

The “Islamic State” Crisis and U.S. Policy

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Summary

The Islamic State is a transnational Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist group that has expanded its control over areas of parts of Iraq and Syria since 2013. It threatens the governments of both countries and potentially several other countries in the region, and has drawn increased attention from the international community. There is debate over the degree to which the Islamic State organization might represent a direct terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland or to U.S. facilities and personnel in the region.

The forerunner of the Islamic State (IS) was part of the insurgency against coalition forces in Iraq, and the organization has in the years since the 2011 U.S. withdrawal from Iraq expanded its control over significant areas of both Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State has thrived in the disaffected Sunni tribal areas of Iraq and in the remote provinces of Syria torn by the civil war. Since early 2014, Islamic State-led forces, supported by Sunni Arab tribalists and groups linked to ousted Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, have advanced along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, seizing multiple population centers including Mosul, one of Iraq's largest cities. Since then, IS forces have massacred Syrian adversaries and Iraqi civilians, often from ethnic or religious minorities, and recently executed two American journalists who the group had captured while they were working in Syria. As of October 2014, Islamic State fighters also have come close to capturing a key Kurdish enclave in northern Syria. The Islamic State's tactics have drawn the ire of the international community, increasing U.S. attention on Iraq's political problems and on the civil war in Syria.

On September 10, President Obama announced a series of actions intended to "degrade, and ultimately destroy" the Islamic State organization. The United States is leading and seeking to expand a multilateral coalition that is undertaking direct military action, providing advice, training and equipment for partner ground forces in Iraq and Syria, gathering and sharing intelligence, and using financial measures against the Islamic State. The objective of these measures is to progressively shrink the geographic and political space, manpower, and financial resources available to the organization.

At the same time, the U.S. effort to show progress against the Islamic State, and the recruitment of regional partners, raises questions of whether the U.S. mission and commitment might expand. The Administration has ruled out deploying combat forces to either Iraq or Syria, but it has not necessarily ruled out providing forward aircraft controllers, additional military advisors, or other related ground military assets. Some experts assert that coalition partners inside Iraq and Syria—Iraqi government forces and select Syrian opposition groups—are too weak to defeat the Islamic State and will eventually require help from U.S. combat troops. Several of the regional coalition members apparently seek an expansion of the U.S.-led mission to include an effort to oust President Bashar al Asad of Syria, arguing that the Islamic State cannot be defeated until the Syrian political situation is altered.

For details on Islamic State operations in Iraq and U.S. policy toward Iraq since the 2003 U.S. invasion, see CRS Report RS21968, *Iraq: Politics, Governance, and Human Rights*, by Kenneth Katzman. For further information on the Islamic State's operations in Syria, see CRS Report RL33487, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, coordinated by Christopher M. Blanchard.

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The Islamic State

The Islamic State (IS, aka the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL/ISIS) is a transnational Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist group that has expanded its control over areas of northwestern Iraq and northeastern Syria since 2013, threatening the security of both countries and drawing increased attention from the international community. The Islamic State has thrived in the disaffected Sunni Muslim-inhabited areas of Iraq and in the remote provinces of Syria torn by the civil war. The Islamic State's tactics have drawn the ire of the international community, increasing U.S. attention on Iraq's political problems and on the civil war in Syria.

Although the Islamic State is considered a direct threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East, it is unclear if it currently poses a significant direct threat to U.S. homeland security. In September 2014, then-National Counterterrorism Center Director Matthew Olsen stated that the group poses "a direct and significant threat to us—and to Iraqi and Syrian civilians—in the region and potentially to us here at home."¹ Olsen said that the group's "strategic goal is to establish an Islamic caliphate through armed conflict with governments it considers apostate—including Iraq, Syria, and the United States." Olsen further said that "we have no credible information that ISIL is planning to attack the U.S.," and highlighted potential threats posed by foreign fighters with Western passports. According to Olsen, U.S. counterterrorism officials "remain mindful of the possibility that an ISIL-sympathizer—perhaps motivated by online propaganda—could conduct a limited, self-directed attack here at home with no warning." However, Olsen noted that, "In our view, any threat to the U.S. homeland from these types of extremists is likely to be limited in scope and scale." A CIA spokesperson provided an updated estimate of the IS organization's size in September 2014, saying the group could muster 20,000 to 31,500 individuals. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey told the Senate Armed Services Committee on September 16 that two-thirds of the Islamic State organization's personnel remain in Syria. U.S. officials report that as many as 15,000 foreign fighters from 80 countries have travelled to Syria, including more than 1,000 Europeans, and more than 100 U.S. citizens, with approximately 12 Americans believed to be currently fighting there.

