Force, Operation Inherent Resolve (SOJTF-OIR) led by Major General James Jarrard has been "the primary advise, assist and accompany force in Syria, working closely with the SDF."[167] SOJTF-OIR has reported to the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), which leads the international coalition to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.[168] In September 2018, Lieutenant General Paul LaCamera assumed command of CJTF-OIR.

[165] "Pentagon Announces Troop Levels in Iraq, Syria," *DoD News*, December 6, 2017.

[166] DoD Press Release No: NR-420-16, November 25, 2016; DoD Press Release No: NR-116-17, March 30, 2017; DoD Press Release No: NR-197-17, May 27, 2017; DoD Press Release No.: NR-093-18, March 31, 2018.

[167] Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Jarrard via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq, October 31, 2017.

[168] See http://www.inherentresolve.mil for an organization chart.

Evolution of the U.S. Deployment in Syria

A small contingent of 50 U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) initially deployed to northern Syria in October 2015 to support operations against the Islamic State. In April 2016, their numbers were increased by 250. In December 2016, the force management level (FML) for U.S. personnel in Syria increased to potentially allow the deployment of up to 500 individuals, including special operations forces trainers, advisors, and explosive ordnance disposal teams. In March 2017, roughly 300 members of the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit deployed to Syria, providing heavy artillery support to SDF operations. An additional 100 Army Ranger forces deployed to the city of Manbij in Aleppo province. Until the revised estimate of U.S. personnel in Syria was issued in December 2017, U.S. military officials continued to reiterate that the FML for Syria remained 503, while also acknowledging that FML numbers did not include "temporary forces."

Military Authorities and Operations

As discussed above ("Presidential Authority to Strike Syria Under U.S. Law"), U.S. strike operations against the Islamic State and Al Qaeda-affiliated targets in Syria are conducted pursuant to the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force. U.S. forces have operated in Syria for train and equip program purposes as well as to advise and assist U.S. partner forces, whether or not those specific partner forces were trained and/or armed under the train and equip program. Such "advise and assist" activities may have been conducted pursuant to the authorities outlined by train and equip program provisions or pursuant to other defense authorities defined in law or asserted by the executive branch. This includes military operations against IS targets conducted pursuant to the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force.

The Administration's FY2019 request for Syria train and equip funds envisioned the requested funding supporting the procurement of weapons, vehicles, and supplies and the provision of life support and operational sustainment for a 35,000-person Internal Security Force (ISF) and 30,000-person combat force (including ISF stipends). According to the request, as of early 2018, 10,000 vetted Syrian organization members were receiving Defense Department-funded monthly stipends, although subsequent oversight reports have detailed changes to the ranks of Syrian groups receiving DOD stipend support.[169]

In 2014, Congress created a new authority for the Department of Defense (DOD) to train and equip select Syrians in the FY2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA, Section 1209 of P.L. 113-291, as amended). This authority, as amended by subsequent legislation, enables DOD "to provide assistance, including training, equipment, supplies, stipends, construction of training and associated facilities, and sustainment, to appropriately vetted elements of the Syrian opposition and other appropriately vetted Syrian groups and individuals." Such assistance activities are authorized for select purposes, including supporting U.S. efforts to combat the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations in Syria and promoting the conditions for a negotiated settlement to Syria's civil war.

The FY2017 NDAA (P.L. 114-328) extended the authorization for the program through December 31, 2018, but the FY2018 NDAA (H.R. 2810, P.L. 115-91) did not extend it further. Instead, the FY2018 act required the President to submit a report describing U.S. strategy in Syria not later than February 1, 2018.

Congress has not appropriated funds specifically for the Syria train and equip program since the program's inception. Rather, Congress has authorized the Department of Defense to reprogram funds from global counterterrorism assistance accounts to operations and maintenance accounts

[169] See Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve and Operation Pacific Eagle- Philippines, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2018 - June 30, 2018, released August 6, 2018.

to support program activities, with each reprogramming subject to the prior approval of the four congressional defense committees. As of July 2018, more than $2.2 billion has been reprogrammed or requested for the program. (**Table 1** provides information about program funding and related requests.)

Table 1. Syria Train and Equip Program: Appropriations Actions and Requests

thousands of dollars

	FY2015 Approved Transfers	FY2016 Approved Transfers	FY2017 Approved Transfers	FY2017 Requests	FY2018 Syria-Specific Request	FY2019 Syria-Specific Request
	225,000 (O&M FY15)	116,453 (CTPF FY15/16)	50,000 (CTPF FY16/17)	430,000[a]	500,000[b] (CTEF)	300,000 (CTEF)
	220,500 (CTPF FY15/16)	300,000 (CTPF FY16/17)	168,000[c] (CTEF FY17/17)			
	279,500 (CTPF FY15/16)	—	—			
	-157,408 (CTPF FY15/16)	—	—			
Net Total	**567,592**	**416,453**	**218,000**	**430,000**	**500,000**	**300,000**
Combined Net Total						**2,214,045**

Source: Executive branch appropriations requests and reprogramming notifications.

Notes: Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF). Counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Train and Equip Fund (CTEF). The authority for the Syria Train and Equip Program requires the Department of Defense to submit prior approval notices to transfer funds into various service and department-wide Operations and Maintenance accounts for program activities. Funds listed were approved for transfer by the required congressional defense and appropriations committees during the fiscal years noted.

a. In 2016, President Obama requested $250 million for the Syria train and equip program for FY2017, and, in March 2017, the Trump Administration requested an additional $180 million in FY2017 funds for the program.

b. The Trump Administration requested $500 million for Syria train and equip program efforts as part of its FY2018 defense appropriations request for the Counter-IS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF).

c. During the period for which a continuing resolution was active for FY2017 defense funding, DOD sought and received committee approval for the reprogramming of $250 million in CTPF funds to O&M accounts. The final FY2017 defense appropriations act did not appropriate CTPF funds, and in August 2017, DOD cancelled prior approval reprogramming request 17-05 and submitted request 17-26 to reimburse O&M accounts for the cancelled funds using CTEF monies. The amount reimbursed was $168 million.

President Trump requested $500 million in FY2018 defense CTEF funds for the program. The FY2018 NDAA authorized the appropriation of that amount, and the FY2018 defense appropriations act (P.L. 115-141) appropriated the requested CTEF amount, but the act did not specify the amount for Syria-specific programs.

