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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

Since 2011, the Syria conflict has presented 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 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 toward 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 appeared to signal the start of a new U.S. approach. However, in February 2019, the White House stated that several hundred U.S. troops would remain in Syria, and the President is requesting $300 million in FY2020 defense funding to continue to equip and sustain Syrian partner forces. The FY2019 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 115-232) required 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 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's use of force to retake most opposition-held areas of Syria has reduced pressure on Damascus to negotiate, and U.S. intelligence officials in 2019 assessed that Asad has little incentive to make significant concessions to the opposition. U.S. officials have stated that the United States will not contribute aid 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. 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 $28.5 billion by September 2018.

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 postconflict 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] In December 2018, President Trump ordered the withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Syria, contributing to the subsequent decision by Defense Secretary James Mattis to resign, and drawing criticism from several Members of Congress. In early 2019, the White House announced that several hundred U.S. troops would remain in Syria.

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 decisively shifted in the Syrian regime's favor, enabling Russia and Iran to further entrench themselves inside the country."[3] At the same time, ongoing conflict between the coalition's Syrian Kurdish partners and Turkey has continued to challenge U.S. policymakers, as has the entrenchment of Al Qaeda-affiliated groups among the opposition and the ongoing humanitarian crisis. As of 2019, 5.7 million Syrians are registered as refugees in nearby countries, with 6.2 million more internally displaced.

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

The U.N. has sponsored peace talks in Geneva since 2012, 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.[4]

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)

Sources: CRS using data from U.S. State Department; Esri; CIA, *The World Factbook*; and the United Nations.

Notes: On March 25, 2019, President Trump issued a proclamation recognizing the Golan Heights as part of the state of Israel.

[4] 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.

Note: For more information, see CRS In Focus IF11080, *Syria Conflict Overview: 2011-2018*, by Carla E. Humud.

Figure 3. Syria Areas of Influence 2019

As of March 11, 2019

Source: CRS using area of influence data from IHS Conflict Monitor, last revised March 11, 2019. 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. On March 25, 2019, President Trump issued a proclamation recognizing the Golan Heights as part of the state of Israel.

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:

Counter-IS 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 questioned the necessity, utility, and legality of continued U.S. operations. The decision also drew domestic and international criticism from those who argued it could enable the reemergence of the Islamic State and embolden Russia and Iran in Syria (see "2018: President Trump Announces Withdrawal"). Some Members of Congress called upon President Trump to reconsider his decision to withdraw U.S. forces, stating that the move was premature and "threatens the safety and security of the United States."[5] Others embraced the decision, citing concerns about the lack of specific authorization for the U.S. campaign and the effectiveness of U.S. efforts.[6] In February 2019, the White House reversed its December announcement, stating that roughly 400 U.S. troops would remain in Syria.

Members of the 116th Congress may seek clarification on the Administration's strategy to ensure the enduring defeat of the Islamic State. A Lead Inspector General report on Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) released in February 2019 states that, "absent sustained [counterterrorism] pressure, ISIS could likely resurge in Syria within six to twelve months and regain limited territory in the [Middle Euphrates River Valley (MERV)]."[7]

[5] "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.

[6] 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.

[7] U.S. Central Command Response to DoD IG, January 16, 2019, as Operation Inherent Resolve and other Overseas Contingency Operations, Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2018 – December 31, 2018, February 4, 2019, p. 2.

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) prohibited 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 was 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 Administration's FY2020 defense funding request seeks an additional $300 million to equip and sustain vetted Syrian opposition (VSO) 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, 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."[8] 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.

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

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, the planned reduction of U.S. military forces, and the December 2018 withdrawal of State Department and USAID personnel from northern Syria.

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.[9]

Then-U.N. Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura said in 2017 that Syria reconstruction will cost at least $250 billion,[10] and a group of U.N.-convened experts estimated in August 2018 that the cost of conflict damage could exceed $388 billion.[11] 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.

Syria-Related Legislation in the 116th Congress

Strengthening America's Security in the Middle East Act of 2019 (S. 1)

Introduced on January 3 by Senator Rubio and three cosponsors, the bill incorporates the Senate version of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2018 considered during the 115th Congress and passed by the House in a different version. Title III 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 bill also would expand the scope of secondary sanctions on Syria 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 does include several suspension and waiver authorities for the President. Its provisions would expire five years after the date of enactment.

Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 (H.R. 31, S. 52)

In January, the House passed the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, introduced by Representative Engel (H.R. 31). A version of the bill was also introduced in the Senate by Senators Risch, Menendez, and Rubio (S. 52). An earlier version of the bill was considered during the 115th Congress. H.R. 31 would eliminate Sections 103 to 303 of S. 52 (primarily

[9] 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.

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

[11] 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.

amendments to the Syria Human Rights Accountability Act of 2012). The House bill retains all of the provisions found in Title III of S. 1 (see above).