Statements and media materials released by the Islamic State reflect an uncompromising, exclusionary worldview and a relentless ambition. Statements by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and Islamic State spokesman Abu Mohammed al Adnani feature sectarian calls for violence and identify Shiites, non-Muslims, and unsupportive Sunnis as enemies in the group's struggle to establish "the Islamic State" and to revive their vision of "the caliphate."² The group describes Iraqi Shiites derogatorily as "rejectionists" and "polytheists" and paints the Iraqi government as a puppet of Iran. Similar ire is aimed at Syrian Alawites and the Asad government, although some sources allege that operatives for the Islamic State and its antecedents have benefitted from evolving financial and security arrangements with Damascus that started during the 2003-2011 U.S. military presence in Iraq.

In July 2012, Al Baghdadi warned U.S. leaders that "the mujahidin have set out to chase the affiliates of your armies that have fled.... You will see them in your own country, God willing.

¹ Remarks at the Brookings Institution by NCTC Director Matthew G. Olsen, September 3, 2014.

² OSC Report GMP20130409405003, "ISI Emir Declares ISI, Al-Nusrah Front: 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant,'" translated from *Ansar al Mujahideen Network*, April 9, 2013.

The war with you has just begun.”³ In January 2014, Al Baghdadi threatened the United States directly, saying, “Know, O defender of the Cross, that a proxy war will not help you in the Levant, just as it will not help you in Iraq. Soon, you will be in direct conflict—God permitting—against your will.”⁴ English language propaganda and recruiting material released by the group in connection with its recent executions of U.S. citizens James Foley and Stephen Sotloff suggest the group is attempting to portray itself as responding to U.S. aggression, a posture adopted by its predecessors and now rivals in Al Qaeda.

Background

The Islamic State’s ideological and organizational roots lie in the forces built and led by the late Abu Musab al Zarqawi in Iraq from 2002 through 2006—*Tawhid wal Jihad* (Monotheism and Jihad) and Al Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers (aka Al Qaeda in Iraq, or AQ-I). Following Zarqawi’s death at the hands of U.S. forces in June 2006, AQ-I leaders repackaged the group as a coalition known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). ISI lost its two top leaders in 2010 and was weakened, but not eliminated, by the time of the U.S. withdrawal in 2011. Under the leadership of Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al Badri al Samarra’i (aka Abu Bakr al Baghdadi),⁵ ISI rebuilt its capabilities. By early 2013, the group was conducting dozens of deadly attacks a month inside Iraq. The precise nature of ISI’s relationship to Al Qaeda leaders from 2006 onward is unclear. In recent months, Islamic State leaders have stated their view that their group “is not and has never been an offshoot of Al Qaeda,”⁶ and that, given that they view themselves as a state and a sovereign political entity, they have given leaders of the Al Qaeda organization deference rather than pledges of obedience.

In April 2013, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi announced his intent to merge his forces in Iraq and Syria with those of the Syria-based Jabhat al Nusra, under the name the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS). Jabhat al Nusra and Al Qaeda leaders rejected the merger, underscoring growing tensions among Sunni extremists in the region.

Additional analysis can be found in: CRS Report RL33487, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, coordinated by Christopher M. Blanchard; and CRS Report RS21968, *Iraq: Politics, Governance, and Human Rights*, by Kenneth Katzman.

The Situation in Iraq

Many observers initially assessed that the Iraqi government was able to contain an IS-led insurrection in Iraq’s Anbar Province that captured the city of Fallujah and parts of the provincial capital of Ramadi in January 2014. Such forecasts were upended on June 10, 2014, when the Islamic State captured the northern city of Mosul amid mass surrenders and desertions by ISF officers and personnel. According to one expert, about 60 out of 243 Iraqi army combat battalions

³ OSC Report GMP20120721586002, “Islamic State of Iraq Amir Calls on Sunni Tribes to ‘Repent,’” July 21, 2012.