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 Obama Administration was taking steps to provide arms to some Syrian rebels under covert action authorities.[170] Several press accounts citing unnamed U.S. government sources subsequently described details of reported U.S. and partner nation efforts to that effect.[171] From 2014 onward, various anti-Asad forces released videos of their operatives loading and firing what appeared to be U.S.-origin antitank weaponry in Syria.[172] Asked in April 2014 about the reported shipments and use of U.S. origin weaponry by Syrian rebels, then-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."[173] 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.[174] In July 2017, press reports citing unnamed U.S. officials stated that the Trump Administration had decided to end a reported program of aid to anti-Asad forces and focus instead on defeating the Islamic State via Defense Department-led train, advise, assist, and equip efforts.[175]

FY2019 Legislation

The FY2019 NDAA (P.L. 115-232) extends the program's authorization through the end of 2019, but also places limitations on the use of FY2019 funds for the program until certain requirements have been met. The act prohibits the obligation or expenditure of funds authorized to be appropriated for FY2019 until both (1) the President submits the report on U.S. strategy in Syria required by Section 1221 of the FY2018 NDAA (P.L. 115-91), and (2) the Secretary of Defense submits a separate report to the congressional defense committees regarding the program. The act also requires the Secretary of Defense to submit a written certification quarterly on matters including progress on stabilization as well as any human rights violations committed by U.S.-supported groups. The act continues to apply the prior approval reprogramming requirements applied to date for the use of appropriated funds.

Defense appropriations legislation for FY2019 considered in the House and Senate would have provided funding for the CTEF account on differing terms.[176] Reflecting Senate concerns, the

[170] 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."

[171] 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.

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

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

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

[175] "Trump ends covert CIA program to arm anti-Assad rebels in Syria, a move sought by Moscow," *Washington Post*, July 19, 2017.

[176] The House bill (H.R. 6157) would provide the Administration's requested amount for the overall account ($1.4 billion) on terms similar to prior-year appropriations. The Senate-reported bill (S. 3159) would appropriate $994 million for the account, based on a recommended rescission of $250 million for border security programs fundable through other accounts and some monies requested for Iraq and Syria due to "insufficient budget documentation." Specifically, the Senate reported version would not appropriate $72 million requested for Syria to purchase non-NATO standard weapons for U.S. partner forces.

conference version of the bill would not provide some funds for Syria due to "insufficient budget documentation." The Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2019 (P.L. 115-245) provides $1.35 billion for the CTEF account, slightly less than the Administration's requested amount for the overall account ($1.4 billion). As in previous years, the text of the act does not specify the amount for Syria-specific programs.

Issues for Congress

Over time, both the purposes and the content of the Train and Equip program have evolved. The Obama Administration initially proposed the program in early 2014 as a means to influence the outcome of Syria's civil war, but amended its authorization and appropriations requests to Congress later that year to include and emphasize counterterrorism objectives in the midst of the Islamic State's contemporaneous territorial gains in Syria and Iraq. After an initial iteration of the program designed to recruit, train, and equip new forces failed to produce intended results, the Obama Administration reengineered its approach in October 2015 to emphasize and focus on support of vetted existing forces actively engaged in operations against the Islamic State. This approach has defined the program's implementation since, with U.S. training and equipping efforts focusing on improving the capabilities of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), along with smaller U.S. partner forces based in southeastern Syria.

During congressional consideration of proposed train and equip authorities in 2014, some Members of Congress raised questions about how the executive branch might respond in instances where U.S. personnel or partner forces in Syria came under threat. These debates reflected concern among some Members of Congress that U.S. military personnel inside Syria might come under threat from Syrian military forces or their allies, which could risk confrontation with the Syrian government and/or its state and nonstate partners—including Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah—in the event of U.S. preemption or retaliation.

Since 2015, U.S. forces in Syria have participated in military operations in forward areas where contact with various hostile forces has occurred. The Obama Administration stated its intent to defend U.S. personnel and partner forces in Syria, but did not conduct force-protection strikes against the Syrian government or its allies. During 2017 and 2018, U.S. military strikes have targeted units of regular and irregular forces aligned with the government of Syria in instances where U.S. forces have determined that those units have posed direct threats to U.S. personnel and/or to U.S. partner forces. U.S. forces also reportedly have returned fire in areas where nonstate actors who may have Turkish support have fired small arms at or near U.S. positions near the northern city of Manbij.

In July 2017, the Trump Administration described a series of strikes taken to defend U.S. and partner forces in 2017 as "limited and lawful measures to counter immediate threats to U.S. or partner forces engaged" in the campaign against the Islamic State. Administration officials asserted that U.S. forces derive the authority to protect themselves and their partners from the underlying authorities the executive branch cites for the U.S. military presence in Syria.

In 2018, DOD officials requested funding to reshape the content and conduct of U.S. assistance programs and parallel U.S. military operations in Syria in response to the anticipated defeat of the Islamic State. In December 2017, a DOD spokesman said that "While the nature of U.S. support to partner forces will adjust as the coalition shifts from major urban combat operations to stabilization tasks, U.S. support will not end until the enduring defeat of ISIS and will be

determined by conditions on the ground."[177] As noted above, DOD's FY2019 request for train and equip funding in Syria envisioned the creation of U.S.-supported security forces in opposition-held areas of northern and eastern Syria with up to 65,000 members. President Trump's December 2018 announcement that U.S. forces would withdraw from Syria has generated significant uncertainty about the future of these programs.

Prior to the withdrawal announcement, future U.S. support was expected to feature an increased emphasis on counterterrorism and internal security capacity building assistance for U.S. partner forces relative to past efforts to increase the military capacity of local partners. Such evolution would likely have resulted in a reduction in specific types or amounts of support in response to changing conditions. Specifically, changes in prevailing patterns of training and/or equipment provision to partners were expected. The Defense Department's FY2019 request projected more spending on sustainment of partner forces than on weapons and equipment relative to past requests. These types of changes, in turn, may have had implications for the security of U.S. partner forces, and could have prompted changes in their domestic political orientation, security, and attitudes toward the United States, even in the absence of the planned U.S. withdrawal.

In particular, U.S. assistance to elements of the Syrian Democratic Forces to date has enabled SDF units to operate across large areas of northeastern Syria and deploy relatively formidable military capabilities against their Islamic State adversaries. To the extent that distinct components of the SDF, including Kurdish YPG fighters, also seek to preserve and protect the autonomy and security of Kurdish areas and support distinct political prerogatives, changes in patterns of U.S. assistance might have security and political effects. The empowerment of new groups and individuals as part of efforts to recruit, train, equip, and sustain an Internal Security Force may also have had important political and security implications in local areas of eastern Syria.

The Syrian government, its backers, and the Turkish government have long opposed U.S. support for SDF forces in general and the SDF's YPG element in particular as violations of Syrian sovereignty or support for potentially hostile forces. The withdrawal of U.S. forces and support may lead the YPG and other SDF elements to seek reconciliation with the Syrian government in order to protect themselves from Turkish incursions. Syrian government forces may seek to retaliate against U.S.-partner forces in the absence of U.S. personnel.

Local Syrian Arab populations may resent the current de facto dominance enjoyed by U.S.-supported Kurds in security, politics, and economic decision making in eastern Syria, and the Asad government could seek to exploit such grievance to build popular support for its attempts to reassert political control of the east. Remnants of the Islamic State and other extremist groups also could seek to exploit divisions among Syrians in the east to bolster their attempts to survive and launch insurgent attacks.