No Assistance for Assad Act (H.R. 1706)

Introduced in March by Representative Engel, the bill would state that it is the policy of the United States that U.S. foreign assistance made available for reconstruction or stabilization in Syria should only be used in a democratic Syria or in areas of Syria not controlled by the Asad government or aligned forces. Reconstruction and stabilization aid appropriated or otherwise available from FY2020 through FY2024 could not be provided "directly or indirectly" to areas under Syrian government control—as determined by the Secretary of State—unless the President certifies to Congress that the government of Syria has met a number of conditions. These include ceasing air strikes against civilians, releasing all political prisoners, allowing regular access to humanitarian assistance, fulfilling obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention, permitting the safe and voluntary return of displaced persons, taking steps to establishing meaningful accountability for perpetrators of war crimes, and halting the development and deployment of ballistic and cruise missiles. The House passed an earlier version of the bill during the 115th Congress.

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. The bill would permit exceptions to the above restrictions on aid to government-held areas for humanitarian projects, "projects to be administered by local organizations that reflect the aims, needs, and priorities of local communities," and projects that meet basic human needs including drought relief; assistance to refugees, IDPs, and conflict victims; the distribution of food and medicine; and the provision of health services.

The bill would also state that it is the sense of Congress that the United States should not fund projects in which any Syrian government official or immediate family member has a financial or material interest, or is affiliated with the implementing partner.

Recent Developments

Military

Islamic State Loses Last Territorial Stronghold

On March 23, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced that the Islamic State had lost its final stronghold in the eastern Syrian town of Baghouz.[12] President Trump initially announced the group's defeat in December 2018, although Coalition and SDF operations against the group continued in 2019.[13] In early March CENTCOM Commander General Joseph Votel stated that the territory held by the Islamic State had been reduced down to a single square mile near Baghouz, along the Euphrates River (**Figure 3**). However, Votel also noted,

> we should be clear that what we are seeing now is not the surrender of ISIS as an organization, but a calculated decision to preserve the safety of their families and

[12] "ISIS has lost its final stronghold in Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces says," *CNN*, March 23, 2019.

[13] See CJTF-OIR strike summaries, available at: http://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/.

> preservation of their capabilities by taking their chances in camps for internally displaced persons and going to ground and remote areas and waiting for the right time to resurge.[14]

Votel also noted that, "ISIS population being evacuated from the remaining vestiges of caliphate largely remain unrepentant, unbroken, and radicalized. We will need to maintain a vigilant offensive against this now widely dispersed and disaggregated organization."[15] Coalition officials previously have stated that they do not intend to operate in Syrian-government controlled territory,[16] despite reports that IS militants remain present in those areas.[17]

Continued attacks by the Islamic State in 2019 have raised concerns about the group's resiliency and potential to regenerate, particularly given plans to withdraw most U.S. military forces from Syria. On January 16, a suicide bombing claimed by the Islamic State killed 4 Americans and 15 others in the northern city of Manbij, in Aleppo province. One week later, a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device targeted a joint American-SDF patrol in the town of Ash Shaddadi in Hasakah province. Both cities were liberated from the Islamic State in 2016. The most recent Lead Inspector General report on Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) states that, "absent sustained [counterterrorism] pressure, ISIS could likely resurge in Syria within six to twelve months and regain limited territory in the [Middle Euphrates River Valley (MERV)]."[18]

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.[19] These plans were reflected in the Defense Department and State Department requests for appropriations for FY2019. Following the Administration's February announcement that several hundred U.S. troops would remain in Syria, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford stated,

> [...] this is about campaign continuity. So we had a campaign that was designed to clear ISIS from the ground that they had held, and we always had planned to transition into a stabilization phase where we train local forces to provide security and prevent the regeneration of ISIS. So there is -- there is no change in the basic campaign, the resourcing is being adjusted because the threat has been changed.

While military officials have emphasized the continuity of the U.S. military campaign, it is not clear whether the threat posed by the Islamic State is similarly unchanged, particularly as the group shifts from controlling territory to operating as what General Votel has described as a "clandestine insurgency."[20] U.S. officials in 2018 stated that the Islamic State had "atomized," becoming more dispersed in its command and control, and posing a more decentralized threat.[21] Former U.S. Special Envoy Brett McGurk, who resigned in December 2018, had stated that the

[14] CENTCOM Commander Gen. Joseph Votel before the House Armed Services Committee, March 7, 2019.

[15] Ibid.

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

[17] Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve I Quarterly Report to the United States Congress I July 1, 2018 - September 30, 2018 (p. 49).

[18] Operation Inherent Resolve and other Overseas Contingency Operations, Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2018 – December 31, 2018, February 4, 2019, p. 2.

[19] 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.

[20] CENTCOM Commander Gen. Joseph Votel before the House Armed Services Committee, March 7, 2019.

