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

,name redacted,, Coordinator

Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

,name redacted,

Analyst in Middle Eastern and African Affairs

,name redacted,

Specialist in Nonproliferation

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Summary

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

Since March 2011, the conflict has driven more than 4.1 million Syrians into neighboring countries as refugees (out of a total population of more than 22 million). More than 7.5 million other Syrians are internally displaced and are among more than 12 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance. The United States remains the largest bilateral provider of such assistance, with more than \$4.5 billion in U.S. funding identified to date. The United States also has allocated more than \$440 million to date for nonlethal assistance to select opposition groups, and President Obama requested \$385 million in FY2015 and FY2016 Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funding for such assistance. The \$600 million FY2016 defense request for the Syria Train and Equip program may support a planned shift in the program toward equipping vetted units in Syria. The Administration also seeks more than \$1.6 billion in Syria-related FY2016 humanitarian aid and refugee response funds.

Syrian officials and their Russian and Iranian backers have stated their conditional willingness to serve as "counterterrorism" partners of the United States in Syria, provided that U.S. officials accept a role for the Asad government as a bulwark against Sunni Islamist extremism. However, the Obama Administration and several Members of Congress have rejected the prospect of partnership with Asad, as well as his characterization of all of his opponents as "terrorists." U.S. officials have described a "fundamental strategic disagreement" with Russia over its military intervention and Asad's future, and they continue to call for a managed political transition and describe Asad as having lost legitimacy. Some Members of Congress and observers have argued that the United State should seek to compel Asad to negotiate or act militarily to protect Syrian civilians. Others have expressed concern that disorderly regime change could further empower extremists or that civilian protection missions could prolong the conflict or involve the United States and its partners too deeply in stabilizing Syria over the long run.

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

The 114th Congress is now considering proposed appropriations (H.R. 2685, S. 1558, and H.R. 2772) and authorization legislation (H.R. 1735) related to Syria. For more information, see CRS Report R43727, *Train and Equip Program for Syria: Authorities, Funding, and Issues for Congress*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted), and CRS Report R43612, *The "Islamic State" Crisis and U.S. Policy*, by (name redacted) et al.

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Overview

Russia's military intervention in Syria is the latest in a more-than-four-year-long series of dramatic events in the conflict there, which pits Syrian government forces and their foreign allies against a range of anti-government insurgents, including the Islamic State organization (IS, aka the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or ISIL/ISIS) and the Al Qaeda-affiliated *Jabhat al Nusra* ("Support Front", JN). Syrian government forces have lost or ceded control of large areas of the country to rebels and the Islamic State since 2011, and suffered a series of tactical defeats in early-to-mid 2015 that appeared to threaten the government's ability to defend some of its strongholds in western Syria (**Figure 1**). This shift in momentum on the battlefield led some observers to question the staying power of Syrian President Bashar al Asad and led others to speculate that a new opportunity had emerged for a negotiated settlement based on the United Nations (U.N.) Security Council-backed June 2012 Geneva Communiqué, which calls for an end to hostilities and an inclusive transition.

Preparations for new United Nations Security Council-backed consultations in pursuit of such a settlement were planned at the time of Russia's September 2015 military intervention. However, Russian military strikes against anti-Asad groups—including some of those responsible for placing new pressure on Asad in 2015—have since dampened expectations that negotiations will resume in the near term. The strikes also have raised fundamental questions for the United States and other supporters of Asad's opponents about the nature and terms of their plans for future opposition support. U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter said on October 7 that the United States and Russia have a "fundamental strategic disagreement" about Russia's support for Asad, and he rejected the possibility of counterterrorism cooperation while Russian attacks on certain anti-Asad forces continue. In the wake of Russia's intervention, Obama Administration officials have announced decisions on policy initiatives that were under discussion prior to Russia's moves—namely a shift in focus for the Train and Equip program toward aiding groups already fighting the Islamic State and a new air campaign focused on rolling back the Islamic State's territorial control in northwest Syria. However, President Obama has rejected arguments that suggest the Syria conflict should be seen primarily in terms of U.S.-Russian competition.

In the wake of the Islamic State organization's high-profile mid-2014 military offensive in Iraq, it has worked to consolidate control over territory it holds in Syria. In May and June 2015, IS fighters launched new offensives in central and northern areas of the country against both pro-Asad and anti-Asad forces. Islamic State gains in Syria in 2015 have come largely at the expense of pro-Asad forces, and the group continues to control large but relatively less populated areas of northeast and central Syria, including most of the Euphrates River valley and some areas adjacent to Syria's borders with Turkey and Iraq (**Figure 2**). In areas of northwestern and northeastern Syria controlled by Kurdish groups, the Islamic State has suffered some losses at the hands of mostly Kurdish fighters backed by coalition air strikes. U.S. and coalition military operations against the Islamic State in areas of northwest Syria are reportedly set to expand in order to sever the group's remaining access to the Turkish border. However, such operations may raise now the prospect of potentially dangerous intersection with Russian military activities in the area.

As fighting continues, Syrian civilians continue to suffer in what U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper described in early 2014 as an "apocalyptic disaster." U.N. sources report that since March 2011, the conflict has driven more than 4.1 million Syrians into neighboring countries as refugees (out of a total population of more than 22 million; see **Figure 3**). At the end of 2014, an estimated 12.2 million people inside Syria, more than half the population, were in need of humanitarian assistance, of which more than 7.6 million were internally displaced. The United Nations and its humanitarian partners have launched the largest

combined appeal in U.N. history for a \$4.5 billion Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) and a \$2.9 billion Strategic Response Plan (SRP) for Syria.¹ As of October 2015, the 3RP was 46% funded and the Syria SRP was 33% funded.² The United States is the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to the internal Syria and Syria regional responses and is part of the international humanitarian operation, with more than \$4.5 billion allocated to date from global humanitarian accounts and some reprogrammed funding.³ For more information on humanitarian issues and programs, see CRS Report R43119, *Syria: Overview of the Humanitarian Response*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted) .

Syria's government has met many of the final requirements associated with the September 2013 chemical disarmament agreement endorsed by the U.N. Security Council in Resolution 2118. All of Syria's declared chemical weapons materials have been removed from the country and more than 98% have been destroyed. The Syrian government has since revealed previously undisclosed chemical weapons-related facilities and, as of September 2015, 10 of 12 facilities had been destroyed, with plans in place for the destruction of the others where security conditions have precluded access. Opposition groups and the Syrian government have traded allegations about new chemical attacks in 2015, and the U.N. Security Council has approved a new investigative body to review and assign responsibility for reported chemical attacks. For more information on chemical weapons and the U.S.-backed disarmament process, see CRS Report R42848, *Syria's Chemical Weapons: Issues for Congress*, coordinated by (name redacted) .

In Congress, Members are weighing the relative risks and rewards of action in Syria against the Islamic State and the Assad government while conducting oversight of U.S. lethal and nonlethal assistance to vetted members of select opposition groups, including the provision of military training, arms, and defensive protection. President Obama's FY2016 budget requests for foreign operations and defense seek more than \$3.8 billion in Syria- and Iraq-related assistance funding for programs in those two countries and the surrounding region. The 114th Congress also has considered proposals to authorize the use of military force against the Islamic State organization.

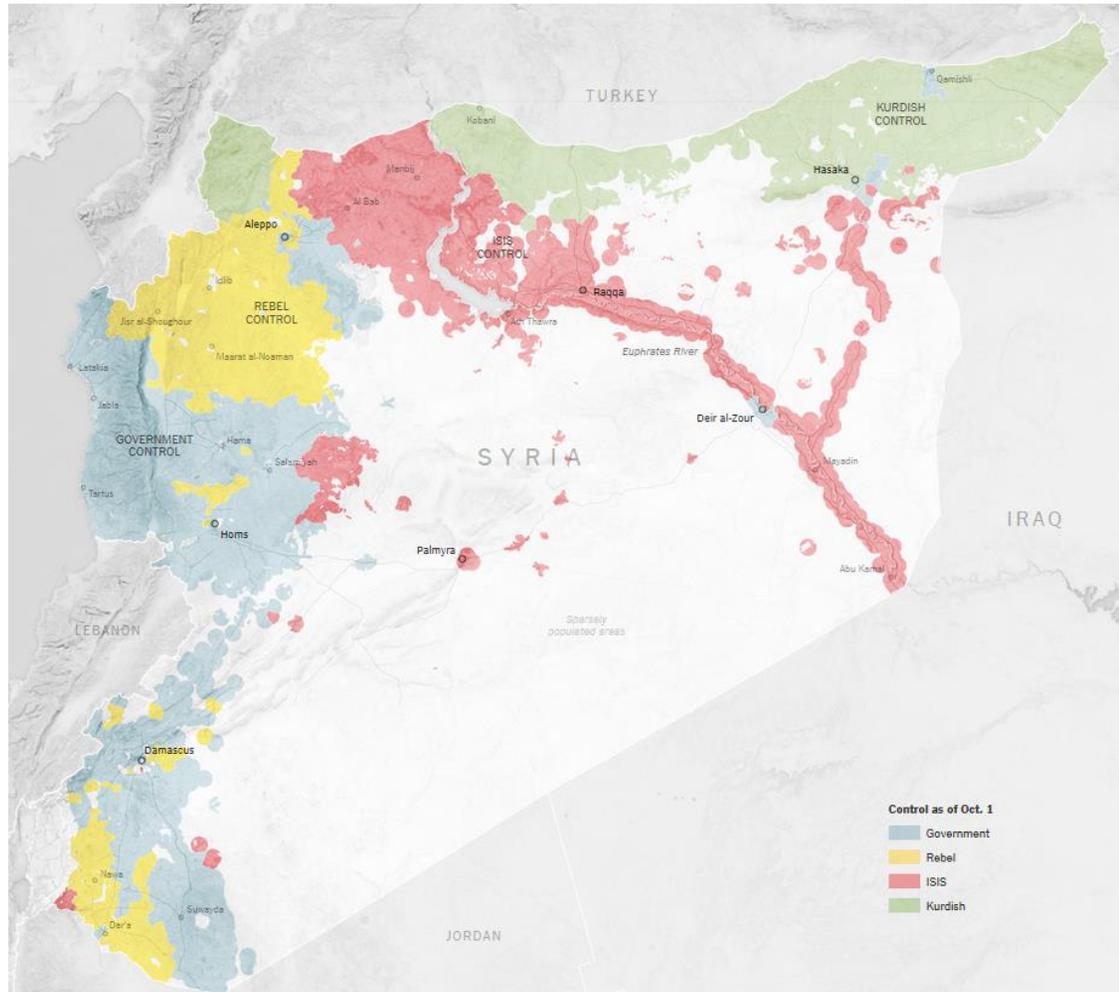
The negative effects of the humanitarian and regional security crises emanating from Syria appear to be beyond the power of any single actor, including the United States, to independently contain or fully address. The region-wide flood of Syrian refugees, the growth of armed extremist groups in Syria,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

