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Flashpoints in Syria and Iraq Create Challenges for U.S. Policy

Interconnected active and latent armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq involving a range of domestic groups and international actors could further destabilize the region and create evolving policy challenges for U.S. policymakers. Related instability gives Iran opportunities to expand its influence and could lead to resurgence of the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS/ISIL), which has lost control over nearly all of the territory it once occupied. Several incidents in 2018 have focused attention on this complex, dynamic environment, complicating U.S. priorities and policies.

Israeli Strikes in Syria

Since 2012, Israel reportedly has conducted dozens of airstrikes in Syria. Initially, these focused mainly on preventing the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon. However, because Iran-backed forces and Russia have strengthened the Syrian regime's position considerably since late 2015, Iran's posture toward Israel from Syria appears to have grown more assertive. Consequently, Israeli strikes in the past two years have also focused on preventing Iran from establishing bases or weapons factories in Syria, or "opening new terror fronts" along Israel's northern border. A February 2018 cross-border incident highlighted the possibility that Israel's limited strikes against Iran-backed forces to enforce its "redlines" could expand into wider conflict, particularly in cases of miscalculation by one or both sides.

The reported exchange of fire, apparently sparked by the entry of an Iranian drone into Israeli airspace, caused Israel to down the drone and retaliate against its Iranian operators in central Syria. When a Syrian air defense battery shot down an Israeli F-16 in Israeli airspace (the first loss of an Israeli jet in combat since 1982), Israel responded by destroying a number of Syrian air defense units and Iranian facilities in Syria. Reports indicate that Israel's reprisal may have been more extensive, if not for a Russian demand to limit its scope. Advanced Russian air defenses deployed in Syria have the potential to challenge Israeli air superiority. Actions since February seem to indicate that neither Israel nor Iran and its allies seek a broader military confrontation at present, but miscalculation remains a risk.

Conflict Along the Euphrates

The U.S.-supported Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have captured much of northeastern Syria north of the Euphrates River from the Islamic State. Forces aligned with the government of Syrian President Bashar al Asad, including from Russia and Iran, have taken much of the territory south of the river, leading to a situation in which the two sides share a fluid de facto line of control (or "deconfliction line") that mostly corresponds to the river. Clashes between the two sides fuel risks of a more general escalation. Such clashes include a February 2018 incident near Deir ez Zor that reportedly involved a large column of Asad-linked forces advancing on SDF positions outside the city near

lucrative oil fields. U.S. force protection strikes in response reportedly killed dozens of fighters, including some Russian nationals. Russian officials stated that no Russian armed forces personnel were killed, and suggested that the Asad-linked forces did not coordinate their attack with Moscow.

Turkish Operations in Afrin

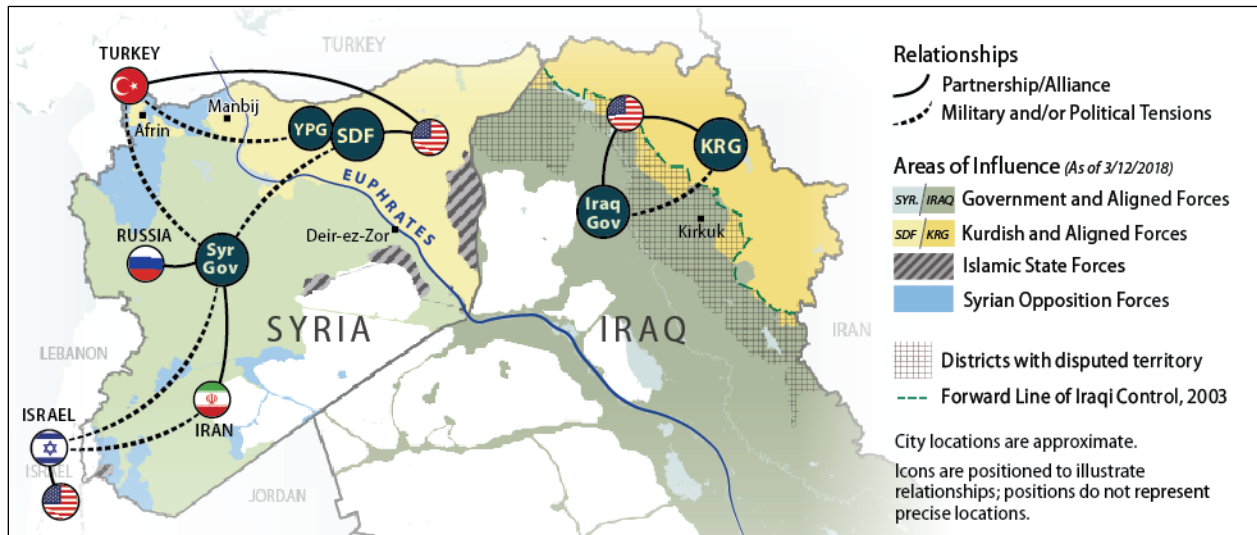
Turkey's military operations in Syria began with an offensive against IS-held territory in August 2016, and expanded to the Kurdish-held territory of Afrin in January 2018. Afrin is administered by the People's Protection Units (Kurdish acronym YPG), a group that Turkey views as a direct extension of the PKK (a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization that has waged a decades-long insurgency against Turkey). Asad-linked militias may be indirectly aiding the YPG in Afrin, but giving the regime a foothold there could undermine the Kurdish goal of autonomy.