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

"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.[22]

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.[23] 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). Neither their home countries nor the SDF wish to assume long-term responsibility for the detainees, which are viewed as a security risk.[24]

Idlib: The Final Opposition Stronghold

Idlib province has been under rebel control since 2015, hindering the Asad government's ability to transit directly from government-held areas in the south to Syria's largest city of Aleppo, in the north. While a range of opposition groups operate in Idlib, U.S. officials have described the province as a safe haven for Al Qaeda, while also highlighting the significant civilian presence. U.S. initiatives in Idlib aimed at countering violent extremism (CVE) were halted in May 2018 as part of a broader withdrawal of U.S. assistance to northwest Syria.[25]

De-escalation Area & Demilitarized Zone. 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).[26] 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 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.

2019 Jihadist Advance. In January 2019, the Al Qaeda-linked group Haya't Tahrir al Sham (HTS) seized large areas of Idlib province from rival armed groups, forcing them to accept an HTS-run civil administration. HTS was established in 2017 as a successor to the Nusra Front (Al Qaeda's formal affiliate in Syria). U.S. officials have stated that "The core of HTS is Nusra,"[27] and amended the FTO designation of the Nusra Front in May 2018 to include HTS as an alias.

Al Qaeda in Idlib

U.S. officials in mid-2017 described Idlib province as "the largest Al Qaeda safe haven since 9/11."[28] Beginning in 2014, the United States conducted a series of air strikes, largely in Idlib

[22] Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.[29] 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.[30]

Figure 5. Northern Syria Areas of Control

As of March 11, 2019

Source: CRS using area of influence data from IHS Conflict Monitor, last revised March 11, 2019. 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.

In addition to HTS, the intelligence community's 2019 worldwide threat assessment also referenced another Al Qaeda-linked group in Syria known as Hurras al Din ("Guardians of Religion"). While HTS and Hurras al Din have occasionally clashed in Idlib, some analysts have assessed that the two groups "serve different functions that equally serve al-Qa`ida's established

27, 2017.

[29] Ibid.

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

objectives: one appeals to hardened jihadis with an uncompromising doctrine focused on jihad beyond Syria and one appeals to those focused on the Syrian war."[31] In February 2019, the two groups signed an accord pledging broader cooperation.[32]

Risk of Escalation

The 2019 expansion of jihadist groups in Idlib has raised concern about the potential for renewed Syrian and/or Russian operations in the area. In March 2019, Syrian and Russian strikes in Idlib reportedly intensified to their highest level in months.[33] U.N. officials have described Idlib as a "dumping ground" for fighters and civilians—including an estimated 1 million children—evacuated or displaced from formerly opposition-held areas in other parts of the country. U.N. officials have warned that a mass assault on Idlib could result in "the biggest humanitarian catastrophe we've seen for decades."[34]

Turkish Operations in Northern Syria[35]

Turkey has maintained a military presence in northern Syria since 2016, and currently has forces deployed in Aleppo and Idlib provinces. Turkish forces partner with local Arab militias and have conducted border operations against the Islamic State and other jihadist fighters, while also targeting Syrian Kurdish forces.

President Trump has stated that Turkey could play a larger role in countering the Islamic State in Syria,[36] although it is unclear to what extent U.S. and Turkish objectives overlap. Turkish officials have openly stated that their objectives are not limited to IS militants, and that they also intend to expand military operations against Kurdish forces—including those that have been allied with the United States as part of the counter-IS campaign.[37] It is unclear to what extent Ankara is prepared to launch counter-IS operations in parts of Syria not adjacent to Turkey's border. U.S. military officials have noted that Turkey has not participated in ground operations against the Islamic State in Syria since 2017, and that Turkish forces have not participated in the fight against the Islamic State in the Middle Euphrates River Valley (MERV), which is roughly 230 miles away from the Turkish border.[38] Turkish officials have requested U.S. air and logistical support for their potential operations, despite the two countries' different stances on the YPG.[39]

In January 2019, President Trump proposed the creation of a 20-mile deep "safe zone" on the Syria side of the border.[40] Secretary of State Mike Pompeo later said that the U.S. "twin aims" are

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[31] Hassan Hassan, "Two Houses Divided: How Conflict in Syria Shaped the Future of Jihadism," *CTC Sentinel*, October 2018.

[32] Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Hurras al-Din reach a new accord," *Long War Journal*, February 15, 2019.

[33] "Russian and Syrian air strikes intensify on last rebel bastion," *Reuters*, March 13, 2019.

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

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

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

[37] Transcript, Acting Secretary Shanahan and Minister Akar Remarks at the Opening of the Bilateral Meeting, February 22, 2019.

[38] Operation Inherent Resolve and other Overseas Contingency Operations, Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2018 – December 31, 2018, February 4, 2019, p. 6.

[39] "Turkey Seeks U.S. Aid in Syria," *Wall Street Journal*, January 5, 2019.

[40] https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1084584259510304768.

to make sure that those who helped take down the IS caliphate have security, and to prevent terrorists from attacking Turkey out of Syria.[41] It is unclear who would enforce such a zone. Some sources suggest that U.S. officials favor having a Western coalition patrol any kind of buffer zone inside the Syrian border, with some U.S. support, while Turkey wants its forces together with allied Syrian opposition partners to take that role.[42] Kurdish representatives have said that a safe zone must be guaranteed by international forces.[43]

Israeli Strikes in Syria

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."[44] Israeli strikes in Syria have mostly targeted locations and convoys near the Lebanese border associated with weapons shipments to Lebanese Hezbollah.[45] However, in 2018, strikes widely attributed to Israel for the first time directly targeted Iranian facilities and personnel in Syria.[46]

In September 2018, 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.[47] 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."[48] 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.