¹ U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance, "2015 Strategic Response Plan: Syrian Arab Republic," December 18, 2014; U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and U.N. Development Program, "Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan 2015-2016 in Response to the Syria Crisis: Regional Strategic Overview," December 18, 2014.

² Donor funding is usually provided in response to a crisis in the form of financial contributions or relief supplies. The Strategic Response Plan, administered through the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance, brings aid organizations together to coordinate a response to major humanitarian crises and disasters and appeal for funds through a collaborative plan. Additional bilateral and other contributions and pledges are also made outside of the U.N. appeals through direct bilateral assistance to governments, international organizations, and NGOs.

³ USAID, Syria Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #8, FY2015, September 21, 2015.

Figure 1. Syria Conflict Map: Estimated Areas of Control as of October 1, 2015

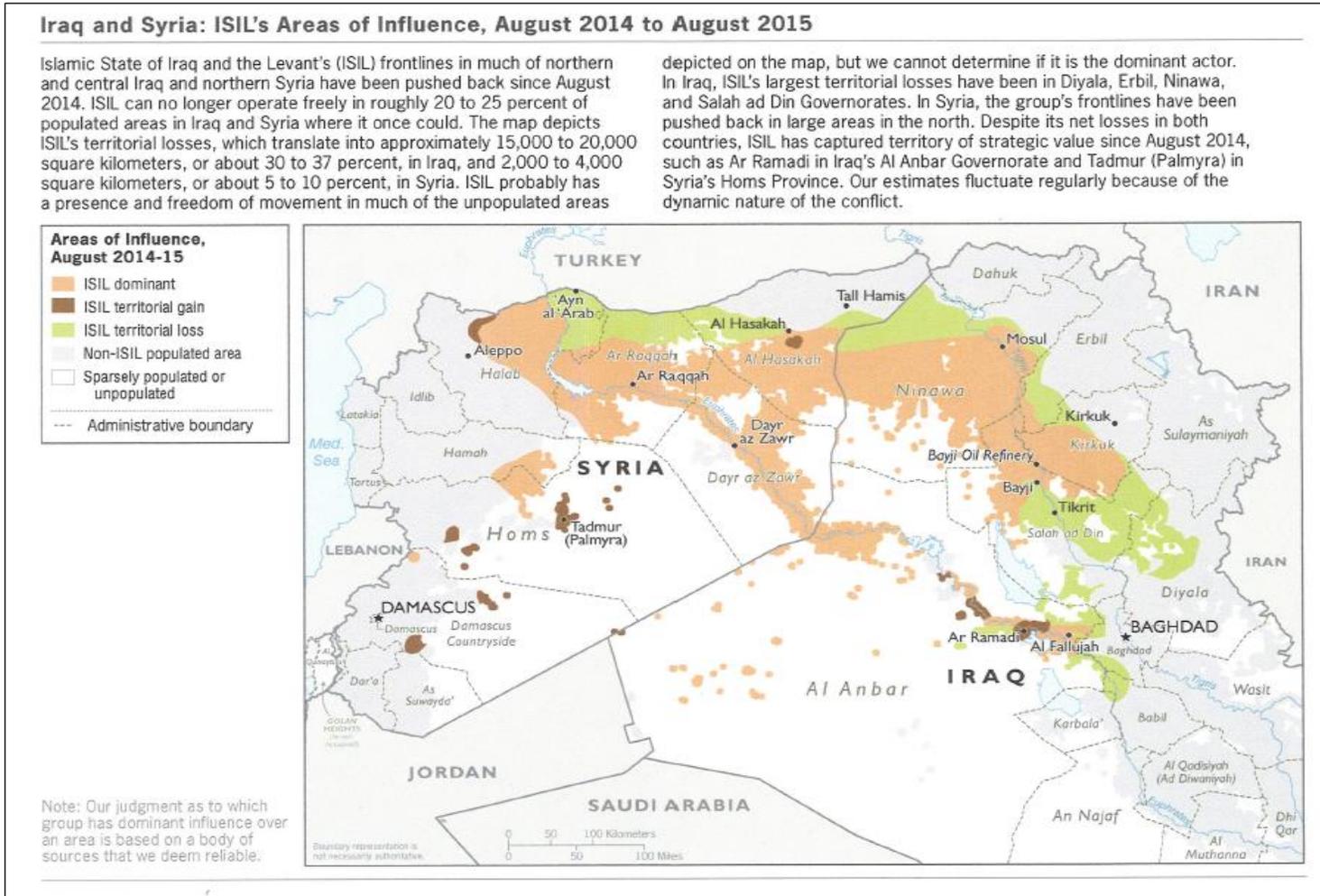


Source: Tim Wallace, New York Times. Area of control data source is Carter Center, October 1, 2015.

Notes: All areas approximate. Yellow area of “Rebel Control” includes areas under Jabhat al Nusra (Al Qaeda affiliate) control, and includes areas controlled by a wide variety of anti-Asad forces. White color denotes sparsely populated or unpopulated areas.

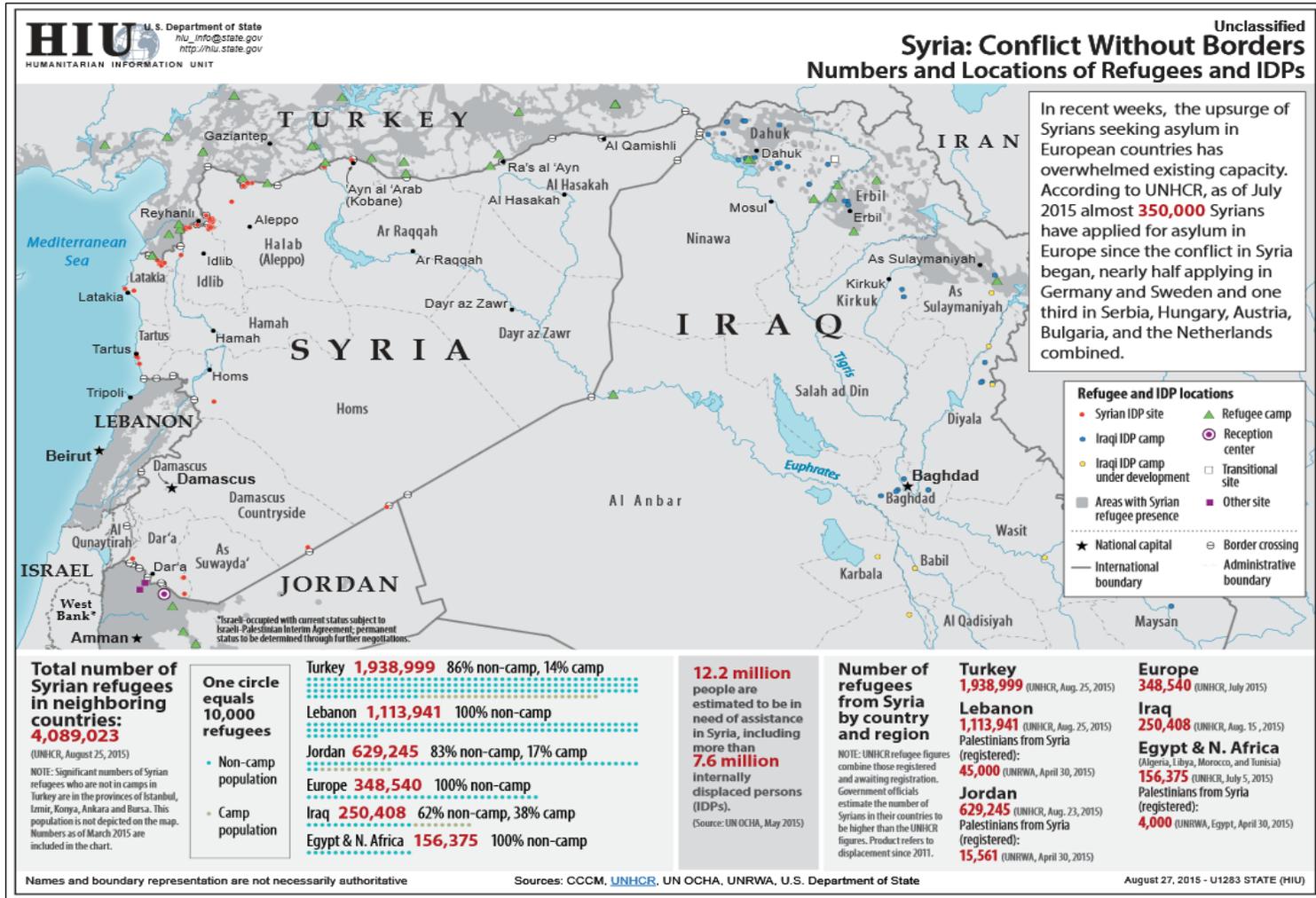
Figure 2. Areas of Islamic State Influence

U.S. Department of Defense Map, September 2015



Source: Map and text produced by U.S. Department of Defense, September 2015.