⁴ OSC Report TRR2014011980831299, “Al-Furqan Establishment Releases Audio Statement by ISIL Emir Condemning ‘War’ Against Group,” translated from *Al Minbar al I’lami Jihadist Forum*, January 19, 2014.

⁵ Al Baghdadi reportedly was arrested and detained by U.S. forces in Iraq.

⁶ OSC Report TRN2014051234500562, “Al-Furqan Releases ISIL Al-Adnani’s Message Criticizing Al-Zawahiri, Refusing to Leave Syria,” Twitter, May 11-12, 2014.

could not be accounted for.⁷ The Islamic State offensive was reportedly joined, supported, or enabled by Sunni tribal fighters, former members of the late Saddam Hussein's Baath Party and military, and other Sunni residents.⁸ The Sunni support for the offensive, despite reservations among many Sunnis about the Islamic State's brutal tactics against opponents and its intention to impose its version of Islamic law, appeared to reflect broad Sunni dissatisfaction with the government of Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki.⁹

After taking Mosul, the IS-led fighters advanced to Saddam's hometown of Tikrit and other cities, and into Diyala Province, which has roughly equal numbers of Sunnis and Shiites. In the course of the offensive, IS and allied fighters looted banks, freed prisoners, and reportedly captured a substantial amount of U.S.-supplied military equipment, such as HMMWVs ("Humvees") and artillery equipped with Global Positioning System (GPS) targeting systems.¹⁰ Islamic State-led fighters captured the city of Tal Afar west of Mosul on June 16 and reached the outskirts of Baqubah, capital of Diyala, about 38 miles northeast of Baghdad, by June 17. In mid-July, IS members in Mosul reportedly ordered remaining Christians there to leave the city, and most apparently complied.¹¹ After initially establishing a relatively quiet front line with territory controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and its *peshmerga* militia fighters, IS-led fighters went on the offensive against Kurdish-controlled territory in early August, as discussed below.

Shiite militias mobilized to try to help the government prevent IS forces from reaching Baghdad. The Iraqi capital is reportedly about 80% Shiite-inhabited, and many Shiites there and from elsewhere volunteered for militia service—in part answering a call by Iraq's leading Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani—to help the ISF. With support from these militias, the government forces regrouped to some extent and attempted some unsuccessful limited counterattacks on Tikrit and cities near it.

The ISF collapse in the north enabled the *peshmerga* (Kurdish militia) to capture Kirkuk and large nearby oil fields abandoned by the ISF. The Kurds have long sought to control that oil-rich region, which they claim is historic Kurdish territory, and to affiliate the province with their autonomous region run by a Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). On July 11, *peshmerga* reportedly seized control of two key oil fields near Kirkuk from a state-controlled company. Many experts assert that the Kurds are unlikely to willingly return control of Kirkuk and related areas to the central government.¹² The *peshmerga* gains prompted renewed discussion among KRG leaders about seeking outright independence from Iraq. In early July, KRG President Masoud Barzani asked the KRG parliament to plan a referendum on independence.¹³ However, Kurdish leaders subsequently stated that the crisis the KRG faces from the Islamic State organization has caused KRG leaders to shelve the independence effort, at least temporarily. KRG

⁷ Michael Knights in "Iraq's Dire Situation," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 17, 2014.

⁸ Tim Arango, "Uneasy Alliance Gives Insurgents an Edge in Iraq," *New York Times*, June 19, 2014.

⁹ "Unlikely Allies Aid Militants in Iraq," *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2014.

¹⁰ Mitchell Prothero, "Iraqi Army Remains on Defensive as Extent of June Debacle Becomes Clearer," McLatchey Wire Service, July 14, 2014.

¹¹ Alissa Rubin, "ISIS Expels Last Iraqi Christians from Mosul," *New York Times*, July 19, 2014.

¹² Author conversations with expert on the Iraqi Kurds, June-August 2014.

¹³ For more information on the Kurds and the potential for the Iraqi Kurds to declare independence, see CRS Insight IN10105, *The Kurds and Possible Iraqi Kurdish Independence*, by Jim Zanotti and Kenneth Katzman.

leaders probably view the independence issue primarily as leverage in disputes with Baghdad, such as those over KRG oil exports and revenue-sharing.