The expanding presence of Iranian and Iranian-backed personnel in Syria remains a consistent point of tension between Israel and Iran. In a rare acknowledgement, Israeli military officials in January 2019 confirmed strikes on Iranian military targets in Syria.[49] Israel has accused Hezbollah of establishing a cell in Syrian-held areas of the Golan Heights, with the eventual goal of launching attacks into Israel.[50]

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[41] Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, Remarks to Traveling Press, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, January 14, 2019.

[42] "Erdogan-Putin summit highlights differences over Syria," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, January 25, 2019.

[43] "The Safe Zone Northern Syria Needs," *New York Times*, January 23, 2019.

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

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

[46] 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.

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

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

[49] "Israel Confirms Attacks on Iranian Targets in Syria," *New York Times*, January 20, 2019.

[50] "Israel Says Hezbollah Operative Is Setting Up a Terror Network in Golan Heights," *Wall Street Journal*, March 13, 2019.

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

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."[51] 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,[52] 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 then-U.N. Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura, closed in late January 2018. While the United States continues to call for a political settlement to the conflict, the U.S. intelligence community has assessed that Asad is "unlikely to negotiate himself from power"[53] or make meaningful concession to the opposition:

> The regime's momentum, combined with continued support from Russia and Iran, almost certainly has given Syrian President Bashar al-Asad little incentive to make anything more than token concessions to the opposition or to adhere to UN resolutions on constitutional changes that Asad perceives would hurt his regime.[54]

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).[55] De Mistura resigned in December 2018, and

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

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

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

[54] Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, January 29, 2019.

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

was succeeded by veteran Norwegian diplomat Geir Pederson. As of early 2019, Pederson has continued De Mistura's efforts to convene a constitutional committee.

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 is not a party to the Astana talks but has attended as an observer delegation.

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.[56]

The 11th round of Astana talks was held in November 2018. In February 2019, the presidents of Russia, Iran, and Turkey held a trilateral summit at the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi to discuss the future of Idlib, anticipated changes to the U.S. military presence in Syria, and how to move forward on the formation of a constitutional committee.[57]

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.[58] 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.[59] 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."[60]

Following the 2018 Sochi Conference, de Mistura sought 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

[56] 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.

[57] "Can the Astana process survive the U.S. withdrawal from Syria?" *Al Jazeera*, February 16, 2019.

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

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

[60] "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.

leaders, and women. The sticking point remains this latter, U.N.-selected group, known as the "middle third list."[61] 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."[62]

Kurdish Outreach to Asad Government

In July 2018, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), the political wing of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), opened formal discussions with the Syrian government.[63] The Kurdish-held areas in northern Syria, comprising about a quarter of the country, are the largest remaining areas outside of Syrian government control. Asad has stated that his government intends to recover these areas, whether by negotiations or military force.[64] In early 2019, the U.S. intelligence community also assessed that the Asad government was "likely to focus on reasserting control over Kurdish-held areas."[65]

Following President Trump's announcement in December 2018 that the United States shortly would withdraw forces from Syria, Kurdish leaders sought Asad government protection from a possible Turkish attack. Turkey, which captured the Kurdish enclave of Afrin in northern Syria in 2018, has stated its intent to expand its military operations against PYD and YPG elements in Syria, and Kurdish concerns about such an operation appear to have accelerated talks between Kurdish representatives and the Asad government. The PYD is not a party to the ongoing talks in Geneva between Syrian government and opposition forces, despite the fact that its YPG militia controls the vast majority of territory that remains outside of Syrian government control.

Humanitarian Situation

As of 2019, nearly 12 million people in Syria are in need of humanitarian assistance, 6.2 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.[66]

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.

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).[67]

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[61] "A Primer on Syria's Constitutional Committee," *Lawfare*, December 22, 2018.

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

[63] "Syria's Kurds hope for 'new state and system' via Assad talks," *Al Jazeera*, July 28, 2018.

[64] Transcript, Interview of Bashar al Asad by *Russia Today*, May 31, 2018.

[65] Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, January 29, 2019.

[66] "United Nations calls for sustained support to Syrians and the region ahead of Brussels conference," UNHCR Press Release, March 13, 2019.

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

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.[68] As of March 2019, total U.S. humanitarian assistance for the Syria crisis since 2011 had reached more than $9.5 billion.[69] Of this total, roughly $4.7 billion has gone toward meeting humanitarian needs inside Syria, while the remainder has supported host communities in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt that host Syrian refugees.[70]

The Trump Administration's FY2020 request would eliminate funding for the International Disaster Assistance (IDA) account as well as funding for overseas humanitarian assistance programs previously funded through the Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) account. Instead, it requests $5.9 billion in funding for a new International Humanitarian Assistance (IHA) account, intended to consolidate all U.S. overseas humanitarian programming into a single account. Funds requested for the IHA account would fund the U.S. humanitarian response in Syria and other crisis areas.