Figure 3. Syria: Humanitarian Situation Map and Graphic
As of August 27, 2015



Source: U.S. State Department Humanitarian Information Unit, August 27, 2015.

FY2016 Legislation and Issues for Congress

The 114th Congress has considered FY2016 appropriations (H.R. 2772, H.R. 2685, and S. 1558) and defense authorization legislation (H.R. 1735) related to Syria, and has debated proposals to authorize the use of military force against the Islamic State. Key issues under consideration in relation to legislation in the 114th Congress include:

- **What is the United States' overall strategy toward the Syria conflict in general and toward the Islamic State in Syria and the Asad government in particular? How might U.S. strategies in Iraq and Syria best be aligned?** Members of Congress continue to express a range of views concerning U.S. strategy toward the conflict in Syria, combatting the Islamic State, and coordinating responses to the crises in Iraq and Syria. Several legislative proposals call on the Administration to provide Congress with new or updated strategy reports on these topics.
- **What authority and funding should be provided for U.S. assistance to Syrians, including assistance to opposition elements? How do Members of Congress view planned changes in the program that may emphasize equipping vetted units in Syria rather than building new units in neighboring countries? How do new plans relate to the authorities granted by Congress to date?** While some proposals to rescind funding and authority for the Train and Equip program have thus far failed to garner sufficient congressional support for enactment, Members continue to debate the proper scope, pace, and goals of the program, especially in light of reports of program setbacks. The Obama Administration has committed to protecting program trainees upon their return to Syria, and intends to shift the program's focus toward training vetted units in Syria. It remains to be seen what implications U.S. pledges of conditional force protection for program trainees might have for U.S. involvement in the wider Syria conflict.
- **How if at all should the United States respond to calls from regional partners and some Syrians for the imposition of no-fly zone or safe zone arrangements for the protection of civilians in areas of Syria? How might Russian military operations in Syria shape debate about those options?** In response to ongoing indiscriminate attacks on civilians in Syria by pro-Asad forces and some of their opponents, some Members of Congress and outside observers have called for new attention to be paid to proposals for the establishment of areas safe from air and/or ground attack inside Syria. The Obama Administration has reiterated that such options are not under consideration at present, but could be considered under different circumstances.
- **How might Russian military intervention in Syria change the dynamics of the Syria conflict, the prospects for a settlement or transition, and the context in which the United States and its allies pursue their campaign against the Islamic State organization?** Russian military intervention has the potential to bolster the Asad government's prospects against its opponents and thus may reshape conditions on the battlefield and the prospects for the type of negotiations and managed transition that Administration officials favor. Russian military operations in Syria create new operational considerations for the ongoing coalition air campaign against the Islamic State as well as proposals for other types of intervention, including the establishment of safe zones or no-fly zones.

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

Background: Syria, its People, and the Conflict

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

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

Syria’s Diverse Population

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

Despite the secular nature of the ruling Baath party, religious sects have been important to some Syrians as symbols of group identity and determinants of political orientation. The Asads and the Baath party have cultivated Alawites as a key base of support, and elite security forces have long been led in large part by Alawites, although some officers and most rank and file military personnel have been drawn from the majority Sunni Arab population and other minority groups. The government violently suppressed an armed uprising led by the Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s, killing thousands of Sunni Muslims and others.⁴

⁴ In a March 1980 intelligence product, the Central Intelligence Agency described the then-prevailing dynamic among members of the regime and military in relation to the Islamist upheaval as follows: “President [Hafiz al] Assad has committed his minority Alawite government to a risky course with his reported decision to use the military more freely to crush civil unrest in Syrian cities. This may intimidate his domestic opponents in the short run, but unless Assad is able to reestablish order quickly, it will also further erode his domestic support and could eventually bring about his (continued...)”

Religious, ethnic, geographic, and economic identities overlap in influencing the views and choices of Syrians about the current conflict. Within ethnic and sectarian communities are important tribal and familial groupings that often provide the underpinning for political alliances and commercial relationships. Socioeconomic differences abound among farmers, laborers, middle-class wage earners, public sector employees, military officials, and the political and commercial elite. Many rural, less advantaged Syrians originally supported the opposition movement, while urban, wealthier Syrians appeared to have mixed opinions.

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

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

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

Some Sunni Arabs may view the conflict as a means to assert their community's dominance over Alawites and others, but others may support the Asad government as an alternative to rule by extremist forces or out of fear of retaliation for past collaboration with the regime.⁵ Some Sunni opposition leaders have sought to assuage other groups' concerns about the implications of

(...continued)

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

⁵ See Chris Zambelis, "Syria's Sunnis and the Regime's Resilience," U.S. Military Academy Combatting Terrorism Center (CTC), *CTC Sentinel*, May 28, 2015.

potential Sunni dominance, whereas others have demanded that non-Sunni groups accept Sunni religious rule. Some opposition figures have pledged their commitment to seeing that orderly trials and the rule of law prevail in any post-conflict setting. Nevertheless, reports of abuses at the hands of opposition forces suggest that leaders of many armed groups at times are unable or unwilling to ensure that such standards are applied consistently to their pro-Asad adversaries.

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

Conflict Synopsis

The Syrian political uprising of early 2011 evolved into an insurgency as the Syrian government met initially peaceful protests with increasing repression. Initially isolated acts of violence by opposition members against state authorities drew heavy-handed military responses, killing civilians and sparking cyclical, retaliatory clashes of increasing intensity. Extremist groups also began to emerge—between November 2011 and December 2012, the Al Qaeda-affiliated *Jabhat al Nusra* (“Support Front,” JN, aka the Nusra Front) claimed responsibility for nearly 600 attacks in Syria, ranging from more than 40 suicide attacks to small arms and improvised explosive device operations.⁶ Military defectors and armed civilians defeated state security forces in some early engagements, enabling opposition elements to seize control of territory and disrupting the government's control over Syria's territory and population.

A broad spectrum of opposition actors who initially demanded varying degrees of political change coalesced around their shared demands for the ouster of President Bashar al Asad. At the same time, some Islamist activists and armed groups insisted on wholesale, systemic change in the governance of the country and acted to assert their prerogatives in areas under their control. An influx of foreign fighters on both sides of the conflict amplified underlying tensions. Syrian authorities described their opponents—secular and Islamist—as foreign-backed conspirators and labelled armed opposition groups as terrorists, vowing a merciless response to restore state control, resist select foreign interference, and protect pro-government civilians.

By February 2014, U.S. Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper estimated the strength of the insurgency in Syria at “somewhere between 75,000 or 80,000 or up to 110,000 to 115,000 insurgents,” who were then organized “into more than 1,500 groups of widely varying political leanings.”⁷ Among these forces are violent extremist groups such as *Jabhat al Nusra* and the Islamic State organization. According to U.S. officials, from early 2011 through 2015, more than 25,000 foreign fighters from more than 100 countries,⁸ including at least 4,500 fighters⁹ from

⁶ “Terrorist Designations of the al-Nusrah Front as an Alias for al-Qa’ida in Iraq,” Press Statement by State Department Spokesperson Victoria Nuland, December 11, 2012.

⁷ Remarks by DNI James R. Clapper to the Senate Armed Services Committee, February 11, 2014.

⁸ Estimate by ODNI Spokesman Brian Hale, as reported in Barbara Starr, ‘A few dozen Americans’ in ISIS ranks,’ CNN, July 15, 2015.

⁹ National Counterterrorism Center Deputy Director John Mulligan, testimony before the House Committee on Homeland Security, June 3, 2015.

“Western countries,” may have travelled to Syria as part of a trend that is “unprecedented” relative to other conflicts involving foreign recruits.¹⁰

Regional and global powers, including Iran, Turkey, the Arab Gulf states, Russia, and the United States, responded to the uprising and emerging conflict in Syria in ways that prioritized their own interests and perspectives. Funding, weaponry, political support, and personnel offered by outside forces—both state and nonstate—have contributed directly to the intensification and continuation of fighting across Syria from 2012 to the present. Syrian government forces reversed initial setbacks with assistance from Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, but some anti-Asad forces have improved their battlefield performance since late 2014 reportedly with outside assistance. Russia’s intervention on Asad’s behalf since September 2015 may help Syrian government forces reverse recent losses, but also may provoke new support for anti-Asad groups, including extremist groups.

Amid a series of tactical victories by opposition and Islamic State fighters since early 2015, some observers speculated about the prospect of a shift in government strategy to a defensive posture in limited urban areas in the western part of the country and along the coast. New movements of Russian military equipment into these areas have bolstered views that Asad and his supporters intend to stiffen their resistance to further opposition and IS advances toward the coast and areas linking it to the capital. Few argue, at present, that these new infusions of outside support are likely to allow Asad to reassert control over wider areas of the country that have slipped from his grasp and are under the control of a variety of groups.