U.S. Nonlethal 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. At the executive branch's request, Congress has granted it specific authority to provide nonlethal foreign assistance in Syria for certain purposes notwithstanding other provisions of law, and the executive branch has acted to waive other restrictions imposed by law. Outside of the proscribed eligible purposes, U.S. assistance to Syria remains restricted by a series of preexisting provisions of law (including some

[177] Pentagon Spokesman Eric Pahon, quoted in Ryan Browne, Barbara Starr and Jamie Crawford, "Pentagon: US committed to Syria until ISIS areas stabilized," CNN, December 5, 2017.

terrorism-related sanctions provisions). Territorial gains by the Syrian military have intensified congressional concern (as seen in legislative proposals such as H.R. 4681) about whether U.S. funds could inadvertently benefit the Asad government, and have raised questions about the future of U.S. assistance inside Syria.

In August 2018, the Trump Administration announced it would reprogram nearly $200 million in FY2017 funds appropriated by Congress for cross-border stabilization programs in Syria and instead rely on contributions from foreign partners, including a $100 million contribution from Saudi Arabia, to continue stabilization efforts in northeastern Syria. As of December, the Administration had not acted to obligate or expend funds appropriated by Congress in FY2018 foreign operations appropriations legislation for nonlethal assistance and stabilization in Syria. It remains to be seen whether the Administration will do so.

Trump Administration officials had stated their view that the announced changes in U.S. stabilization funding policy would not diminish the scope of stabilization activities or U.S. leadership of stabilization efforts.[178] It was unclear whether the changes would have resulted in arrangements in which U.S. government personnel were less directly involved in program implementation and management than they would have been if U.S.-funded programs had been maintained. The Administration reiterated its intent to prioritize the direction of stabilization assistance to areas liberated from the Islamic State over other areas where non-IS extremist groups are active or where the Syrian government and its allies have reasserted control. Nevertheless, the reported withdrawal of U.S. civilian personnel from eastern Syria in anticipation of the withdrawal of U.S. forces raises questions about the future of U.S.-administered, foreign funded stabilization efforts.

Foreign Assistance Authorities and Operations

The FY2014 foreign operations appropriations act (Section 7041(i) of Division K of P.L. 113-76), as expanded and extended by the FY2015 act (Section 7041(h) of Division J of P.L. 113-235), made FY2015 and prior year ESF funding available "notwithstanding any other provision of law" for select nonlethal purposes inside Syria. The FY2016 appropriations act (Section 7041(h) of Division K 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. The Obama Administration 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 appropriations acts for FY2017 (Section 7041(j) of Division J of P.L. 115-31) and FY2018 (Section 7041(k) of Division K of P.L. 115-141) further amended and specified the categories of assistance authorized to be provided from these accounts.

Prior to the enactment of specific notwithstanding authority by Congress, the President was required to assert emergency and contingency authorities (i.e., Sections 451 and 614 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended) to provide nonlethal assistance to the unarmed Syrian opposition and to communities inside Syria.[179] In 2012, the Administration began to use these emergency and contingency authorities to provide food rations and medical supplies to the

[178] U.S. State Department, Briefing on the Status of Syria Stabilization Assistance and Ongoing Efforts to Achieve an Enduring Defeat of ISIS, August 17, 2018.

[179] Prior to the enactment of the expanded congressional authorization in 2013, U.S. assistance had been provided to select unarmed opposition groups and opposition-held communities on a periodic basis from May 2012 onward.

National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC) and the Turkey-based Syrian Military Council (SMC).

From 2014 onward, as directed by specific provisions in appropriations bills, U.S. assistance in Syria expanded to encompass a range of smaller, local groups and actors, including municipal authorities, local councils, and nongovernmental organizations in opposition-held areas.[180] Syrian recipients have used U.S. assistance to bolster governance by providing services such as emergency power, sanitation, water, and education services. Other U.S. assistance programs have supported the maintenance of public safety, rule of law, and the documentation of human rights violations.

Under authorities now in effect for funds appropriated for FY2018, congressional committees of jurisdiction are notified when the Administration intends to obligate funds from designated accounts for "non-lethal assistance for programs to address the needs of civilians affected by conflict in Syria, and for programs that seek to—[181]

> (A) establish local 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, including local government structures in Syria and through cross-border programs;
>
> (E) develop and sustain civil society and independent media in Syria;
>
> (F) promote stability and 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) 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 and other academic institutions in the region, 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 as a counterbalance to extremism, particularly those living in neighboring countries and among youth;
>
> (L) protect and preserve cultural heritage sites in Syria, particularly those damaged and destroyed by extremists;
>
> (M) counter extremism in Syria; and

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

[181] Per Section 7041(k) of Division K of P.L. 115-141, the FY2018 Consolidated Appropriations Act.

> (N) facilitate the return of displaced persons to liberated areas in Syria.

Current law requires the Secretary of State to "take all practicable steps to ensure that mechanisms are in place for monitoring, oversight, and control of such assistance inside Syria," and requires the Secretary of State to

> "promptly inform the appropriate congressional committees of each instance in which funds appropriated by this Act for assistance for Iraq, Libya, Somalia, and Syria, the Counterterrorism Partnership Fund, the Relief and Recovery Fund, and to counter extremism and foreign fighters abroad, have been diverted or destroyed, to include the type and amount of assistance, a description of the incident and parties involved, and an explanation of the response of the Department of State or USAID, as appropriate."

Provisions in annual appropriations acts that have defined the terms for these programs have required the executive branch to update its comprehensive interagency strategy prior to obligating funds under the authorities.[182] All funds obligated pursuant to the authorities have been subject to established congressional notification procedures.

Appropriations act provisions authorizing the use of funds for select purposes in Syria notwithstanding other provisions of law have not explicitly prohibited the potential obligation or expenditure of funds in areas of Syria controlled by the Syrian government. However, the joint explanatory statement that accompanied the FY2018 appropriations act states that funds made available by the act "are made available for programs in areas not controlled by the Government of Syria." Legislation considered in the 115th Congress (H.R. 4681) would have placed restrictions on the use of some types of U.S. assistance in government-controlled areas unless certain conditions were met.

The State Department requested more than $480 million in FY2016 and FY2017 funding to provide nonlethal support to vetted, moderate armed opposition groups, other opposition actors, and communities in opposition-held areas of Syria. The Trump Administration requested $191.5 million in Overseas Contingency Operation funding for State Department-administered programs in Syria for FY2018, including $150 million in Economic Support and Development Fund (ESDF)-OCO monies. The Administration did not request Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) funding specifically for Syria, although as noted above, the FY2018 appropriations act authorized the use of PKO funds for nonlethal assistance programs.

The Administration's FY2019 request sought $130 million in ESDF-OCO for stabilization efforts in nongovernment-controlled areas of Syria in FY2019, out of an overall request of $174.5 million for Syria programs. However, program changes and developments in Syria since this request was made cast doubt on the Administration's intent to continue related efforts.