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 "resilience" response (stabilization-based development assistance) led by the U.N. Development Program (UNDP).[71]

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.[72]

In 2019, U.N. officials warned that the Syria conflict was not over, and that significant humanitarian needs remain. The 2019 3RP appeal seeks $5.5 billion and the HRP for Syria seeks $3.3 billion, on par with previous years. U.N. officials have noted that the 2018 3RP appeal was funded at 62%, while the Syria HRP was funded at 65%.[73]

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sc/documents/sgreports/.

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

[69] State Department Fact Sheet: U.S. Humanitarian Assistance in Response to the Syria Crisis, March 14, 2019.

[70] Ibid.

[71] 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.

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

[73] "United Nations calls for sustained support to Syrians and the region ahead of Brussels conference," UNHCR Press Release, March 13, 2019.

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 civil unrest to nationwide military conflict involving multiple internal and external actors to the apparent resurgence of the Asad government, 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 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.

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."[74] 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 General Votel, who said in testimony that, "after we have removed

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

[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."[75]

In March 2018, President Trump fired Secretary Tillerson. The President later stated that U.S. troops in Syria would be "coming out of Syria, like, very soon."[76] Speaking about Syria on April 3, Trump reiterated, "I want to get out. I want to bring our troops back home."[77] 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."[78] An April 7 chemical weapons attack by the Syrian government and subsequent U.S., British, and French air strikes 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.[79] At the same time, officials continued to stress the importance of a sustained U.S. presence in the country. In July, then-Defense 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 "redirect approximately $230 million in stabilization funds for Syria."[80] In August and September, the Administration notified Congress that these funds, originally appropriated as FY2017 ESF-OCO, would be reprogrammed to meet other priorities. Administration officials 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.[81]

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.[82] In September 2018, U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton

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

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

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

[78] 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.

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

[80] "Syria Stabilization Efforts Continue With Coalition Contributions," State Department Press Statement, August 17, 2018.

[81] 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.

[82] 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.

stated, "We're not going to leave [Syria] as long as Iranian troops are outside Iranian borders and that includes Iranian proxies and militias."[83]

In November 2018, Ambassador James F. 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."[84] 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.[85]

2018: President Trump Announces Withdrawal of U.S. Forces

President Trump announced on December 19 that U.S. forces would be returning from Syria "now."[86] He stated, "We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency."[87] 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.[88] Nevertheless, a Pentagon spokesperson confirmed that the Defense Department had "started the process of returning U.S. troops home" from Syria,[89] and State Department personnel reportedly were evacuated from Syria within 24 hours of the announcement.[90]

The announced troop withdrawal came as a surprise to senior military and diplomatic officials, who publicly had 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 [...] obviously, it would be reckless if we were just to say, well, the physical caliphate is defeated, so we can just leave now.[91]

Following the announcement, some Defense and State Department officials reportedly sought to persuade the White House to reconsider the withdrawal.[92] On December 20, Defense Secretary

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

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

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

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

[87] 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.

[88] 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.

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

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

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

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

Mattis submitted his resignation.[93] On December 22, Brett McGurk announced that he would accelerate his resignation as Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, stating 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."[94]

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."[95] 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.

Some U.S. allies also 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 air strikes against the Islamic State in Syria would continue.[96] 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."[97] In contrast, Russian President Putin praised the U.S. move toward withdrawal, calling it "correct."[98] 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.[99]

2019: Some U.S. Troops to Remain in Syria

In early January, U.S. forces began withdrawing equipment—but not personnel—from Syria. In late February, the White House announced that the United States would leave approximately 400 troops in Syria, reversing President Trump's December withdrawal announcement. These troops reportedly are intended to form part of a multinational force of roughly 800-1,500 military personnel, which the Administration intends to solicit mostly from NATO member states.[100]

When asked about the mission of the remaining U.S. contingent in Syria, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford stated,

> It's the same -- we're -- this is about campaign continuity. So we had a campaign that was designed to clear ISIS from the ground that they had held, and we always had planned to transition into a stabilization phase where we train local forces to provide security and

19, 2018.

[93] President Trump appointed Patrick Shanahan as Acting Secretary of Defense as of January 1; "Read Jim Mattis's Letter to Trump: Full Text," *New York Times*, December 20, 2018.

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

[95] "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.

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

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

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

[99] "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.

[100] "In Latest Shift, Trump Agrees to Leave 400 Troops in Syria," New York Times, February 22, 2019.