As of early October, Syrian government forces retain an advantage in air power, particularly in regime strongholds, and remain engaged in combat operations across the country. An offensive launched in conjunction with Russian airstrikes seeks to reverse opposition gains in Idlib and Hama Provinces. The government has faced manpower constraints, but has sought to compensate for this by deploying local and foreign militias alongside Syrian military forces and by increasing the use of airstrikes in some areas. While the government has lost control over large areas in the country’s northeast and large areas in the northwest and south, it retains full or partial control of most of the country’s urban centers, its coastal stronghold, and all but two provincial capitals.

Islamic State forces continue to besiege an isolated bastion of Syrian government forces and thousands of civilians in the eastern city of Dayr al Zawr. In May 2015, they advanced southwest from Dayr az Zawr and seized the central Syrian town of Tadmor and the adjacent antiquities at Palmyra. This move placed the country’s central desert crossroads under IS control and further isolated the few remaining pro-Asad forces in eastern Syria. IS fighters have since destroyed some local antiquities and advanced further westward, seizing the town of Qaryatayn in eastern Homs Province, 25 miles east of the important north-south M5 highway that links Syria’s western cities. As coalition forces and local ground forces press the Islamic State to the east in Iraq and to the north along the Turkish border, IS forces may seek opportunities to advance further southward and westward, particularly if Asad regime forces continue to weaken in these areas.

In late September, opposition and regime representatives engineered ceasefire agreements and planned population exchanges involving the predominantly Shiite-populated Idlib Province towns of Al Fu’ah and Al Kafrya and the besieged opposition stronghold of Zabadani near the Lebanese border in Rif Dimashq Province. Opposition forces, including JN suicide bombers, had assaulted Al Fu’ah and Al Kafrya and threatened to overrun the towns, while Sunni opposition fighters in Zabadani faced defeat at the hands of Hezbollah and pro-Asad forces. The Al Fu’ah-Zabadani

¹⁰ Statement of Nicholas J. Rasmussen, Director, U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, before the House Committee on Homeland Security, February 11, 2015.

ceasefire dynamic illustrates the central theme in the conflict to date—both the Asad regime and its opposition have shown a capacity to use foreign support to make gains at the expense of their foes, but neither side has demonstrated the capacity to win decisively.

Implications of Russia’s Military Intervention

Observers continue to debate the range of motives that may have driven Russian leaders to intervene militarily in the Syria conflict in September 2015. Russia has long provided military advice and equipment to the Syrian government and has sought to preserve Russian access to a naval support facility in Tartus, Syria, over a period of decades. Russia has resupplied Syrian forces during the conflict, although Russian officials have stated that they are merely fulfilling existing bilateral contracts. Russian leaders have blocked action in the U.N. Security Council that would have increased pressure on the Asad regime for its conduct, and Russia remains an outspoken critic of what it describes as unwarranted external interference aimed at regime change in Syria and elsewhere. The series of losses suffered by Syrian government forces in 2015 may have contributed to Russia’s decision to enter the conflict directly when it did. Russian concerns about U.S. and other third party security assistance to Syrian opposition groups, the potential for broader U.S.-led coalition military operations in Syria, and the presence in Syria of extremists of Russian and Central Asian origin also may have been motivating factors.

As noted above, Russian involvement may bolster the immediate prospects of pro-Asad forces in reversing recent opposition gains, but it also appears to be contributing to new statements of unity among opposition forces and may attract new recruits to the anti-Asad cause over the longer term. Anti-Russian Islamist extremism also may grow as a response to the Russian intervention, to the extent that Sunni Muslims in Syria and beyond view Russia as supporting the survival of the Iran-aligned Asad government, which many Sunnis hold responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of Sunni civilians.

Russia’s intervention and its forceful endorsement of the Asad government’s descriptions of the conflict as one between a legitimate Syrian government and a host of interchangeable “terrorists” appear to foreclose the immediate prospect of successful settlement and transition negotiations. Russian leaders have offered to engage with moderate opposition elements in an effort to incorporate them into a Syrian government-led, Russian-supported “counterterrorism” campaign, while broad coalitions of opposition groups have condemned Russia’s intervention and reiterated their demands for regime change. More broadly, Russia’s demonstration of its military capabilities and political will could have repercussions in the broader regional security environment, as regional governments and outside powers recalculate their basic assumptions about Russia’s presence, goals, and role in the Middle East.

Parties to the Conflict

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

Figure 4. Profile of Select Pro-Asad Forces

Pro-Asad Forces



Syrian Armed Forces and National Defense Forces

As of mid-2015, U.S. defense officials described Syria's armed forces as "much weakened." By some estimates, more than 44,000 members of the regular armed forces have been killed during the conflict. Thousands more have defected, with overall force strength having been halved by some estimates from 250,000 to 125,000 troops. Reports from Syria suggest that military conscription efforts are facing resistance in some communities, but many Sunni conscripts continue to fight for Asad. Syria's air force has maintained its monopoly on operation in Syrian air space in relation to rebel forces, although opposition groups periodically shoot down fixed and rotary-wing aircraft, and coalition and Russian air forces now operate inside of Syria. In parallel to Russia's intervention, Iran and Iran-backed Shia militias play advisory and operational roles, with forces in some cases fighting alongside Syrian troops (see below).



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



Lebanese Hezbollah

Since at least 2013, Hezbollah has worked with the Syrian military to protect regime supply lines by helping to clear rebel-held towns along the Damascus-Homs stretch of the M-5 highway. Hezbollah personnel have played significant roles in battles around Al Qusayr and the Qalamoun Mountains region, in which rebel presence along the highway threatened the government's ability to move forces and to access predominantly Alawite strongholds on the coast. Hezbollah forces in Lebanon reportedly monitor and target rebel positions near the border that facilitate attacks in Syria and Lebanon. In addition to conducting military operations, Hezbollah trains NDF forces to improve their capacity to hold cleared terrain. Hezbollah fighters also train and advise the Syrian military, and often embed with Syrian units. A senior Israeli military official in June 2015 stated that Hezbollah then-maintained 6,000 to 8,000 fighters in Syria and Iraq.



Iraqi and Other Shia Militias

Analysts estimate that there are between 5,000 and 10,000 Iraqi Shiites fighting in Syria on behalf of the Syrian government, in addition to an unknown number of Afghan and other Shiites. Many hail from Iraqi Shiite political and militia groups including *Kata'ib Imam Ali* and groups led by former members of *Asa'ib Ahl al Haq*. Some members identify their objective as the defense of Shia holy sites such as the tomb of Sayyida Zeinab, the granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammad, in southern Damascus. Other reports describe these groups as assuming a broad operational role in the conflict, noting that militias have formed sniper teams, led ambushes, established checkpoints, and provided infantry support for Syrian armored units. Reports suggest that some Iraqi fighters receive training in Iran before being flown in small batches into Syria, and that some work closely with Lebanese Hezbollah. However, the precise command and control arrangements of these militias remain unclear. Islamic State gains in Iraq prompted some Iraqi fighters in Syria to return home to fight in 2014, but more recent reports suggest that some militia leaders increasingly describe Syria and Iraq as a common theater of operations against Sunni extremist enemies.

Sources: Graphic created by CRS, October 2015. More detailed source information available on request.

Figure 5. Profile of Select Anti-Asad Forces

Select Anti-Asad Forces and Extremist Groups



Southern Front Forces

A coalition of dozens of smaller armed groups, many of which are aligned with the “Free Syrian Army” movement and reported to coordinate and receive assistance through a Military Operations Center based in Jordan. Southern Front fighters scored victories against pro-Asad forces in late 2014 and early 2015, seizing control of the western stretch of the Syrian-Jordanian border. A 2015 offensive to break Asad’s control over the provincial capital of Dara’a failed, leading some to question the Front’s future. Several Southern Front-aligned units have posted social media footage of their fighters using U.S.-produced anti-tank weapons against pro-Asad forces. The Front’s leaders reportedly have stated their support for secular governance in Syria and eschew coordination with the Nusra Front and other extremists, but not all members may agree.



Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant (*Harakat Ahrar al Sham al Islamiyya*, aka *Ahrar al Sham*, ASIM)

After suffering a near catastrophic loss of senior leaders in 2014, ASIM has reemerged as a powerful force on multiple fronts in Syria, collaborating with other Islamists and nationalists in fighting with pro-Asad and Islamic State forces. The group’s fluid relationship with Jabhat al Nusra, some of its founders’ links to Al Qaeda, and its Salafi-jihadist ideology lead some Western observers to classify the group as an extremist organization. Some of its leaders have described the group as a potential partner for the West against Asad and the Islamic State.



Army of Islam (*Jaysh al Islam*)

This Damascus area-based coalition controls the eastern suburbs of the capital and its forces operate against pro-Asad and IS forces in that area and other areas of southern and western Syria. Its leader Zahran Alloush is believed to have close ties to Saudi Arabia and he has attempted to moderate his public image and strengthen links to other patrons in 2015, in spite of his past sectarian rhetoric.



Nusra Front (*Jabhat al Nusra*, *The Support Front for the People of Syria*)

This Al Qaeda-aligned Salafi-jihadist group emerged in late 2011 and since has earned a reputation as a formidable fighting force, attracting thousands of recruits, performing some social services, and attacking other opposition forces it deems hostile to its goals. The U.S. government designated it a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 2012. It has played a leading role in opposition offensives in 2015 as a member of *Jaysh al Fatah* (Army of Victory) operations in northwest Syria. Its leader, Abu Mohammed al Golani, remains hostile to the Islamic State and to the United States. In masked interviews during 2015 he has offered conditional safety under Islamic law to Syrian minorities and supporters of Asad, provided they repent, end practices that Nusra considers deviant, and accept religious rule.