Congress appropriated additional FY2017 OCO funds in the December 2016 continuing resolution to support stabilization in areas liberated from the Islamic State, although, as discussed above, the Administration in August 2018 announced that it would repurpose some of these funds for other priorities and use foreign contributions to maintain stabilization efforts.

The FY2018 appropriations act [Section 7041(j) of Division K of P.L. 115-141] authorizes the use of $500 million from various foreign assistance accounts for a "Relief and Recovery Fund" for aid to "areas liberated from, at risk from, or under the control of, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, other terrorist organizations, or violent extremist organizations in the Middle East and Africa." These funds could support stabilization efforts inside Syria, and appropriations

[182] That strategy must include 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."

legislation considered for FY2019 would have directed the use of these funds and other previously appropriated funds for stabilization activities in Syria and other countries.

FY2019 Legislation

The Senate Appropriations Committee report (S.Rept. 115-282) on the FY2019 Foreign Operations appropriations bill (S. 3108) recommended $161 million in ESF funding "for stabilization assistance" for Syria (along with NADR, INCLE, and PKO funds) and would have directed that funds made available "shall continue to be made available for programs described" in the FY2018 appropriations act, as well as "for programs to build the capacity of Syrian civil society, including through core support, to address the immediate and long-term needs of the Syrian people in Syria."

The Senate committee version of the bill would not have required the State Department to submit an update to the comprehensive Syria strategy required by Section 7041(i)(3) of the FY2014 State and Foreign Operations appropriations bill (P.L. 113-76). It also did not include the monitoring and oversight requirements on Syria aid found in current law. The bill also would have directed that additional assistance monies in various accounts be made available for a $250 million Relief and Recovery Fund (RRF) for areas liberated or at risk from the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations, and the accompanying report contained a further direction that $100 million in funds appropriated for RRF purposes in prior acts be made available for programs in Syria.

The House Appropriations Committee-approved version of the bill would have limited the use of funds in Syria to funds from the ESF account, and would have removed the FY2018 direction that funds be used to strengthen Syrian civil society organizations. It would not have directed the use of NADR funds for explosive ordnance removal, and the bill's provision on Syria warned against the use of U.S. assistance funds in areas of Syria controlled by the Syrian government, with the exception of humanitarian assistance. The House bill would have preserved the current requirement for an update to the Administration's comprehensive Syria strategy, as well as current monitoring and oversight requirements.

Issues for Congress

To date, congressionally enacted provisions have reflected a desire to ensure that U.S. aid programs inside Syria address specific issue areas and needs, but do not inadvertently benefit the Asad government or extremist groups active in the country.[183] FY2019 foreign aid appropriations bills considered in the 115th Congress would have directed the continued spending of U.S. assistance monies on nonlethal assistance and stabilization programs, in contrast with the Administration's announced decision to end some cross-border programs and rely on foreign contributions to continue stabilization efforts.

Authorities, aid conditions, and reporting requirements for U.S. assistance and activities in Syria also have appeared to reflect congressional concerns about a perceived lack of clarity regarding successive Administrations' broader Syria strategies. As discussed above, FY2019 defense authorization legislation conditioned the availability of defense funding for security programs on the delivery to Congress of mandated strategy and oversight reporting on Syria strategy and policy.

[183] For example, the Senate Appropriations Committee report (S.Rept. 115-282) on the FY2019 Foreign Operations appropriations bill (S. 3108) states that, "the Committee remains concerned with the absence of a coherent and comprehensive strategy for stabilization of areas liberated from ISIS in Iraq and Syria."

Obama and Trump Administration officials have noted that U.S. efforts to deliver and monitor security assistance and other aid inside Syria have at times been hindered by host nation administrative procedures, border closures, fighting inside Syria, and risks from extremist groups. In the past, some U.S. nonlethal assistance to armed Syrian opposition groups has fallen into the hands of unintended recipients and has led to changes in delivery and oversight mechanisms.[184] 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 over time. 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. Current law requires the Secretary of State to monitor U.S. assistance inside Syria and to inform Congress of instances in which U.S. funds "have been diverted or destroyed."

To monitor and implement U.S. assistance programs, a U.S. Syria Transition Assistance and Response Team (START) has operated from Turkey and coordinated U.S. humanitarian and foreign assistance to northern Syria, including assistance to opposition-held areas. In Jordan, the Southern Syria Assistance Platform (SSAP) has monitored and coordinated comparable U.S. humanitarian and foreign assistance to southern and eastern Syria, including assistance to opposition-held areas. The Trump Administration also deployed a small team of U.S. civilian assistance officials (known as START Forward) inside areas of northern Syria where DOD-trained and/or equipped local forces are in control. Some START programs were amended and/or ended in 2018 in line with the Administration's plans to focus on stabilizing former IS-held areas to the east, and the announced withdrawal of U.S. forces was preceded by the withdrawal of U.S. civilian personnel.

By mid-2018, the future of SSAP-managed programs in southern Syria appeared uncertain, as the Syrian government and its allies reasserted control over southwest Syria, including over areas long held by opposition groups in which U.S. programs had been active. In November 2018, USAID officials testified that, after the regime regained control of southwestern Syria in late July, Syrian forces stopped cross-border humanitarian operations from Jordan.[185] The official added that USAID was working with local partners to provide aid to the area using convoys from Damascus. However, he noted that NGOs were now required to register with the Syrian government in order to operate, and that lack of approvals from Damascus had forced some U.S. non-humanitarian partners to suspend or partially suspend their activities in southern Syria.

Looking ahead, increasingly vocal demands by the Syrian government and its international supporters for an end to cross-border assistance operations may significantly complicate U.S. assistance operations and prompt difficult decisions for U.S. policymakers. This dynamic has been evident in Russian objections to the renewal of the U.N. Security Council mandate for cross-border and cross-line humanitarian operations (Resolutions 2393 and 2449), but it similarly applies to ongoing Syrian government rejections of non-humanitarian assistance operations in opposition held areas. UNSCR 2449 currently authorizes cross-border and cross-line humanitarian assistance until January 10, 2020—at which point the resolution will be subject to renewal at the Security Council. Russia and China abstained from the December 2018 renewal,

[184] 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.

[185] Written Statement of Robert W. Jenkins, Deputy Assistant Administrator, U.S. Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance, USAID, before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East & North Africa, November 29, 2018.

and the Russian representative objections argued that "new realities… demand that [the mandate] be rejigged with the ultimate goal of being gradually but inevitably removed."[186]

Amid the ongoing reassertion by national authorities of political and security control over formerly opposition-held areas, past recipients of U.S. foreign assistance may become politically exposed and subject to persecution. This, in turn, may prompt renewed conflict or population displacement. If a future negotiated or imposed political solution to the Syria conflict results in a still greater reassertion of sovereignty by the Syrian government, international actors may then increase their recognition of Syrian government sovereignty. Under these circumstances or in anticipation of this outcome, Congress and the Administration may revisit fundamental questions about the authorization for, purposes and content of, and volume or terms for U.S. defense and foreign assistance programs in Syria. Ongoing debates about a continued U.S. military presence and U.S. participation in potential reconstruction efforts reflect these issues, illustrating tensions between U.S. concerns about political outcomes and the potential security and humanitarian imperatives of stabilizing conflict-torn areas.