> prevent the regeneration of ISIS. So there is -- there is no change in the basic campaign, the resourcing is being adjusted because the threat has been changed.[101]

In March 2019, the *Wall Street Journal*, citing unnamed U.S. officials, reported that the U.S. military was preparing to leave as many as 1,000 troops in Syria.[102] In a statement, General Dunford described this claim as "factually incorrect."[103] Other reports citing U.S. officials have stated that the number of U.S. forces to remain in Syria ultimately will depend on the number of forces pledged by allied states.[104] The Administration's FY2020 defense funding request assumes for budgeting purposes that more than 7,000 U.S. military personnel will be deployed to Iraq and Syria in FY2020.

It is unclear whether USAID and State Department personnel will redeploy to Syria to spearhead stabilization projects. Administration officials have stated that they are seeking increased coalition financial contributions to continue Syria stabilization efforts. The Administration's FY2020 foreign assistance request states that the United States will seek to "leverage" additional partner contributions. The request does not include funding for specific assistance programs in Syria but states that funds designated for Relief and Recovery Fund purposes could be used in Syria.

President Trump Recognizes Israeli Claim to Golan Heights

On March 25, President Trump issued a proclamation recognizing the Golan Heights as part of the state of Israel.[105] The Golan Heights, a roughly 450-square-mile plateau situated between Israel and Syria, has been disputed since 1967, when Israel captured most of the area from Syria. U.N. Security Council resolutions have called for the final status of the area to be determined via negotiations between the two sides. In 1974, U.N. Security Council Resolution 350 established the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) to monitor a separation zone between Israel and Syria on the Golan Heights. In 1981, Israel effectively annexed the Golan Heights unilaterally by applying Israeli law to the area. In December 1981, the Security Council voted unanimously to adopt Resolution 497, stating that the annexation was "null and void and without international legal effect." Syria condemned the Trump Administration's March 2019 recognition of Israeli sovereignty, describing it as a "flagrant violation" of U.N. resolutions regarding the status of the Golan.[106] For additional information, see CRS Insight IN11081, *Israel and Syria in the Golan Heights: President Trump Voices Support for Israeli Sovereignty Claim*, by Jim Zanotti and Carla E. Humud.

Presidential Authority to Strike Syria under U.S. Law[107]

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

[101] Acting Secretary Shanahan and General Dunford Media Availability Prior to Honors Parade, February 22, 2019.

[102] "U.S. Military Now Preparing to Leave as Many as 1,000 Troops in Syria," *Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 2019.

[103] "Correction to the Record—Syria Troop Numbers," Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Public Affairs, March 17, 2019.

[104] "Top US general refutes report that military could keep nearly 1,000 US troops in Syria," CNN, March 17, 2019.

[105] Proclamation on Recognizing the Golan Heights as Part of the State of Israel, March 25, 2019.

[106] "Syria: Trump's recognition of annexing the occupied Syrian Golan to Zionist entity represents highest degrees of contempt for international legitimacy," Syrian Arab News Agency, March 25, 2019.

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

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 of 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 United States has an important national interest in averting a worsening catastrophe in Syria, and specifically deterring the use and proliferation of chemical weapons.[108]

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."[109]

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.[110]

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

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

[109] 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."

[110] 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.

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 Iraq from the Islamic State threat). As noted above, Senate committees 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

Since 2015, U.S. forces have operated in Syria in support of the counter-IS campaign. Roughly 2,000 U.S. military personnel[111] conduct train and equip program-related activities as well as "advise and assist" operations in support of U.S. partner forces. The Special Operations Joint Task Force, Operation Inherent Resolve (SOJTF-OIR) led by Brigadier General Patrick B. Roberson has been "the primary advise, assist and accompany force in Syria, working closely with the SDF."[112] 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.[113] In September 2018, Lieutenant General Paul LaCamera assumed command of CJTF-OIR. 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.

Military Authorities

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. U.S. operations in Syria also are 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.

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

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

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

Syria Train and Equip Program

Overview

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.

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 to support program activities, with each reprogramming subject to the prior approval of the four congressional defense committees. As of March 2019, more than $2.5 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	FY2020 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)	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							**2,514,045**

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.

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. 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.

FY2020 Defense Funding Request

The Administration's FY2020 request seeks $300 million in CTEF funds to equip and sustain "vetted Syrian opposition (VSO) forces," including Internal Security Forces. The department describes U.S. SDF and other partners as VSO in planning and reporting documents. The request states that the "primary focus" will be on the continued equipping of Internal Security Forces, and that these forces "together with wide-area security and other VSO elements, will focus on back-clearing and holding areas that were liberated from ISIS."[114]

The Administration's FY2019 request had envisioned the creation of a 35,000-person Internal Security Force and a 30,000-person combat force. The FY2020 request references a 61,000 VSO force without specifying what percentage of these are to be focused on internal security versus other tasks. Other differences with the FY2019 request include a reduced emphasis on direct U.S. training of VSO forces. Instead, the FY2020 request states that DOD will "support the VSO's ongoing efforts to recruit, vet, train, and equip additional Syrians representative of the population and enable them to engage ISIS throughout the battlespace."[115]

The request states that $252 million was enacted for the Syria Train and Equip program in FY2019 (about $50 million less that the Administration's FY2019 request). It also notes that the FY2020 budget realigns $250 million in FY2019 funds for IS-related border security support to partner nations from the CTEF fund to Operation and Maintenance, Defense-wide.