The Islamic State (aka *ISIL/ISIS/Daesh*)

From its Syria-based capital in Raqqa, the Islamic State controls the Euphrates river valley east and south from the Aleppo area to the border with Iraq. It captured parts of central Syria in 2015 and has supporters in the Damascus region and along Syria’s border with Lebanon. Along the northern periphery of its areas of control, the group has suffered a series of setbacks in 2015, mainly at the hand of Kurdish fighters backed by U.S.-led coalition airstrikes. Syria appears to remain a staging ground and source of strategic depth for the Islamic State. IS fighters in Syria label most other armed groups, including other Islamist extremists, as “awakening” forces—a reference to Iraq-based Sunni fighters supported by the United States against IS predecessors during 2006–2008.

Sources: Graphic created by CRS, October 2015. More detailed source information available on request.

Figure 6. Profiles of Select Kurdish and Political Opposition Groups

Select Kurdish Forces and Political Opposition Groups



Kurdish Democratic Unity Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD*)

The PYD seeks Kurdish autonomy in Syria and is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a U.S. designated Foreign Terrorist Organization. The PYD has taken a relatively ambiguous stance toward the Arab-led uprising to date, but PYD leader Saleh Muslim Mohammed stated in October 2015 that the Asad government cannot remain in power in the long term, but emphasized that the PYD “will fight alongside whoever fights” the Islamic State, including Russia. In June 2015, Muslim called for decentralized democracy for Syria and denied that the PYD seeks partition. The PYD and other Syrian Kurdish forces refer to Syrian populated areas of the country as one entity that they call *Rojava*.



Popular Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG*)

The “Popular Protection Units” are a secular militia coalition made up mostly of Kurdish fighters affiliated with the PYD, which is in turn affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a U.S. designated Foreign Terrorist Organization. The YPG’s size is undetermined but may include as many as fifty thousand fighters, including Assyrian, Armenian, Circassian, and Arab sub-units. The YPG has played the leading role (with coalition air support) in ejecting Islamic State fighters from the Syrian-Turkish border areas at Kobane and Tal al Abyad in 2015. Prior to the rise of the Islamic State, YPG forces fought a number of battles with Arab Islamist militia groups for control of towns and strategic border crossings in northern Syria. Throughout 2015, YPG forces have clashed with IS forces in the northeastern governorate of Al Hasakah.



National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (aka *Etilaf, Syrian Opposition Coalition, SOC*)

Based in Turkey and considered to be close to foreign opponents of Asad, the SOC has been the focal point for most formal Western and other international engagement with Syrian political opposition members. The group’s current leadership has acknowledged its limitations and has worked to strengthen relationships with other political and armed groups. SOC leader Khalid Khojah seeks international support for more forceful intervention to protect civilians in Syria and has reached out to armed groups in order to build consensus around shared opposition principles for the settlement of the conflict. In the wake of Russia’s military intervention, the SOC joined with a broad range of secular and Islamist armed groups to state its rejection of Russia’s involvement and to reiterate its demand that Asad have “no place in any political process.” The SOC and others also called for security agencies to be disbanded and reconstituted. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is a member of the Syrian National Council (SNC), which is the SOC’s largest constituent group.



National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB)

The NCB is a small Syria-based alliance of leftist groups, Kurdish activists, and individuals associated with the 2005 Damascus Declaration on political reform. The NCB has stated a willingness to negotiate with the Asad regime (predicated on an end to the use of force against civilians) and opposes foreign intervention in Syria’s conflict. Repeated attempts to merge the NCB with the Syrian National Council failed, and the NCB has declined to support the SOC. The NCB is frequently viewed by anti-Asad groups as being part of the “loyal opposition” to the Syrian government.

Sources: Graphic created by CRS, October 2015. More detailed source information available on request.

U.S. Policy and Assistance

Debating U.S. Strategy and Policy

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

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

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

Prior to Russia’s intervention, leading U.S. policymakers described an overall approach that remained engaged in the “political track,” but U.S. statements tended to be circumspect about the prospects for political arrangements to bring about a durable settlement of the conflict.¹¹ In this regard, U.S. defense officials described both desirable and likely scenarios for near-term evolution in the conflict. Secretary of Defense Carter described the “best” scenario for the Syrian people as one that would entail an agreed or managed removal of Asad and the coalescence of opposition forces with elements of the remaining Syrian state apparatus as U.S. partners in

¹¹ On June 16, 2015, Secretary of State Kerry said, “we are engaged in a number of efforts right now diplomatically and otherwise to see whether or not there might be some life in the political track, and it’s too early to answer that question, but we are not simply sitting there and allowing this to happen without any efforts to see if there’s a way to stop it.” Secretary of State John Kerry, Press Availability, June 16, 2015.

opposition to the Islamic State and other extremists.¹² On July 7, Secretary Carter told the Senate Armed Services Committee that

the outcome that we are aiming for is one in which Bashar al Assad and those who have been associated with his atrocities in Syria are removed and -- but the structures of government in Damascus and in Iraq [sic] that remain continue on our -- in an inclusively governed way that is multisectarian to get -- to include Alawites and others and that can then turn to the task of regaining its sovereign territory from ISIL to the east in a project that would look like what we are working with Baghdad to accomplish to its west in Iraq. That is the post-Asad transition that will be the best for the Syrian people and the best for our counter-ISIL strategy.¹³

Secretary Carter also warned that “further conflict, further civil war, and ethnic cleansing” could follow in a scenario in which the Asad regime collapsed, making a political transition “much to be preferred.”¹⁴ Citing the views of regional partners, U.S. defense officials portrayed a shift by pro-Asad forces to a defensive posture in select areas and the continuation of wider conflict as the most likely scenario in the near term.¹⁵ However, Russia’s intervention, and the corresponding shift by pro-Asad forces from defense to offense in some areas, suggests a different trend may prevail in the coming months. The immediate questions for Administration officials and Members of Congress have thus shifted to whether or how to respond to Russia’s intervention and the Asad regime’s counteroffensives.

Whether or not scenarios described as desirable by U.S. officials are feasible in the longer term is debatable. While U.S. officials and their counterparts in other governments may wish for some element of Syria’s state apparatus and security services to be salvageable as a hedge against total state collapse, the durability of Syria’s state institutions is unknown. Russian intervention on Asad’s behalf is no guarantee of the success or survival of the current Syrian government and arguably may increase the already considerable desire of some opposition groups to completely topple the Syrian state. The willingness of Syrian officials and leaders of key communities to accept outcomes that would involve ceding power to opposition forces was unknown and likely highly variable prior to Russia’s intervention and may remain so until the relative success or failure of that intervention is determined. Many armed and unarmed opposition groups have called for the removal and prosecution of all officials with “blood on their hands,” including Asad, while calling for the preservation and reform of key security institutions. Others seek more fundamental change and have made hostile sectarian statements about the collective culpability of Syrian Alawites for the Asad government’s atrocities.

Even if a transitional Syrian state acceptable to a sufficient segment of armed opposition forces were achieved, it may not prove to be capable of administering state services, dedicated to

¹² On June 18, Secretary of Defense Carter said, “. . .the best way for the Syrian people for this to go would be for him to remove himself from the scene and there to be created, difficult as that will be, a new government of Syria based on the moderate opposition that we have been trying to build and support and then helping them strengthen themselves and to retake all of Syrian territory. That would be a desirable path if he did remove -- was removed from the scene or removed himself from the scene.” Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, June 17, 2015.

¹³ Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, July 7, 2015.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ On June 17, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey said, “it’s generally the consensus [in the region] that in the near term, it’s probably more likely that the regime would limit its -- would go over to the defensive and limit its protection of the Alawite Shia and some of the minority groups, leaving the rest of -- of Syria essentially ungoverned, or governed in ways that wouldn’t be -- wouldn’t be positive for the region in the near term.” Gen. Dempsey, Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, June 17, 2015.

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

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

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

FY2016 Budget Requests for Syria

The FY2016 foreign assistance request for Syria reflects the two main elements of the Obama Administration's policy response: (1) humanitarian assistance to meet the needs of internally displaced Syrians and refugees in neighboring countries, and (2) continued political, economic, and nonlethal military support for national and local opposition groups. In addition, the Administration has requested funding to continue the Train and Equip program for vetted Syrians authorized by Congress in 2014. Planned changes to that program announced in October 2015 may create new funding requirements and priorities. Specifically, more funding may be used to equip vetted Syrian fighters than to train new Syrian units.

The FY2016 request would increase U.S. financial commitments toward responding to the crisis in Syria, including \$255 million for nonhumanitarian assistance, some of which may provide support to opposition groups within Syria. Of this amount, \$65 million is requested from the Overseas Contingency Operations-designated Peacekeeping Operations (PKO-OCO) account to provide nonlethal assistance to vetted members of the armed Syrian opposition, in parallel to the Department of Defense-led Train and Equip program, for which the Administration has requested

\$600 million in defense funding.¹⁶ The \$255 million requested also includes \$160 million in ESF-OCO funding to provide nonlethal assistance to other opposition groups and \$10 million in INCLE-OCO funding for justice sector support in opposition-held areas. Twenty million dollars from the base budget request in the Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining, and Related Program (NADR) account would support law enforcement training for opposition members, border security training, and weapons abatement initiatives.