Overview: Syria Chemical Weapons and Disarmament[187]

The United States, the United Nations, and others 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.-OPCW Joint Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic (JIM) and the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) 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 the Syrian regime and by the Islamic State.[188] Any use of chemical weapons is prohibited by the Chemical Weapons Convention, which Syria joined in September 2013.

Chemical Weapons Use

The majority of reports of chemical weapons use in Syria have consisted of chlorine use in barrel bombs in addition to the use of sarin in August 2013, April 2017, and possibly April 2018.[189] The use of sarin by the Syrian military in the April 2017 and April 2013 attacks was confirmed by the United Nations, and the investigation of the April 2018 attack is underway. Reports of the use of chlorine gas as a chemical weapon in barrel bombs used by the Syrian military began to surface in April 2014 and continue.[190] U.N. investigators have confirmed a few cases of the use of mustard gas by the Islamic State. The OPCW established a fact-finding mission to investigate these allegations.

[186] United Nations Security Council, 8423rd meeting, December 13, 2018, S/PV.8423.

[187] Prepared by Mary Beth Nikitin, Specialist in Nonproliferation. See also CRS Report R43612, *The Islamic State and U.S. Policy*, by Christopher M. Blanchard and Carla E. Humud.

[188] Find full reports at "The Fact Finding Mission (FFM)," OPCW, https://www.opcw.org/special-sections/syria/the-fact-finding-mission/.

[189] UN Commission of Inquiry Info Graphic: Chemical Weapons Attacks Documented by the U.N. Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, as of September 6, 2017; Arms Control Association, "Timeline of Chemical Weapons Attacks in Syria: 2012-2018," ACA Fact Sheet, 2018.

[190] The use of chlorine as a weapon is banned under the Chemical Weapons Convention.

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. The Russian Federation supports the Syrian position.

2018 Chemical Attack (Douma) and U.S. Response

On April 7, Syrian government forces are suspected to have launched a chemical attack on Douma, killing at least 40 people and injuring hundreds more.[191] U.S. officials described the symptoms displayed by victims as consistent with an asphyxiation agent and "a nerve agent of some type."[192] Defense Secretary Mattis stated, "We're very confident that chlorine was used. We are not ruling out sarin right now."[193] The attack came within the context of broader Syrian government operations to retake the rebel enclave of eastern Ghouta, on the outskirts of Damascus.

On April 13 (April 14 local time), more than 100 missiles were launched into Syria from British, French, and U.S. air and naval platforms in the Red Sea, the Northern Arabian Gulf, and the Eastern Mediterranean. The strikes targeted three chemical weapons storage and research sites in Syria: the Barzeh Research and Development Center on the outskirts of Damascus and the Him Shinshar chemical weapons storage and bunker facilities in Homs province.[194] Contrasting the operation with the April 2017 U.S. strikes on Al Shayrat airbase, military officials stated, "Last year the focus was on the delivery [of chemical weapons]. This time, we went—the strikes went to the very heart of the enterprise, to the research, to development, to storage."[195] U.S. military officials also stated that "obviously the Syrian chemical weapons system is larger than the three targets that we addressed tonight. However, these are the targets that presented the best opportunity to minimize collateral damage, to avoid killing innocent civilians, and yet to send a very strong message."[196]

2017 Chemical Attack (Khan Sheikhoun) and U.S. Response

On April 4, 2017, Syrian aircraft operating in rebel-held Idlib province conducted several airstrikes using what U.S. officials assessed to be a chemical nerve agent.[197] The strikes, which occurred in the town of Khan Sheikhoun, killed an estimated 80 to 100 people. The Director General of the OPCW, which conducted a fact-finding mission following the attack, stated on April 19 that four of its laboratories had "incontrovertible" evidence that victims "were exposed to Sarin or a Sarin-like substance."[198] In addition, then-Secretary of State Tillerson said that the U.S. government had a "very high level of confidence" that the Syrian air force had used the

[191] "Dozens Suffocate in Syria as Government Is Accused of Chemical Attack," *New York Times*, April 8, 2018.

[192] "Douma symptoms consistent with nerve agent: U.S. State Department," *Reuters*, April 9, 2018.

[193] Press briefing by Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis; Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Joseph F. Dunford; Pentagon Chief Spokesperson Dana W. White, April 13, 2018.

[194] Department of Defense Press Briefing by Pentagon Chief Spokesperson Dana W. White and Joint Staff Director Lt. Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. in the Pentagon Briefing Room, April 14, 2018.

[195] Ibid.

[196] Ibid.

[197] President Trump Statement on Syria, April 6, 2016; and, Statement from Pentagon Spokesman Capt. Jeff Davis on U.S. strike in Syria, Release No: NR-126-17, April 6, 2017.

[198] "OPCW Director-General Shares Incontrovertible Laboratory Results Concluding Exposure to Sarin," OPCW Press Release, April 19, 2017.

nerve agent sarin in two earlier 2017 attacks—on March 25 and March 30 in neighboring Hamah province.[199]

On April 6, 2017, the United States fired 59 Tomahawk missiles at Al Shayrat airfield in Homs province, from which U.S. intelligence sources had concluded the Khan Sheikhoun attack was launched.[200] A Defense Department statement said the U.S. strike "targeted aircraft, hardened aircraft shelters, petroleum and logistical storage, ammunition supply bunkers, air defense systems, and radars" and that "the strike was intended to deter the regime from using chemical weapons again." Secretary Mattis later stated that "around 20 aircraft were taken out" by the strike.[201] The United States also imposed sanctions on 271 Syrian employees of the Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC), the entity responsible for managing Syria's chemical weapons program.[202]

2013 Chemical Weapons Attack (Ghouta)

The largest-scale use of chemical weapons in Syria to date was an August 21, 2013, nerve gas attack, which the U.S. government estimated killed more than 1,400 people.[203] A U.N. investigation subsequently identified the nerve agent as sarin. The U.S. intelligence community assessed that the Syrian government had "used chemical weapons on a small scale against the opposition multiple times in the last year."[204] President Obama requested congressional approval of a limited authorization for the use of military force to respond. As part of a diplomatic solution to the crisis based on a U.S.-Russian joint proposal, the Obama Administration withdrew the threat of military force and Syria agreed to give up its chemical weapons and join the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). 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.[205]

Syria and the CWC: Disarmament Verification

After joining the CWC in September 2013, Syria declared that it possessed 1,308 metric tons of chemical warfare agents and precursor chemicals, including several hundred metric tons of the nerve agents sarin and VX, as well as mustard agent in ready-to-use form. The nerve agents were stored as two separate components that are combined before use, called precursor chemicals, a form that facilitated removal and destruction efforts. In an unprecedented effort, the international community oversaw the removal in late 2013 and 2014 of chemical weapons agents to locations outside of Syria for destruction. As of January 4, 2016, all of Syria's declared Category 1 and 2 chemicals had been neutralized.[206] As of June 2018, the OPCW had verified that all 27 of Syria's declared chemical weapons production facilities (CWPFs) had been destroyed.[207]

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[199] Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson, "Remarks With National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster," April 6, 2017.