Outside of Afrin, the United States has partnered with the YPG—whose commanders and fighters have been core elements of SDF forces—against the Islamic State. Turkish officials have stated their intention to extend military operations eastward from Afrin, and the town of Manbij has emerged as a focal point of U.S.-Turkish tensions. (Turkish officials argue that U.S. promises made in 2016 that YPG elements would withdraw from Manbij have not been fulfilled.) U.S. forces have deployed in and around Manbij since at least March 2017. A series of high-level U.S.-Turkey meetings that took place in February 2018 established a mechanism for resolving tensions. Doing so may prove difficult given apparent gaps between U.S. and Turkish priorities in Syria.

Security and Internal Disputes in Iraq

Iraqi leaders declared victory against the Islamic State in December 2017 but face ongoing IS insurgent attacks. Tensions also persist between the national government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)—the United States' principal security partners.

In September 2017, the KRG held a referendum on independence, in spite of opposition from the U.S. and Iraqi governments and Iraq's neighbors. Kurds overwhelmingly backed independence, but in October 2017 the Iraqi government returned security forces, including volunteer Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), to long-disputed areas between the constitutionally recognized Kurdistan region and the rest of Iraq. This included areas secured by Kurdish forces after the 2014 IS offensive, such as oil-rich Kirkuk. PMF units are set to be incorporated into Iraq's military chain of command, but the presence of some Iran-supported Shia PMF units may exacerbate inter-communal tensions. National elections in Iraq planned for May could reshape the balance of political forces, with implications for Baghdad-KRG relations, KRG leadership, stabilization, and the continued deployment of U.S. military personnel.

Figure 1. Entangled Regional Conflicts

Source: CRS using ESRI and State Department data, Areas of Influence derived from IHS Markit Conflict Monitor data, March 12, 2018.

Possible IS Resurgence

In February 2018, the U.S. intelligence community told Congress that the Islamic State “has started—and probably will maintain—a robust insurgency in Iraq and Syria as part of a long-term strategy to ultimately enable the reemergence of its so-called caliphate.”

In Iraq, U.S. officials describe the Islamic State as having reverted to an “underground insurgency,” and reports describe ongoing clashes between government forces and IS fighters in northern and western areas. Stabilization and reconstruction needs are considerable, and relative unity among Iraqis that came from confronting the Islamic State has frayed in the run-up to national elections.

Officials from members of the U.S.-led anti-IS coalition have noted that despite the Islamic State’s loss of territory in Syria, it retains the ability to launch successful surprise offensives and retake ground from Syrian government forces. Moreover, some IS fighters have fled west into Syrian government-controlled territory, where coalition officials have stated that they do not intend to operate. This raises the possibility that the group could reemerge in areas of Syria outside the coalition’s operating space. U.S. officials have warned that the Turkish operation in Afrin is “detracting from our efforts against ISIS” by diverting SDF attention and resources, leading to an “operational pause” in the anti-IS campaign. Clashes between the SDF and Asad-linked forces, like those in Deir ez Zor, further reduce the space for effective anti-IS cooperation.

Potential Questions for Congress

The Trump Administration is requesting additional funding and extensions of existing authorities to address some of these interrelated security challenges. As Members of Congress fund, help shape, and oversee executive branch actions, they may consider some questions, including:

U.S. Strategy. What are the principal U.S. strategic interests in Syria and Iraq? How do actions in pursuit of some goals shape the context in which others are pursued?

U.S. Military Presence. What missions have U.S. forces been given in Syria and Iraq, and how many U.S. personnel

are necessary to accomplish those missions? What authorities govern the presence of U.S. forces in both countries, and to what extent, if any, should they be revisited to reflect political or military developments?

Security Cooperation. What support should the United States provide to its state and non-state partners? On what terms? How effective are measures intended to prevent weapons provided to U.S. partners from falling into the hands of third parties (e.g., PMF or IS) or from being used against other U.S. partners (e.g., SDF and Turkey)? How can the United States reconcile tactical support for the YPG in Syria with Turkish concerns? Can Israel sufficiently prevent, deter, or defend against missile threats from Iran, Hezbollah, and others? Are current Jordanian capabilities sufficient to defend against incursions into its territory and/or airspace (by IS, Iran, or others)?

Reconstruction. To what extent and on what terms should the United States provide grants or loans for reconstruction efforts in Syria and Iraq? What are the reasons (strategic, legal, political, moral, or otherwise) for or against? What considerations should underpin how the U.S. determines partners through whom it might disperse development and reconstruction assistance in Syria and Iraq?

Regional Dynamics. How much of a priority is addressing Iran’s influence in the region? Should the U.S. goal be containment of Iran, or rollback of its regional reach? What means should the United States use, if any, to counter Iran? How might Iran respond? Does Iran’s presence in Syria complicate Israel’s traditional defense posture/prerogatives? How likely and imminent is conflict between Iran-backed forces and Israel? What form(s) might such a conflict take? How do Iranian and Russian interests in the region align with each other and with those of the Asad regime? How do those interests differ?

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