Table I. Select U.S. Foreign Assistance for Syria, FY2013-FY2016 Request
(In thousands of current dollars; fiscal year denotes the year funds were appropriated or requested)

Account	FY2013 (Actual)	FY2014 (Actual)	FY2015 (Request)	FY2016 (Request)
ESF	20,780 (OCO)	8,250 (OCO)	125,000 (OCO)	160,000 (OCO)
INCLE	0	n.a.	10,000 (OCO)	10,000 (OCO)
NADR	0	n.a.	20,000	20,000
PKO	38,620 (OCO)	n.a.	0	65,000 (OCO)
FFP	18,338	n.a.	0	n.a.
Total	77,738	8,250	155,000	255,000

Source: Congressional committees, State Department and Foreign Operations, Congressional Budget Justification, FY2015-FY2016.

Notes: FY2015 estimates for Syria spending were not available as of July 2015. Funds appropriated in fiscal years prior to FY2013 have been reprogrammed to support U.S. assistance programs in Syria since 2011. n.a. = not available. Total figures above do not reflect all of the funding allocated for support to the Syrian opposition to date. The FY2016 Syria assistance request includes, but the table does not show, \$1.6 billion within Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA-OCO) and International Disaster Assistance (IDA-OCO) accounts expected to be used for humanitarian assistance related to the Syria conflict. Accounts listed are Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining, and Related Program (NADR), Economic Support Fund (ESF), International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE), Peacekeeping Operations (PKO), and Food for Peace (FFP).

Most of the requested Syria-related foreign operations funding would be used to address the impact of the crisis on Syria's neighbors. In congressional budget briefing materials, the Administration identified its entire \$1 billion FY2016 request for Jordan as helping to counter the Islamic State and mitigate Syria-related economic and security concerns. The Administration has also requested \$335 million to strengthen Iraq's counterterrorism capabilities and \$211 million to assist Lebanon in meeting the needs of Syrian refugees and addressing the IS threat. An additional \$1.6 billion in U.S. humanitarian assistance is being requested for the region to respond to the Syria-Iraq crises in FY2016. The Administration also has requested more than \$700 million in FY2016 CTPF funding to address terrorism threats in the Levant and Iraq; to counter Iranian-sponsored terrorism; and to mitigate foreign fighter flows.¹⁷

¹⁶ The State Department is requesting this \$65 million in Peacekeeping Operations-OCO (PKO-OCO) funding to provide nonlethal support to vetted, moderate armed opposition groups "to bolster their capacity, cohesion, and credibility" and "to strengthen linkages between armed and civilian actors." The Department of Defense is requesting \$715 million and \$600 million for train and equip programs for Iraqis and Syrians respectively. These requests would fund continuation of programs initiated under authorities and funds first provided in FY2015 Defense authorization and appropriations bills.

¹⁷ Administration FY2016 defense and foreign operations budget proposal documents.

Combatting the Islamic State in Syria

President Obama said in September 2014 that U.S. engagement in Syria would remain focused “narrowly” on assisting Syrians in combatting the Islamic State, while continuing “to look for opportunities” to support a political resolution to Syria’s conflict.¹⁸ As discussed above, U.S. and coalition airstrikes continue to target IS forces in some areas of Syria. These strikes have succeeded in assisting anti-IS forces in retaking some territory, but IS forces have advanced in other areas. In parallel, U.S. diplomatic officials have sought to more closely link the campaign against the Islamic State and other extremist groups to efforts to find a solution to the broader conflict. Specifically, the Administration has reiterated its view that any effort to defeat the Islamic State in Syria must be complemented by an effort to bring an end to the broader Syrian conflict that results in a transition away from Bashar al Asad’s rule. President Obama and senior U.S. officials continue to identify Asad’s presence as an aggravating factor and a contributor to the appeal of extremist groups. Russian and Syrian officials reject this view.

In this context, U.S. strikes against Islamic State targets and other terrorist groups in Syria are illuminating several dilemmas faced by the Administration. On the one hand, Syrian opposition forces who have been fighting the Islamic State welcome U.S. and coalition assistance in their campaign, but question why the United States does not take military action against the Asad government or take more robust action to degrade IS capabilities in Syria. Some Syrian political and military opposition forces appear to resent what they see as the United States’ narrow focus on fighting Sunni extremists in Syria and some have indicated that they may insist on broader support for their anti-Asad goals as a condition of working with the U.S.-backed coalition against the Islamic State.¹⁹ These parties also question why the United States and coalition partners are willing to act militarily to halt Islamic State atrocities but not to protect Syrian civilians from attacks by government forces or opposition groups.

The Administration’s policy initiatives have reflected its intention to pressure the Asad government into negotiating with opposition groups and fulfilling its pledges with regard to chemical weapons. At the same time, U.S. officials have appeared to be balancing these goals with concerns that a full-scale degradation of Islamic State forces or of pro-Asad forces could have unintended negative consequences. Specifically, U.S. officials may be concerned that a more aggressive campaign against the Islamic State may take military pressure off the Asad regime or create opportunities for other extremist groups such as the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al Nusra to advance. Similarly, U.S. officials have stated their fears that a precipitous collapse of the Asad government could allow extremists to advance and potentially to carry out atrocities.

Some U.S. critics of the Obama Administration’s approach to the conflict and terrorism threats in Syria argue that current U.S. strategy lacks effective Syrian partners willing or able to advance against Islamic State and/or Al Qaeda-affiliate-held territory on the ground.²⁰ These critics suggest the United States should either abandon its efforts to support a vetted partner force in

¹⁸ The President said, “our attitude towards Asad continues to be that you know, through his actions, through using chemical weapons on his own people, dropping barrel bombs that killed innocent children that he—he has foregone legitimacy. But when it comes to our policy and the coalition that we’re putting together, our focus specifically is on ISIL. It’s narrowly on ISIL.” President Obama interview with NBC News Meet the Press, September 6, 2014.

¹⁹ For one discussion of this issue, see Michael Weiss, “Exclusive: Syrian Rebels Backing Out of U.S. Fight Vs. ISIS,” *The Daily Beast*, May 31, 2015.

²⁰ For a selection of critical perspectives see, Michael Eisenstadt, “The War Against ISIL: In Search of a Viable Strategy,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 15, 2015; Frederic Hof, *Trouble in Train-and-Equip Land*, the *Atlantic Council*, July 9, 2015; Michael Rubin, “U.S. Policy towards the Islamic State after its Seizure of Ramadi and Palmyra,” *American Enterprise Institute*, June 3, 2015.

Syria or drastically expand the size and scope of those efforts to create a more formidable partner force. Russian attacks on anti-Asad forces also raise new questions about U.S. commitment to defend U.S.-backed forces.

Others critics argue that if U.S. strategy toward the Islamic State presumes that Asad's departure or demise is the key to resolving the underlying conflict that boosts extremists then the United States should prioritize efforts to secure Asad's departure over operations against the Islamic State. In the view of such critics, a Russia-backed reversal of Asad's recent fortunes may mean that extremist threats may grow rather than recede, and therefore the United States and its partners should do all they can to prevent Asad and his foreign supporters from succeeding. Supporters of this point of view may argue that achieving stated Administration objectives will likely require U.S. or other military forces to engage more aggressively to pressure Asad to accept a negotiated solution. In the current context, this could entail military confrontation with Asad's supporters, including Russia and Iran.

At present, senior Administration officials have told Congress and the press that the Administration is prepared to provide military protection to U.S.-trained Syrian participants of the Train and Equip program in their engagements with Islamic State forces and if they come under attack by other forces, including the Syrian government.²¹ The conference version of the FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act (H.R. 1735) would require Administration reporting on this issue. In the case of potential attack by Syrian government forces, for example, such protection could entail attacks against Syrian military units, now backed by Iran and Russia. Such attacks would have uncertain implications for the conflict in Syria and for anti-Islamic State operations in Iraq, where Asad's principal foreign supporter—Iran—is working in parallel with the coalition to combat the Islamic State.

Significant political and strategic questions may be raised by proposals that would further benefit certain nonstate actors (such as Kurdish groups) relative to national governments or that might unpredictably alter prevailing dynamics among adversaries in Syria. Opponents of deeper U.S. engagement with or support for Syrian combatants have argued that the United States cannot guarantee that provided material assistance will not fall in to the hands of extremist groups or the Asad government. Others fear that by arming and training Syrian opposition members overtly or by supporting such forces in the field, the United States may be making itself a combatant in Syria's civil war. Still others argue that the wider international precedents set by U.S. assistance for or intervention on behalf of trained opposition members risk undermining broader U.S. support for principles of nonintervention and sovereignty or policy goals in specific conflicts.

The timing and duration of anti-Islamic State military operations may also be influenced by calculations of the likely relative benefit of such operations for opposition and government forces in Syria. U.S. or other third-party military operations that seriously degrade Islamic State capabilities prior to improvements in the organization and capabilities of U.S.-preferred armed groups could result in substantial military gains for pro-Asad forces or other extremist groups.

U.S. Assistance to the Syrian Opposition

A broad set of bilateral U.S. sanctions on Syria existed prior to the outbreak of conflict, and some, such as those triggered by Syria's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism, have had a limiting

²¹ Testimony of Secretary of State John Kerry, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. March 11, 2015; and Briefing by Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter and CJCS General Martin E. Dempsey, May 7, 2015.

effect on the delivery of U.S. assistance in the country since 2011. The FY2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act (Section 7041[i]) of Division K of P.L. 113-76) significantly expanded the Administration's authority to provide nonlethal assistance in Syria for certain purposes using the Economic Support Fund (ESF) account. Such assistance had been restricted by a series of preexisting provisions of law (including some terrorism-related sanctions provisions) that required the President to assert emergency and contingency authorities (i.e., Sections 451 and 614 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended) to provide such assistance to the unarmed Syrian opposition and communities in Syria. Such assistance has been provided to select unarmed opposition groups on a periodic basis since May 2012, although the Administration has not publicly released a detailed accounting or list of recipients.