[200] Ibid.

[201] Press Conference by Secretary Mattis and Gen. Votel in the Pentagon Briefing Room, April 11, 2017.

[202] "Treasury Sanctions 271 Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center Staff in Response to Sarin Attack on Khan Sheikhoun," April 24, 2017.

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

[204] Ibid.

[205] Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter authorizes the use of punitive measures such as sanctions or military force.

[206] Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, "Destruction of Syrian Chemical Weapons Completed," press release, January 4, 2016.

[207] Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, "Note by the Director-General: Progress in the Elimination

The continued use of chemical weapons in Syria has raised questions about Syrian compliance. In addition, the OPCW has not been able to verify the completeness of the Syrian initial declaration, part of Syria's obligations after having joined the CWC. For years, the United States, the OPCW Director General, and other governments have asserted that Syria had not declared all of its chemical weapons stocks and facilities.[208] The OPCW's Declaration Assessment Team (DAT) continues to investigate "gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies" through interviews and lab analysis of samples from site visits according to OPCW Executive Council reports.

International Investigations

Since the first reports of alleged chemical weapons use during the conflict in Syria, the U.N. Secretary-General, the U.N. Security Council, and the CWC Executive Council have formed several different bodies to investigate chemical weapons use in Syria, outlined below. Of these, OPCW inspections to verify CWC compliance as well as the OPCW Fact Finding Mission are the only two currently functioning:

- In response to the Syrian government and other governments' request, in March 2013, the U.N. Secretary-General established the **United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic**.[209] The Syrian government alleged that opposition forces had used chemical weapons at Khan al-Asal on March 19, 2013, while opposition forces had accused the Asad government of CW use there.
- Following a U.S.- and Russian-brokered deal with Syria to join the CWC, the Security Council established the **U.N.-OPCW Joint Mission** to oversee the removal of chemical weapons in Syria between October 2013 and June 2014.[210]
- After Syria joined the CWC in September 2013, the **OPCW** was responsible for overseeing the verification of its initial declaration and continues to monitor destruction of chemical weapons facilities in the country.[211]
- The OPCW Director-General declared the creation of a **Fact Finding Mission (FFM)** in Syria on April 29, 2014, in response to new allegations of the use of chlorine as a weapon from December 2013 to April 2014. The CWC allows for the OPCW Director General to start an investigation into chemical weapons use in a member state with its permission. The Syrian government agreed to accept the FFM and provide security.[212] The FFM did not have authority to attribute attacks until a decision was taken by a special session of the CWC member states in June 2018. That decision gave the FFM authority to attribute as part of its investigations.[213]

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of the Syrian Chemical Weapons Programme," EC-89/DG.24, September 24, 2018.

[208] Joint News Conference with Secretary Mattis and Minister of Defense Lieberman in Tel Aviv, Israel, Department of Defense News Transcript, April 21, 2017; Julian E. Barnes and Maria Abi-Habib, "Syrian Attack Defies 2013 Chemical-Weapons Deal," *Wall Street Journal*, April 6, 2017.

[209] "Secretary-General's Press Encounter on Syrian Government Request," March 21, 2013.

[210] https://opcw.unmissions.org/.

[211] OPCW Reports on the Elimination of Chemical Weapons in Syria can be found here: https://www.opcw.org/special-sections/syria/related-official-documents/.

[212] "The Fact Finding Mission (FFM)," OPCW, https://www.opcw.org/special-sections/syria/the-fact-finding-mission/.

[213] The decision calls upon the OPCW make arrangements "to identify the perpetrators of the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic by identifying and reporting on all information potentially relevant to the origin of those

- On August 7, 2015, the U.N. Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2235, which established a new **OPCW-U.N. 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.[214] The JIM's mandate expired in November 2017.

Earlier U.N. and OPCW investigations starting in 2013 had not been tasked with assigning responsibility for alleged attacks but were to identify whether and which type of chemical weapons were used. This changed with the JIM, which was mandated to attribute attacks. The JIM was to have access anywhere in Syria; however, the JIM's mission was complicated by the security situation on the ground.

The OPCW FFM and JIM have concluded with a high degree of confidence that chemical weapons were used in Syria in 48 incidents from April 2014 to November 24, 2017. All incidents occurred in governorates considered by the Syrian government as outside its effective control from 2014 to present. The JIM was able to attribute the use of chemical weapons in 7 of these 48 incidents.[215] The JIM concluded that the Syrian Armed Forces dropped barrel-bombs containing chlorine or a chlorine-like substance from helicopters on towns in the Idlib Governorate in three attacks: Talmenes on April 21, 2014, Qmenas on March 16, 2015, and Sarmin on March 16, 2015.[216] The FFM concluded in its June 2017 report that sarin had been used as a weapon in Khan Sheikhoun, Idlib Governorate on April 4, 2017.[217] The JIM concluded on October 26, 2017, a few weeks before the expiration of its mandate, that the Syrian Armed Forces used sarin-filled aerial bombs in the Khan Sheikhoun attack, and that ISIL used sulfur mustard-filled mortars in attacks in Um Housh, Aleppo Governorate on September 15 and 16, 2016.[218]

The Security Council extended the mandate of the JIM through November 2017 but further attempts to renew the mandate were blocked by Russia, which argues for a wider regional

chemical weapons in those instances in which the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission determines or has determined that use or likely use occurred, and cases for which the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism has not issued a report." https://www.opcw.org/news/article/cwc-conference-of-the-states-parties-adopts-decision-addressing-the-threat-from-chemical-weapons-use/. In November 2018, States parties approved an Attribution Team as part of the OPCW verification responsibilities.

[214] 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 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…."

[215] In addition to these cases, the FFM and JIM have reported their recording through open sources of at least 138 other incidents involving the use of chemicals as weapons in Syria since April 2014.

[216] U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, "Third Report of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism," S/2016/738, August 24, 2016. "Report of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism," OPCW, S/2016/888, October 21, 2016.

[217] "Report of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism," OPCW, S/1510/2017, June 29, 2017.