[114] Justification for FY 2020 Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO), Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF), March 2019.

[115] Justification for FY 2020 Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO), Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF), March 2019.

U.S. Nonlethal and Stabilization Assistance

The Administration's FY2020 foreign assistance budget request reflects a move by the Trump Administration to end nonlethal assistance for the Syrian opposition, and to shift funding responsibility for stabilization projects to coalition partners. Since 2012, the United States has provided nonlethal assistance to Syrian opposition groups. The United States also has funded stabilization efforts in areas of northeastern Syria liberated from Islamic State control. Possibly reflecting a recognition that the Syria conflict has "decisively shifted in the Syrian regime's favor,"[116] the FY2020 request includes no Syria-specific funding.

Background

Since 2012, the United States has provided a range of nonlethal assistance to Syrian opposition and civil society groups. At the start of the Syria conflict, U.S. ability to provide aid to the Syrian opposition was limited by restrictions stemming from an existing body of U.S. bilateral sanctions against Syria, as well as Syria's status as a state sponsor of terrorism. President Obama invoked emergency and contingency authorities under the Foreign Assistance Act to enable initial deliveries. To enable the expanded delivery of aid to Syrian opposition groups, the executive branch requested and Congress granted specific authorities to provide nonlethal foreign assistance in Syria for certain purposes notwithstanding other provisions of law. Over time, Congress expanded and amended these authorities to focus on areas of congressional priority and to put into place oversight and reporting requirements.[117]

Nonlethal and Stabilization Aid to Syria: 2017-2019

Since FY2012, successive Administrations and Congresses have taken evolving approaches to requests and appropriations of funds for assistance and stabilization programs in Syria. Funding for both types of projects has been drawn from a mix of regular and OCO funds from multiple accounts—largely ESF—with the Administration required to notify Congress of its intent to use these funds for assistance and stabilization efforts in Syria.

FY2017 Funds. In January 2017, the Obama Administration notified Congress that it intended to spend $230 million in FY2017 ESF-OCO funds (originally appropriated under the Further Continuing and Security Assistance Appropriations Act, 2017, P.L. 114-254) to support stabilization in areas liberated from the Islamic State in Syria. In August and September 2018, the Trump Administration notified Congress of plans to reprogram those funds and instead rely on

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

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

contributions from foreign partners—reflecting a broader assessment by the Administration that the United States was bearing more than its share of costs in regards to Syria stabilization. The Administration's FY2020 budget request states that $422 million in OCO funds were obligated for Syria in FY2017.

FY2018 Funds. The Administration has not acted to obligate or expend funds appropriated by Congress in FY2018 foreign operations appropriations legislation for nonlethal assistance and stabilization in Syria. The FY2018 appropriations act (P.L. 115-141) authorized the use of $500 million in FY2018 funds from various foreign assistance accounts for a "Relief and Recovery Fund" (RRF) for areas liberated from the Islamic State, while not specifying a specific amount for Syria. RRF funds could be used for Syria stabilization, but as of March 2019 no FY2018 monies have been notified for programs in Syria.

FY2019. The Administration's FY2019 budget request sought $130 million in Economic Support and Development Fund (ESDF) monies and $44.5 million in Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining and Related Programs (NADR) for stabilization efforts in nongovernment-controlled areas of Syria.

FY2019 Legislation and the FY2020 Request

The FY2019 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-6) states that, of the funds appropriated under the ESF, INCLE, and PKO accounts, no less than $40 million should be made available for nonlethal stabilization assistance for Syria, of which not less than $7 million should be made available for emergency medical and rescue response, and chemical weapons use investigations. Notably, the act states only that nonlethal assistance is to be provided for stabilization purposes. This is a significant departure from the FY2018 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 115-141), which made funds available for 14 listed purposes including establishing inclusive local governance, bolstering the viability of the Syrian opposition, developing civil society and independent media, and countering extremism.

The Administration's FY2020 State and Foreign Operations request for Syria seeks no ESDF or NADR funding for Syria-specific programs, in contrast to the FY2019 request which sought $130 million and $44.5 million for Syria programs in the two accounts, respectively. The request includes $145 million from various accounts for the Relief and Recovery Fund, some of which could be used in Syria.

Uncertain Future for Syria START Programs and Cross Border Aid

To monitor and implement U.S. assistance programs, several regionally based teams were established. A Syria Transition Assistance and Response Team (START) 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) 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.

In 2018, these programs underwent significant changes. 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. Cross-border SSAP programs reportedly were halted in mid-2018, after

Syrian military forces regained control of southwestern Syria.[118] In late 2018, the announced withdrawal of U.S. forces was preceded by the withdrawal of U.S. civilian personnel from northern Syria. With the Administration's 2019 announcement that some U.S. forces would remain in Syria, it is unclear whether or under what circumstances START Forward personnel might redeploy to the country to assist in stabilization efforts.