The FY2014 assistance authorities, as expanded and extended by the FY2015 Appropriations Act (Section 7041[h] of P.L. 113-235), make FY2015 and prior year ESF funding available “notwithstanding any other provision of law for nonlethal assistance for programs to address the needs of civilians affected by conflict in Syria, and for programs that seek to—

- (A) establish governance in Syria that is representative, inclusive, and accountable;
- (B) expand the role of women in negotiations to end the violence and in any political transition in Syria;
- (C) develop and implement political processes that are democratic, transparent, and adhere to the rule of law;
- (D) further the legitimacy of the Syrian opposition through cross-border programs;
- (E) develop civil society and an independent media in Syria;
- (F) promote economic development in Syria;
- (G) document, investigate, and prosecute human rights violations in Syria, including through transitional justice programs and support for nongovernmental organizations;
- (H) counter extremist ideologies; and
- (I) assist Syrian refugees whose education has been interrupted by the ongoing conflict to complete higher education requirements at regional academic institutions.

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

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

Foreign operations legislation under consideration in Congress would extend these authorities to some FY2016 funds. The House version of the FY2016 foreign operations appropriations bill (H.R. 2772) would make not less than \$175 million in FY2016 ESF, PKO, or INCLE funds available for authorized purposes in Syria. The Senate version would make an identical amount available and add authority to assist vulnerable populations in Syria and in neighboring countries.

Nonlethal Assistance to Armed Syrian Opposition Elements

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

In March 2013, the Administration notified Congress of its intent to use these special authorities to provide food rations and medical supplies to the National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC) and the Turkey-based Syrian Military Council (SMC). In September 2013, the Administration notified Congress of its intent to use these contingency authorities to provide additional “nonlethal commodities and services” to the SMC. In January 2014, the State Department referred to completed deliveries of food, medical equipment, and vehicles and “planned deliveries of satellite access equipment, laptops, radio communication equipment, and medical kits to moderate SMC elements” in a summary of its nonlethal support as of that date.²²

Administration officials have noted that U.S. efforts to deliver and monitor security assistance and other aid inside Syria have been hindered by border closures, ongoing fighting, and risks from extremist groups. Some U.S. nonlethal assistance to armed opposition groups has fallen into the hands of unintended recipients and has led to changes in delivery and oversight mechanisms.²³ Infighting among some opposition forces and the empowerment of the Islamic State in Syria have created further complications. Although the Islamic State has lost control of some border crossings, access issues may continue to hinder efforts to expand support to anti-IS forces.

Syria Train and Equip Program²⁴

The establishment of the Syria Train and Equip program by Congress in 2014 represented a further evolution of the involvement of the United States in supporting Syrian opposition groups. Several hundred U.S. military training personnel and a similar number of support personnel deployed in support of the program, which Congress authorized to train and equip vetted Syrians to fight the Islamic State, defend against terrorist threats, and promote “the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria.” According to Administration officials, the program originally was designed to recruit, vet, train, and equip a force of 5,400 Syrians per year for each of three years. However, challenges in implementation have significantly limited the program’s output in 2015.

The program has come under renewed scrutiny in the wake of reports that some of the small number of U.S. trainees that have completed the program have quit and others may have turned over equipment and weaponry to Jabhat al Nusra, the Al Qaeda affiliate that controls much of Idlib Province in northwest Syria. As of October 2015, U.S. officials reported that the program had produced 124 graduates, 70 of whom had returned to Syria in September 2015. Of the other

²² Office of the State Department Spokesperson, “The Syrian Crisis: U.S. Assistance and Support for the Transition,” January 17, 2014.

²³ Opposition infighting in late 2013 led to the capture of some nonlethal U.S. assistance by Islamist groups. U.S. officials subsequently revisited some delivery and monitoring mechanisms and worked to improve the reliability and security of delivery channels. Dasha Afanasieva and Humeyra Pamuk, “U.S., Britain suspend aid to north Syria after Islamists seize weapons store,” Reuters, December 11, 2013.

²⁴ For more on this program and related legislation, see CRS Report R43727, *Train and Equip Program for Syria: Authorities, Funding, and Issues for Congress*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted)

54, U.S. CENTCOM Commander General Lloyd Austin told the Senate Armed Services Committee that “four or five” remained “in the fight” against the Islamic State in Syria, after having come under Jabhat al Nusra attack in August.

In October 2015, Obama Administration officials announced plans for a significant shift in the program's focus toward equipping select vetted fighters inside Syria and away from training and equipping new units in neighboring countries. The announced shift from training and equipping of new vetted units toward equipping existing vetted armed groups carries some unique risks. Some Syrian opposition groups that have received U.S. equipment and weaponry to date have surrendered or lost these items to other groups, including to extremist groups such as Jabhat Al Nusra. The comprehensive training approach under the program's first iteration sought to create unit cohesion, groom and support reliable leaders to serve as U.S. partners, and inculcate a spirit of nationalist motivation among fighters in the place of local, sectarian, or ideological goals. The new approach could more rapidly and effectively equip anti-IS forces in some areas of Syria, but may entail some loss of opportunity to shape the development and practices of opposition forces that may play an important role in providing security in Syria for years to come. Moreover, the new emphasis on equipping units commanded by vetted leaders raises questions as to whether all members of a unit receiving U.S. weapons will be individually vetted going forward, particularly as group membership fluctuates in the course of the conflict. Increased reliance on vetted group leaders may reduce U.S. visibility and influence over which individual fighters receive U.S. weapons.

The anti-Islamic State focus of the program does not appear set to change under the Administration's new approach. President Obama and other U.S. officials have suggested that uncertainties among Syrian oppositionists and their regional backers about the program's purpose and about the level of U.S. support for anti-Asad efforts have limited the appeal and effectiveness of the program to date. A more direct equipping effort may compensate for concerns raised by some Syrian opposition members and their U.S. supporters about the program being insufficient in size and speed. Others disagree strategically with President Obama and argue that U.S.-backed forces should be trained for offensive operations against the Syrian government.

The Administration has not announced changes to its FY2016 Defense appropriations request for \$600 million in program funding. Approved FY2015 funds for the program have likely been obligated. The House version of the FY2016 defense appropriations act under consideration as of July 2015 (H.R. 2685) would appropriate \$600 million, and the Senate version (S. 1558) would realign some of the requested funds to other operations and maintenance accounts, providing \$531 million for a new Syria train and equip account. The conference version of the FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act (H.R. 1735) would authorize the appropriation of \$531 million for the program, and would create new reporting and certification requirements relative to the provision of U.S. support to U.S.-trained fighters in the event of their attack by pro-Asad or Islamic State forces.

Other Reported U.S. Assistance

Then-Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel said in a September 2013 hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Administration was taking steps to provide arms to some Syrian rebels under covert action authorities.²⁵ Several press accounts citing unnamed U.S.

²⁵ Secretary Hagel said, “it was June of this year that the president made the decision to support lethal assistance to the opposition. As you all know, we have been very supportive with hundreds of millions of dollars of nonlethal assistance. The vetting process that Secretary Kerry noted has been significant, but—I’ll ask General Dempsey if he wants to add (continued...)”

government sources have described reported U.S. and partner nation efforts to that effect.²⁶ To date, other U.S. officials have not publicly acknowledged any such efforts or publicly described which elements of the Syrian opposition may have received U.S. training or support via any such channels, what any training may have entailed, what types of weaponry may have been provided, or what safeguards may be in place to monitor the disposition of equipment and the actions of any U.S.-trained or equipped personnel. One June 2015 article discussed differences of opinion among Members of Congress about future funding for the reported program.²⁷ In October 2015, unnamed U.S. officials were cited in press reports that suggested that Russia was actively targeting Syrian opposition groups that had received covert support from the United States.²⁸

U.S.-Origin Weaponry and the Syria Conflict

Since April 2014, various anti-Asad forces have released videos of their operatives loading and firing what appears to be U.S.-origin anti-tank weaponry in Syria.²⁹ In April 2014, an official affiliated with the now-defunct opposition group Harakat Hazm told the *New York Times* that “friendly states” had provided “modest numbers” of the weapons.³⁰ The commander of the group told the *Washington Post* that those who supplied the missiles had U.S. government approval and said the shipment suggested “a change in the U.S. attitude toward allowing Syria’s friends to support the Syrian people.”³¹

Asked in April 2014 about the reported shipments and use of U.S. origin weaponry by Syrian rebels, U.S. National Security Council spokeswoman Bernadette Meehan said, “The United States is committed to building the capacity of the moderate opposition, including through the provision of assistance to vetted members of the moderate armed opposition. As we have consistently said, we are not going to detail every single type of our assistance.”³² In May 2014, an unnamed senior Administration official reiterated that formulation to members of the press in a background briefing, while stating that “asymmetry which exists on the ground militarily, unfortunately, between the regime and the moderate opposition is problematic for the emergence of the kinds of political conditions necessary for a serious political process. And we and others are focused on that.”³³

Specific public information is lacking about the sources of U.S.-origin weaponry and which units or personnel may have continuing access to U.S.-origin weaponry.³⁴ In 2015, a range of opposition groups largely affiliated with the Free Syrian Army movement have published videos that purport to depict their personnel firing U.S.-origin anti-tank

(...continued)

anything—but we, the Department of Defense, have not been directly involved in this. This is, as you know, a covert action. And, as Secretary Kerry noted, probably to [go] into much more detail would—would require a closed or classified hearing.”

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

²⁷ Miller and DeYoung, “Secret CIA effort in Syria faces large funding cut,” *Washington Post*, June 12, 2015.