[218] U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres, "Sixth Report of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism," S/2017/552, June 28, 2017. U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres, "Letter Dated 26 October 2017 from the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the Security Council," S/2017/904, October 26, 2017, Annex I.

coverage.[219] In January 2018, the French government gathered 30 countries in Paris to announce a new effort, the "International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons," to raise awareness of the issue, strengthen international action against CW use, and bolster international pressure on Syria.[220] Then-U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson attended.

Repeated efforts by these states to pass U.N. Security Council resolutions condemning attacks have been blocked by a Russian veto on multiple occasions.[221] The latest incidence of chemical weapons use on April 7, 2018, elevated these issues again to the U.N. Security Council, where Russia defends the Syrian stance. The United States, United Kingdom, and France proposed a U.N. Security Council Resolution in support of a U.N. investigation into who was responsible for the April 7 attack, but the resolution was vetoed by Russia. Nevertheless, under the U.N. and OPCW mechanisms already in place from past Security Council resolutions, the OPCW's Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) continues to investigate instances of use, including the April 2018 attack in Douma.[222] The FFM stated in its interim report on its investigation of the April 7, 2018 attack that it had detected the presence of toxic substances, such as chlorine and possibly sarin, but that it requires more time to reach a definitive conclusion on the facts surrounding the incident.[223]

In August 2011, the U.N. Human Rights Council established an Independent International Commission of Inquiry into human rights abuses and violations of international law in the Syrian conflict.[224] The Commission has documented the use of prohibited chemical weapons in Syria and is specifically mandated to identify perpetrators. It is instructed "where possible, to identify those responsible with a view to ensuring that perpetrators of violations, including those that may constitute crimes against humanity, are held accountable."[225] The Commission of Inquiry's 2017 report says that between March 2013 and March 2017, it documented 25 incidents of CW use in Syria, "of which 20 were perpetrated by government forces and used primarily against civilians."[226]

Outlook

The victory of pro-Asad forces in the broader conflict appears likely, and, from a U.S. perspective, that may further complicate several unresolved issues, including

- the stabilization and governance of areas recaptured from the Islamic State;
- the resolution of security threats posed by extremist groups in northwest Syria;
- the return and reintegration of internally and externally displaced Syrians;
- the reconstruction of conflict-damaged areas;

[219] "Syria: Renewal of the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism," *What's In Blue*, November 17, 2016.

[220] "Launch of the International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons," French Foreign Ministry, January 23, 2018.

[221] "Syria Draft Resolution Imposing Sanctions Regarding the Use and Production of Chemical Weapons," *What's In Blue*, February 25, 2017.

[222] "OPCW Will Deploy Fact-Finding Mission to Syria," *OPCW Press Release*, April 10, 2018.

[223] OPCW Technical Secretariat, S/1645/2018, July 6, 2018, para. 2.8.

[224] The Human Rights Council is the primary intergovernmental U.N. body charged with addressing human rights situations worldwide. The United States is currently a Council member.

[225] http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IICISyria/Pages/CoIMandate.aspx; see also http://www.ohchr.org/SiteCollectionImages/Bodies/HRCouncil/IICISyria/COISyria_ChemicalWeapons.jpg.

[226] Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, September 6, 2017.

- the management of Syria-based threats to Syria's neighbors; and,
- the terms of a postconflict political order in Syria.

In light of current trends and conditions related to these issues, Administration officials and Members of Congress may reexamine appropriate terms and conditions for U.S. investment, force deployment, and the nature of relationships with U.S. partners in and around Syria.

Consolidating Gains against the Islamic State

Combatting the Islamic State in Syria has been the top priority for U.S. policymakers since 2014. On December 19, 2018, President Trump announced that the group had been defeated in Syria, although military sources have stated that operations against the Islamic State in Syria continue.[227] U.S.-trained and -equipped partner forces control most of northeastern Syria. Prior to President Trump's announcement in December 2018 that U.S. military forces would withdraw from Syria, U.S. policymakers had stated their intention to train and equip local forces to hold and secure areas recaptured from the Islamic State. They also had signaled that U.S. funds would no longer be invested at previously prevailing levels to stabilize conflict-damaged areas under U.S. partner control in Syria's northeast. Instead, the Trump Administration sought to encourage coalition members and U.S. partners to contribute to stabilization efforts as a means of lowering the direct costs to the United States. Questions about program management, coordination, and evaluation may have accompanied what was expected to have been a planned shift toward joint stabilization. More fundamental questions now exist about the future of security and stabilization efforts amid U.S. plans for military withdrawal.

In addition, the potential reintegration of areas of Syria's east and northeast by the Asad government—whether by force or negotiation—raises other challenging policy questions. If the resurgent Asad government adopts a confrontational posture toward withdrawing U.S. forces and their local partners, renewed conflict could result and create new threats to U.S. personnel, demands on U.S. resources, and dilemmas for U.S. decisionmakers. If the Asad government adopts a relatively conciliatory approach toward U.S. partners and moves to reintegrate the northeast under its control through negotiation, it may seek to absorb U.S.-trained and -equipped forces into its own ranks. In light of standing and proposed restrictions on the use of U.S. nonhumanitarian funding in Asad-controlled areas, the expansion of Syrian government control to the areas of northeastern Syria recaptured from the Islamic State could impose limits on U.S. involvement in stabilization and/or counterterrorism activities.

Conflict in Northwestern Syria

Areas of Idlib province are the most significant zone remaining outside of government control in western Syria, and pro-Asad forces may launch military operations to reclaim areas of the province in the coming months. Although infighting among anti-Asad groups in the province escalated in 2018 and mutual suspicions remain between Syrian and non-Syrian fighters, extremist groups and some opposition fighters relocated to the province are expected to forcefully resist any Syrian government military campaign. Turkish forces present in some areas also may oppose or actively resist pro-Syrian government forces if hostilities erupt. The wide-scale use of military force by the Syrian government and its supporters against opposition-held areas of Idlib would likely result in significant civilian casualties and displacement and could generate renewed calls for U.S. or coalition military intervention to protect and aid civilians.

[227] "CJTF-OIR continues partner support to Defeat ISIS," December 25, 2018, <www.inherentresolve.mil>

The presence in Idlib of Al Qaeda-aligned individuals remains a security concern of the United States and its allies, but the ability of U.S. and coalition forces to operate in or over Idlib may continue to be complicated by Syrian government disapproval and Russian military capabilities. If the Syrian government delays or defers action against opposition-held areas of Idlib, extremist groups hostile to the United States could enjoy some degree of continued safe haven. The Asad government also might seek to leverage the persistence of an extremist threat in Idlib to aid in its consolidation of domestic political and international diplomatic support for Asad's continued rule.