The indirect benefits to the Kurds of the Islamic State offensive proved illusory when Islamic State-led forces advanced into territory controlled by the *peshmerga* in early August. In the face of superior Islamic State firepower, the relatively lightly armed Kurdish forces retreated from several towns inhabited mostly by Christians and other Iraqi minorities, particularly the Yazidis. The Yazidis are mostly Kurdish speaking and practice a mix of ancient religions, including Zoroastrianism, which held sway in Iran before the advent of Islam.¹⁴ Fearing Islamic State threats to execute them if they did not convert to Islam, an estimated 35,000–50,000 Yazidis fled to Sinjar Mountain.¹⁵ By August 8, Islamic State-led fighters had advanced to within about 40 miles of the KRG capital of Irbil, causing some flight from the city, and heightening U.S. concern about the security of U.S. diplomatic and military personnel there. Reports of human rights violations by the Islamic State emerged, including murder, kidnappings, forced conversions, and physical and sexual assault.¹⁶ Islamic State-led forces captured Iraq's largest dam, the Mosul Dam, as well, which Kurdish leaders assert could have been damaged or used by the Islamic State to flood wide areas of northern and central Iraq.

Subsequently, U.S. and allied efforts have sought to assist the ISF and *peshmerga* reverse the IS gains. Some successes have been achieved in northern Iraq, whereas the ISF has continued to lose ground in Anbar Province and IS infiltration and mortar fire on Baghdad has increased in spite of the U.S.-led campaign to assist the ISF. Specifics are discussed below.

Iraq Government Alterations

The crisis contributed to major change in Iraq's leadership, in part an Iraqi response to stated U.S. concerns that Prime Minister Maliki's policies had alienated the Sunni Arab community. Elections for the Iraqi Council of Representatives (COR) were held on April 30, 2014, beginning the process of forming a new government. By informal agreement, the COR speakership is held by a Sunni Arab; the largely ceremonial presidency is held by a Kurd; and the powerful executive post of Prime Minister is held by a Shiite Arab. Several Iraqi factions – as well as some within Maliki's core coalition – opposed a third term for Maliki as Prime Minister in spite of the dominant performance of the Maliki-led "State of Law" coalition in the election. In June 2014, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry called for the Iraqi people "to find leadership... that is prepared to be inclusive and share power."¹⁷

In July, the COR selected as COR Speaker Salim al Jabburi (a Sunni), and two deputies, and veteran Kurdish figure Fouad Masoum as Iraq's President. On August 11, in line with the constitutional responsibilities of the president, Masoum formally asked Haydar al Abbadi, a 62-year old member of Maliki's Da'wa Party, to become Prime Minister-designate. Al Abbadi's selection attracted public support from U.S. officials as well as from senior figures in Iran, causing support for Maliki's initial challenge of the Abbadi designation to collapse. The

¹⁴ Ishaan Tharoor, "Who Are the Yazidis?" *Washington Post*, August 7, 2014.

¹⁵ UNOCHA, "Iraq: OCHA Flash Update: Iraq Crisis—Significant Displacement from Sinjar," No. 2, August 4, 2014; Assessment Capacities Project, "Humanitarian Implications of Violence in Northern and Central Iraq," August 7, 2014.

¹⁶ UNAMI, Public Information Office, "UN Gravely Concerned About Situation in Northern Iraq; Calls for Urgent Response," August 7, 2014.

¹⁷ "Kerry Says U.S. Wants Iraqis to Find Inclusive Leadership," Reuters, June 22, 2014.

designation gave him 30 days (until September 10) to form and achieve parliamentary confirmation for a new cabinet. His work program and all but two of his ministerial nominations were approved by the COR on September 8, enabling Abbadi to assume the prime ministership. The two powerful security posts of Interior and Defense Minister were not immediately filled, but Abbadi did achieve confirmation on October 18 of Mohammad Ghabban, who is linked to a Shiite militia organization (Badr Organization), as Interior Minister. That selection could potentially give many Iraqi Sunnis pause as to whether the Abbadi government will prove less sectarian than that of Maliki, although the same day the COR also confirmed Khalid al-Ubaydi, a Sunni ex-military officer during Saddam's rule, as Defense Minister. On September 10, 2014, in conjunction with a visit by Secretary of State John Kerry, Abbadi proposed to recruit Sunnis to a new "national guard" force that would protect Sunni-inhabited areas that might be taken back from Islamic State control.