²⁸ Adam Entous, “U.S. Sees Russian Drive Against CIA-Backed Rebels in Syria,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 5, 2015.

²⁹ See Harakat Hazm YouTube Channel, April 15, 2014, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5x5Q4aTGvu0>.

³⁰ Ben Hubbard, “Syrian Election Announced; Rebels Report New Weapons,” *New York Times*, April 21, 2014.

³¹ Liz Sly, “Syrian rebels who received first U.S. missiles of war see shipment as ‘an important first step,’” *Washington Post*, April 27, 2014.

³² Tom Bowman and Alice Fordham, “CIA Is Quietly Ramping Up Aid To Syrian Rebels, Sources Say,” National Public Radio (Online), April 23, 2014

³³ Transcript of Background Briefing on Syria by Senior Administration Official, U.S. State Department, May 5, 2014.

³⁴ Section 3(a)(2) of the Arms Export Control Act (22 U.S.C. 2753 (a)(2)) applies obligations, restrictions, and possible penalties for misuse of U.S.-origin equipment to any retransfer by foreign recipients of U.S.-supplied defense articles, defense services, and related technical data to another nation. If such a retransfer occurred in the absence of prior U.S. approval, then the nation making such a transfer could be determined to be in violation of its agreement with the United States not to take such an action without prior consent from the U.S. government.

weapons. This includes groups targeted by Russian airstrikes, some of whom have subsequently posted footage of their fighters using such weaponry to repel follow-on ground attacks by pro-Asad forces.³⁵ Islamist groups also have posted similar videos and images of captured U.S.-origin anti-tank weapon stocks, including the Ansar al Islam Front,³⁶ Jabhat al Nusra,³⁷ and the Islamic State.³⁸

Chemical Weapons and Disarmament³⁹

A major policy concern of the United States has been the use or loss of control of chemical weapons stocks in Syria during the ongoing civil war. Syrian opposition sources and Syrian government officials have repeatedly traded allegations concerning the use of chemical weapons and toxic chemicals as weapons of war since late 2012. Several governments—including the governments of Syria and the United States—have submitted allegations of chemical attacks to the U.N. Secretary General and/or the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).⁴⁰ The United States, the United Nations,⁴¹ and other countries have assessed that the Syrian government has used chemical weapons repeatedly against opposition forces and civilians in the country. Expert teams affiliated with the U.N. Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic and the OPCW Fact Finding Mission in Syria have investigated some of these allegations and have found evidence that in some cases confirms and in others suggests that chemical weapons and/or toxic chemicals have been used in attacks. Syrian civilians, opposition fighters, and military personnel have been targeted in alleged attacks.⁴²

The largest-scale use of chemical weapons to date was reportedly an August 21, 2013, nerve gas attack, which the U.S. government estimated killed over 1,400 people.⁴³ In August 2013, the Obama Administration had threatened military action against Syria in response to alleged nerve gas attacks by Syrian government forces. As part of a diplomatic solution to the crisis based on a U.S.-Russian joint proposal, the Administration withdrew the threat of military force and Syria agreed to give up its chemical weapons and join the international Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which bans the use of any toxic chemicals in warfare and requires Syria to destroy all of

³⁵ See Tajammu al Izza YouTube Channel, October 1, 2015, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqGuUbVtGI8>.

³⁶ See Ansar al Islam Front YouTube Channel, August 10, 2014, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9pxIFUKEZg> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QclDMPQkPw>.

³⁷ Umberto Bacchi, “Syria: al-Qaeda Nusra Front shows off huge cache of US weapons seized from moderate Harakat Hazm rebels,” *International Business Times*, March 4, 2015; Michael Smallwood, “Captured TOW 2A missiles employed in Syria,” *Armament Research Services*, 2015

³⁸ OSC Report TRR2015062676424947, “ISIL Deploys Apparent TOW Missile System Against Regime Forces in Al Hasakah,” June 26, 2015.

³⁹ Prepared by Mary Beth Nikitin, Specialist in Nonproliferation.

⁴⁰ Reports by U.N. Member States have been made via confidential correspondence, such as letters containing allegations described generally in the December 2013 final report of U.N. Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic (the U.N. Mission). See U.N. Mission, Final Report, December 12, 2013, pp. 2-6.

⁴¹ The U.N. Mission to investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic released its report on September 16, 2013, concluding that surface-to-surface rockets containing the chemical weapons nerve agent sarin were used in the Ghouta area of Damascus against civilians on a “relatively large scale.” The U.N. investigative mission was not tasked with assigning culpability for the attacks.

⁴² See U.N. Mission, Final Report, December 12, 2013; and, OPCW Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) in Syria, Third Report, December 18, 2014.

⁴³ Government Assessment of the Syrian Government’s Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013, White House Office of the Press Secretary, August 30, 2013.

its chemical weapons stocks and production facilities under international supervision. U.N. Security Council Resolution 2118 (2013) further mandated that Syria give up all its chemical weapons under Chapter VII provisions of the U.N. Charter.⁴⁴

At the start of the war, Syria had more than 1,000 metric tons of chemical warfare agents and precursor chemicals, including several hundred metric tons of the nerve agent sarin, several hundred metric tons of mustard agent in ready-to-use form, and several metric tons of the nerve agent VX. The international community oversaw the removal and destruction of these chemical weapons agents from Syria, and, as of September 24, 2015, 98.8% of all Category 1 and 2 declared chemicals had been destroyed.⁴⁵ Destruction of chemical weapons facilities is still underway,⁴⁶ and the United States has raised questions over whether Syria has declared all of its chemical weapons stocks. The OPCW's Declaration Assessment Team (DAT) continues to investigate these outstanding issues through interviews and lab analysis of samples from site visits.⁴⁷

U.N. and OPCW investigations conducted to date have not been tasked with assigning responsibility for alleged attacks. However, on August 7, 2015, the U.N. Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2235, which established a new U.N.-OPCW 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.⁴⁸ On September 10, the United Nations Security Council adopted the Secretary General's proposal for the establishment of the UN-OPCW JIM, which is to have access anywhere in Syria. The Secretary General appointed Virginia Gamba of Argentina to head the independent three-member panel that will lead the JIM. This mission will likely be complicated by the security situation on the ground.

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.⁴⁹ The U.N.

⁴⁴ Chapter VII of the UN Charter authorizes the use of punitive measures such as sanctions or military force.

⁴⁵ Progress in the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme, September 23, 2015 in Letter dated September 24, 2015 from the United Nations Secretary-General to the President of the Security Council, S/2015/737.

⁴⁶ Ibid. As of September 24, 2015, the OPCW reported that with respect to the 12 chemical weapons production facilities (CWPFs) [seven aircraft hangars and five underground structures], five of seven hangars had been destroyed along with all five underground structures Security conditions precluded safe access to two hangars.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ 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...”

⁴⁹ On August 7, the Permanent Representative of Syria to the United Nations Dr. Bashar Jaafari told the United Nations Security Council that, “the Syrian Government and the Syrian army have never used chemical weapons, and never will. Contrariwise, Syria's army and its civilians have been targeted with toxic chemicals and chemical weapons, including chlorine gas, by armed terrorist groups, such as *Daesh* [Arabic acronym for ISIL] and the Al-Nusra Front, in many parts of Syria...” He accused unspecified investigation missions of having “based their work on false, fabricated statements made by parties well known to all. Those missions have carried out partial and biased investigations — outside Syria — without a modicum of coordination with the Syrian authorities.” (U.N. Document S/PV.7501.) The U.N. and OPCW investigative missions have worked inside Syria with the permission of the Syrian government. In 2011, the U.N. Human Rights Council established an Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic that has reported extensively on the conflict, including on alleged chemical attacks. The Commission uses a “reasonable grounds to believe” standard of evidence and relies on first-hand accounts from Syrians now in (continued...)

representatives of the United States, France, and the United Kingdom continue to cite information they believe suggests Syrian government complicity in conducting ongoing chemical attacks, particularly with chlorine. There also have been additional press reports on possible use of mustard gas in Syria and Iraq by IS fighters.⁵⁰ U.S. Brigadier General Kevin Killea, chief of staff for military operations in Iraq and Syria, said that the United States was conducting testing to confirm these reports, which to date have not been officially confirmed by U.S. or United Nations investigations.

Outlook

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

Over the longer term, Syria's diversity and the interplay of its conflict and regional sectarian rivalries raise the prospect of continued violence even in the wake of the type of "managed transition" President Obama identified as a goal at the U.N. General Assembly in September. President Obama said in February that, "The Syrian civil war will only end when there is an inclusive political transition and a government that serves Syrians of all ethnicities and religions."⁵¹ The presence and power in Syria of armed groups directly opposed to this formulation suggests that the conflict could persist after any negotiated settlement seeking to replace the current Asad-led government with a government of national unity or other inclusive formulation. Political opposition coalitions appear to lack both grass-roots support and, because of their lack of material control over the most powerful armed groups, they appear to lack the ability to guarantee security commitments that might presumably be part of a negotiated settlement.

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

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neighboring countries, remote interviews, and other publicly available information.

⁵⁰ "U.S. Tests Show Mustard Gas Traces in Islamic State Attack," *The Washington Post*, August 21, 2015.

⁵¹ President Obama, Remarks at the Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, Washington, DC, February 19, 2015.

Author Contact Information

(name redacted), Coordinator
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs
[redacted]@crs.loc.gov , 7-....

(name redacted)
Specialist in Nonproliferation
[redacted]@crs.loc.gov7-....

(name redacted)
Analyst in Middle Eastern and African Affairs
[redacted]@crs.loc.gov7-....

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