The Future of Displaced Syrians

Conflict in Syria has taken the lives of hundreds of thousands of people and has displaced millions within the country and beyond its borders. As the intensity of conflict has declined in some areas of the country, displaced Syrians have faced difficult choices about whether or how to return to their home areas amid uncertainty about security, potential political persecution, crime, economic conditions, lost or missing documentation, and prospects for recovery. The Asad government is actively encouraging internally displaced Syrians to return home and is seeking the return of Syrian refugees from neighboring countries under a Russian-designed plan. Humanitarian advocates and practitioners continue to raise concerns about the security and protection of returnees and displaced individuals in light of conditions in many areas of the country and questions about the Syrian government's approach to political reconciliation.

In addition, mechanisms and mandates that have provided for the delivery of humanitarian assistance across the Syrian border without the consent of the Syrian government could face renewed scrutiny in coming months, and the Asad government and its backers may pressure neighboring countries to forcefully return Syrian refugees that are within their jurisdictions. The United States remains the leading donor for international humanitarian efforts related to Syria, and U.S. policymakers may face a series of decisions about whether or how to continue or adapt U.S. support in light of changing conditions.

Reconstruction

In 2017, U.N. Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura estimated that Syria's reconstruction will cost at least $250 billion, and a group of U.N.-convened experts estimated in August 2018 that the cost of conflict damage could exceed $388 billion.[228] The Trump Administration has stated its intent not to contribute to the reconstruction of Asad-controlled Syria absent fundamental political change and to use U.S. diplomatic influence to discourage other international assistance to Asad-controlled Syria. Congress also has acted to restrict the availability of U.S. funds for assistance projects in Asad-controlled areas and has considered legislation that would further restrict such assistance through FY2023 (H.R. 4681, 115th Congress).

In the absence of U.S. engagement, other actors such as Russia or China could conceivably provide additional assistance for reconstruction purposes, but may be unlikely to mobilize sufficient resources or adequately coordinate investments with other members of the international community to meet Syria's considerable needs. Predatory conditional assistance could also further indebt the Syrian government to these or other international actors and might strengthen strategic ties between Syria and third parties in ways inimical to U.S. interests. A lack of

[228] Security Council Briefing on the Situation in Syria, Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, November 27, 2017; and, U.N. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, "Experts discuss post-conflict reconstruction policies after political agreement in Syria," August 7, 2018.

reconstruction, particularly of critical infrastructure, could delay the country's recovery and exacerbate the legacy effects of the conflict on the Syrian population, with negative implications for the country's security and stability.

Addressing Syria-based Threats to Neighboring Countries

Aside from terrorism threats posed by Syria-based Sunni Islamist extremists, U.S. partners and allies among Syria's neighbors perceive threats from Syria-based Iranian forces and associated militia, the reconstituted Syrian military and security services, Russia's presence, and the activities of Syria-based Kurdish armed groups. Asad's post-2015 fortunes in the conflict are largely attributable to the support of Russia and Iran. While there are some tensions reported between Syrian leaders and their foreign partners, it is difficult to foresee a scenario in the short term in which the current Syrian government would seek or be in a position to compel a fundamental change in the posture or presence of Russian or Iranian forces inside Syria. The Syrian security services, once severely degraded, have reconstituted some of their lost capabilities and may continue to grow in strength and coherence. For U.S. partners like Israel and Jordan, these conditions pose long-term strategic challenges, and any independent military or diplomatic actions on their part to address them in turn may create challenges in their relationship with the United States.

Similarly, the Turkish government expresses continuing concern about the presence and power in Syria of armed Kurdish groups, including groups partnered with the United States. Turkish military deployments inside Syria are ongoing and the prospect of confrontation between Turkish forces, U.S. forces, and their respective partners remains a real one. U.S. plans for any enduring partnership with Kurdish-led or -constituted armed groups in Syria or for an enduring U.S. presence in areas under their control would likely have caused related tensions in U.S. relations with Turkish, Syria, Russia, and Iran to persist. If Kurdish armed groups reconcile and align with the Asad-led government in the wake of U.S. withdrawal, it could increase the likelihood of more pronounced confrontation between Turkey, the Syrian government, and its allies. An abrupt severance of all U.S. support for Kurdish groups also could sour U.S. relations not just with Syrian Kurds, but with Kurdish populations and leaders in other regional countries.

Syria's Political Future

Since 2011, the United States has pursued a policy of seeking fundamental political change in Syria, initially reflected in U.S. calls for President Asad to step aside. The Trump Administration in 2018 has stated that it seeks behavior change rather than regime change in Syria. However, the Administration still calls for a political settlement to the Syria conflict based on UNSCR 2254—which requires the drafting of a new constitution and the holding of U.N.-supervised elections.

Asad's reelection in self-administered 2014 elections and his subsequent reconsolidation of security control in much of western Syria may limit the likelihood of substantive political change in line with U.S. preferences. U.N.-led negotiations over a settlement of the conflict remain open-ended, but appear unlikely to result in the meaningful incorporation of opposition figures or priorities into new governing arrangements in the short term. Alternative negotiations backed by Asad's Russian and Iranian supporters have their own logic and momentum, and place Syria's opposition groups in a political predicament. Congress and the Administration may reexamine what remaining points of leverage the United States can exercise or whether new points of leverage could be developed that might better ensure a minimally acceptable political outcome. Members of Congress and Administration officials may differ among themselves over what such an outcome might entail. Perceptions among Syrian opposition supporters of U.S. abandonment

or acquiescence to an Asad victory may also have long-term diplomatic and security consequences for the United States and its partners.

Implications for Congress

The 115th Congress passed defense appropriations for FY2019 funds and was considering foreign operations legislation, including funding for Syria programs, some of which would remain available through FY2020. As discussed above, Congress also has conditioned the availability for obligation of some of those funds on the Administration's provision of a new strategic plan for Syria and the delivery of oversight reporting on current Syria programs to Congress. It remains to be seen what the Administration's responses might contain and whether or how Members of Congress might react. The President's December 2018 announcement of planned military withdrawal answered the basic question of whether or not U.S. forces would seek to remain in Syria, but raised numerous other questions about implementation and the decision's effect on other U.S. priorities.

The 116th Congress may attempt to reach consensus on a formal congressional counterproposal to the Administration's priorities and initiatives, and such a task is likely to be challenging if past trends in congressional debate prevail.

As with Administration policy decisions, Asad's likely eventual victory in the conflict runs counter to long-stated congressional preferences and thus complicates appropriation, authorization, and sanctions decisions. Principal questions for Congress for the future may concern the extent and nature of conditions Congress places on U.S. engagement with the Asad-led government and on the expenditure of U.S. funds for any remaining U.S. programs in Asad-controlled areas.

For the foreseeable future, the essential dilemma for Members of Congress and the Administration may remain how to pursue U.S. counterterrorism and stabilization goals in Syria while maintaining a minimal U.S. military footprint in the country. While this may be accomplished in part by working through local partners and regional allies, these may also have interests and goals in Syria that do not align with U.S. preferences.

Observers, U.S. officials, and many 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; protect civilians; defend U.S. partners; promote accountability and reconciliation; or contribute to the rebuilding of a country significantly destroyed by years of brutal war.

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