The Situation in Syria¹⁸

Since 2013, Islamic State fighters have used Syria both as a staging ground for attacks in Iraq and as a parallel theater of operations.¹⁹ In early 2014, IS fighters reestablished control in most areas of the northern Syrian province of Raqqah and reasserted itself to the east in Dayr az Zawr, a province rich in oil and gas resources bordering the Anbar region of Iraq. Since late 2013, the Islamic State has controlled several oilfields in Dayr az Zawr and reportedly has drawn revenue from oil sales to the Syrian government. With the proceeds, the group was able to maintain operational independence from Al Qaeda's leadership and pay competitive salaries to its fighters. The Islamic State derived additional revenue in Syria by imposing taxes on local populations and demanding a percentage of the funds involved in humanitarian and commercial operations in areas under its control.²⁰ The Islamic State also has operated north of Dayr az Zawr in Hasakah province, establishing a connection to Iraq's Nineveh province that it was apparently able to exploit in its eventual advance towards Mosul.

IS gains in Iraq are likely to facilitate the flow of weapons and fighters into eastern Syria to the Islamic State and other groups, both because of the publicity from these gains and because of the supply lines they open. Captured U.S.-origin military equipment provided to Iraqi security forces has appeared in photos reportedly taken in Syria and posted on social media outlets. Anecdotal reporting suggests that the group relies on brutality and intimidation to manage communities under its control, and in some areas partnerships with local armed groups appear to facilitate IS control.

At some point, the Islamic State's expanding theater of conflict could subject it to overextension. IS gains may also motivate the Iraqi and Syrian governments to cooperate more closely in seeking to counter the group, potentially altering the dynamics in both conflicts.

Further IS advances in Iraq could weaken the Syrian's government's ability to hold ground in contested areas, as some Iraqi Shiite militants who had previously fought alongside Asad forces

¹⁸ Prepared by Carla Humud, Analyst in Middle Eastern and African Affairs. For more information see CRS Report RL33487, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, coordinated by Christopher M. Blanchard.

¹⁹ "Syria War Fueling Attacks by al Qaeda in Iraq, Officials Say," *New York Times*, August 15, 2013.

²⁰ "Sunni Fighters Gain as They Battle 2 Governments, and Other Rebels," *New York Times*, June 11, 2014.

return home to combat the IS.²¹ In mid-June 2014, Syrian forces conducted air strikes against IS-held areas of Raqqah and Hasakah in coordination with the Iraqi government, according to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.²² Syria later struck IS targets near a border crossing between the two states and continues to conduct airstrikes on IS positions in Raqqah province. IS fighters in late July and early August escalated attacks on government army and air force bases in northeastern Syria, capturing several, seizing armaments, and executing captured Syrian military personnel.²³

It is unclear what impact IS gains in Iraq would have outside of northeastern Syria. At least half of Syria-based IS fighters are Syrian or Iraqi tribesmen, according to a Syrian IS defector.²⁴ Like other segments of the Syrian opposition, Syrian tribes have at times been reluctant to expand hostilities against government forces beyond their own local areas.²⁵ The Islamic State to date has concentrated its forces in Syria's northeast, and has largely avoided regular confrontations in the country's main urban areas in Syria's western half. In early August, Syrian rebels who had reportedly pledged allegiance to the Islamic State clashed with Lebanese Armed Forces for control of the Lebanese town of Aarsal, 13 km west of the Syrian border. However, some observers note that there is no indication that the group coordinated its attack in advance with IS leadership.²⁶

Some ongoing IS operations in Syria are focused in Dayr az Zawr, as the group fights to consolidate its supply lines to the city of Abu Kamal, a key node along the Syria-Iraq border. Press and social media reports suggest that IS, by mid-July, had seized large sectors of the provincial capital of Dayr az-Zawr, although some neighborhoods remain contested by the regime and other rebel groups.²⁷ Following the IS declaration of a caliphate, many local and tribal rebel forces surrendered to the group and withdrew from their positions, further expanding the IS presence in the Dayr az-Zawr countryside.²⁸ Others resisted the Islamic State's advance, and were crushed. Any Iraqi or U.S. efforts to disrupt or sever IS supply lines through Abu Kamal or between Dayr az Zawr and Mosul could benefit Syrian military and/or Nusra Front forces also operating in the area. Islamic State fighters also remain engaged in operations against Syrian armed forces southwest of Raqqah and against a range of armed Syrian opposition groups to the northeast of Aleppo.