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. 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, 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."[119]

Overview: Syria Chemical Weapons and Disarmament[120]

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.[121] 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.[122] The use of sarin by the Syrian military in the April 2017 and April 2013 attacks was confirmed by the United Nations. 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.[123] Most recently, the FFM has

[118] 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.

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

[120] 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.

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

[122] 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.

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

been investigating an alleged CW incident in Aleppo on November 24, 2018. U.N. investigators have confirmed several cases of the use of mustard gas by the Islamic State. The OPCW established a fact-finding mission to investigate these allegations.

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 launched a chemical attack on Douma, killing at least 40 people and injuring hundreds more.[124] U.S. officials described the symptoms displayed by victims as consistent with an asphyxiation agent and "a nerve agent of some type."[125] Then-Defense Secretary Mattis stated, "We're very confident that chlorine was used. We are not ruling out sarin right now."[126] An OPCW/FFM investigation concluded in March 2019 that it is likely that toxic chlorine was used as a weapon in the attack,[127] which 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.[128] 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."[129] 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."[130]

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

On April 4, 2017, Syrian aircraft operating in rebel-held Idlib province conducted several air strikes using what U.S. officials assessed to be a chemical nerve agent.[131] The strikes, which occurred in the town of Khan Sheikhoun, killed an estimated 80 to 100 people. The Director

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

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

[126] 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.

[127] Report of the Fact-Finding Mission Regarding the Incident of Alleged Use of Toxic Chemicals as a Weapon in Douma, Syrian Arab Republic, on 7 April 2018, OPCW Technical Secretariat, S/1731/2019, March 1, 2019.

[128] 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.

[129] Ibid.

[130] Ibid.

[131] 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.

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."[132] 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 nerve agent sarin in two earlier 2017 attacks—on March 25 and March 30 in neighboring Hamah province.[133]

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.[134] 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.[135] 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.[136]

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.[137] 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."[138] 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.[139]

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

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

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

[134] Ibid.

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

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

[137] 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.

[138] Ibid.

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

outside of Syria for destruction. As of January 4, 2016, all of Syria's declared Category 1 and 2 chemicals had been neutralized.[140] As of June 2018, the OPCW had verified that all 27 of Syria's declared chemical weapons production facilities (CWPFs) had been destroyed.[141]

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.[142] 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. The latest report said that since the government of Syria has not answered the DAT's inquiries, the OPCW "cannot fully verify that the Syrian Arab Republic has submitted a declaration that can be considered accurate and complete in accordance with the Chemical Weapons Convention."[143] A technical meeting to resolve these differences was held in mid-March.

International Investigations of CW Use

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**.[144] 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.[145]
- 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.[146]

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

[141] Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, "Note by the Director-General: Progress in the Elimination of the Syrian Chemical Weapons Programme," EC-89/DG.24, September 24, 2018.

[142] 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.

[143] "Report on the Progress in the Elimination of the Syrian Chemical Weapons Programme," OPCW, EC-90/DG.11, February 25, 2019.

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

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

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

- 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.[147] 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.[148]
- 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.[149] 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.[150] 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.[151] The FFM concluded in its June 2017 report that sarin had been used as a weapon in Khan

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

[148] 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 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.

[149] 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…."

[150] 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.

[151] 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.

Sheikhoun, Idlib Governorate, on April 4, 2017.[152] 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.[153]

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 coverage.[154] 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.[155] 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.[156] 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) continued to investigate instances of use, including the April 2018 attack in Douma.[157]

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.[158] 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."[159] 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."[160]

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

[153] 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.

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

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

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

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

[158] 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.

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

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

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;
- 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. 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 seeks 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.

The Administration's FY2020 defense funding requests suggest it plans to continue to support U.S. partner forces, but 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.

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.[161] 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[162] and is considering legislation that would further restrict such assistance through FY2024 (H.R. 1706).

[161] 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.

[162] Section 7041(i)(3)(B) of Division F of P.L. 116-6 states that FY2019 funds made available for authorized purposes in Syria "should not be used in areas of Syria controlled by a government led by Bashar al-Assad or associated forces."

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 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 Turkey, Syria, Russia, and Iran to persist. If Kurdish armed groups reconcile and align with the Asad-led government in the wake of U.S. drawdown or 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 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 appropriated defense funds for FY2019 and the 116th Congress has appropriated foreign assistance funds for FY2019. As discussed above, Congress conditioned the availability for obligation of some of the defense 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. As of March 2019, Congress was reviewing the Administration's responses and its FY2020 requests for additional funding. Questions remain about the specifics of the Administration's planned military withdrawal as well as 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 and avoiding actions that further empower the Asad government. 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. New efforts by the Asad government and its external backers to assert the Syrian government's sovereignty could prompt additional scrutiny of residual U.S. and coalition military operations inside the country, to include partnership with local forces.

Observers, U.S. officials, and many Members of Congress continue to differ over which incentives and disincentives may prove most effective in influencing various combatants in Syria 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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