Syrian Kurdish fighters from the People's Protection Units (known as the YPG) continue to clash with IS fighters along the border with Iraq and Turkey.²⁹ YPG forces in early August established security corridors along the Iraqi border, enabling some refugees fleeing IS violence in Iraq to cross into Kurdish-held areas of Syria, according to a Syrian Kurdish aid worker.³⁰ The Islamic

²¹ "Seeing Their Gains at Risk, Shiites Flock to Join Militias," *New York Times*, June 13, 2014.

²² "Syria Pounds ISIS Bases in Coordination with Iraq," *Daily Star*, June 15, 2014.

²³ Institute for the Study of War, "Syria Update: July 26-August 7, 2014."

²⁴ "Sunni Fighters Gain as They Battle 2 Governments and Other Rebels," *New York Times*, June 11, 2014.

²⁵ "The Tribal Factor in Syria's Rebellion: A Survey of Armed Tribal Groups in Syria." The Jamestown Foundation, June 27, 2013.

²⁶ Institute for the Study of War, "The Battle for Aarsal," August 7, 2013.

²⁷ "Syria's Allies Are Stretched by Widening War," *Wall Street Journal*, July 14, 2014; "Resistance Emerges as ISIS Consolidates in Deir az Zour," July 15, 2014.

²⁸ Institute for the Study of War, "ISIS Advances in Deir ez Zour," July 5, 2014.

²⁹ OSC Report EUR2014090645329482, September 6, 2014.

³⁰ OSC Report EUR2014080850721279, August 8, 2014

State's siege in September and October of the Syrian-Turkish border town of Kobane/Ayn al Arab has drawn increasing regional and international attention. More than 150,000 residents of the area have been driven into Turkey by the fighting, and fears that Islamic State forces would massacre the predominantly Kurdish defenders and remaining residents of the town have grown over time. U.S. and coalition airstrikes against the Islamic State in Syria since September 23 have largely focused on "degrading the capacity of (the Islamic State) at its core to project power, to command itself, to sustain itself, to resource itself." Subsequent U.S. and coalition strikes against IS forces near and inside Kobane have destroyed some IS vehicles and personnel, but had not fully reversed the group's gains or broken the siege of the town as of October 22.

U.S. Responses and Options

As the Islamic State offensive in Iraq progressed and the group beheaded two American journalists it had captured, the Obama Administration asserted that the Islamic State constitutes a threat to U.S. interests that necessitates U.S. intervention. At a NATO summit in Wales during September 4-5, 2014, the Administration discussed with its allies a broad strategy to counter the Islamic State's gains.

U.S. Strategy Unveiled

On September 10, 2014, President Obama elaborated on the evolving strategy in a speech, explaining that the United States would seek to lead a multilateral coalition to try to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the Islamic State organization by progressively reducing the geographic and political space, manpower, and financial resources available to it. The Administration stated that different members of the coalition would undertake varying measures, including direct military action, support for partner ground forces in Iraq and Syria, intelligence gathering and sharing, and financial measures. Many of the actions announced by President Obama are already under way in Iraq and Syria, as noted below. Among the major points President Obama announced were the following:³¹

- The U.S. intelligence community believes that thousands of foreigners have joined the Islamic State organization in Iraq and Syria and that these fighters could try to return to their home countries and carry out deadly attacks.
- As of September 2014, the United States had not detected specific Islamic State plotting against the U.S. homeland, but the group's leaders have threatened the United States and its allies.
- U.S. strategy will not involve deployment of U.S. combat troops, but will rely on strengthening local partners who are fighting Islamic State forces on the ground.
- The United States intended expand airstrikes in Iraq to help the ISF and the Kurdish *peshmerga* advance against IS-led forces, and was open to striking IS targets in Syria.
- The United States intended to increase support for Iraqi and Kurdish forces in Iraq by providing an additional 475 advisers (beyond the 300 already deployed),

³¹ White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Statement by the President on ISIL," September 10, 2014.

and will support Iraqi efforts to establish a “national guard” to help Iraqi Sunni Arabs defend themselves from the Islamic State.

- President Obama reiterated an Administration request for Congress to give the Administration authority to train and equip vetted Syrian rebel forces, which would serve as the partner ground force of U.S. strategy in Syria. That authority was since provided as part of the continuing appropriations resolution and is likely to be revisited by Congress as part of full year appropriations or authorization legislation. He added that the United States will not coordinate any actions in Syria with the Asad regime “that terrorizes its own people” and “will never regain the legitimacy it has lost.”
- Working with international partners, the United States will seek to prevent Islamic State terrorist attacks by increasing efforts to cut off Islamic State finances; improving intelligence on the group; strengthening anti-terrorism defenses; countering the Islamic State’s “warped ideology”; and stemming “the flow of foreign fighters into and out of the Middle East.”
- The U.S.-led coalition will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to those displaced by Islamic State offensives, including Sunni and Shiite Muslims and Christians and members of other religious minorities.

Strategy Implementation

The following sections discuss actions taken by the Administration to implement its strategy against the Islamic State organization. U.S. strategy is implemented somewhat differently in Iraq and Syria in that the United States already has a welcoming, organized, and recognized partners on the ground in the ISF and *peshmerga*. The 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. The Administration continues to pressure the Asad government into negotiating with opposition groups and fulfilling its pledges with regard to chemical weapons, while managing concerns that the full scale degradation of Islamic State forces in Syria could produce the unintended consequence of either taking military pressure off the Asad regime or creating opportunities for other extremist groups such as the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al Nusra to advance. The U.S. military operation that is implementing the strategy discussed below has been termed “Operation Inherent Resolve.”

Advice, Training, and Intelligence Gathering

President Obama stated on June 13, 2014, after the Islamic State capture of Mosul, that the Iraqi government “needs additional support to break the momentum of extremist groups and bolster the capabilities of Iraqi security forces.”³² A total of about 1,600 U.S. military personnel have been sent to Iraq since. Of that amount, about 775 are advisers that are assessing and the ISF and gather intelligence on the Islamic State, working out of “Joint Operations Centers” in Baghdad

³² White House, “Statement by the President on Iraq,” June 13, 2014.

(U.S.-ISF) and Irbil (U.S.-*peshmerga*). An additional 820 military personnel have been sent to help secure the U.S. Embassy and other U.S. facilities in Baghdad and Irbil, to protect evacuation routes such as the international airport in Baghdad, and to operate surveillance aircraft. The advisers reportedly have concluded that only about half of all ISF units are sufficiently capable for U.S. advisers to help them regain captured territory.³³

Airstrikes

Citing as an objective stopping the advance on Irbil and reducing the threat to American diplomats and advisers there, on August 7, 2014, President Obama authorized targeted airstrikes against Islamic State positions that pose a threat to U.S. personnel or facilities or to alleviate humanitarian suffering caused by the Islamic State. On September 10, President Obama announced that strikes would “go beyond protecting our own people and humanitarian missions so that we’re hitting ISIL targets as Iraqi forces go on the offensive.”

It was subsequently reported that airstrikes would be conducted in Syria as well, in order to weaken the Islamic State organizations’ ability to support its forces in Iraq. U.S. combat aircraft and armed unmanned aerial vehicles have conducted several hundred strikes in Iraq (since August 8) and Syria (since September 22), joined since September by coalition partners as discussed below.

Weapons Sales to Iraq

Since the Islamic State-led capture of Mosul in June, the United States has announced sales of over 5,000 additional HELLFIRE air-to-surface missiles to Baghdad. Deliveries of U.S.-made F-16s and Apaches, purchased in 2011 and 2012, are in their early stages. After the Islamic State move toward Irbil, the Administration reportedly began supplying mostly lighter weaponry and ammunition directly to the *peshmerga*, through the Central Intelligence Agency.³⁴ That channel is a means of adapting to a general policy that requires all U.S. Foreign Military Sales (FMS, run by the Defense Department) to be provided to a country’s central government. The ISF has transferred some of its U.S.-supplied weapons to the *peshmerga*, and the *peshmerga*, with U.S. assistance, has retransferred some weapons and ammunition to Kurdish forces fighting Islamic State fighters in Syria.³⁵ Kurdish and U.S. officials have said that, as part of a long-term strategy to drive IS forces back, the *peshmerga* will require heavy and long range weapons – in part to counter the Islamic State’s use of captured U.S. weapons.³⁶ Several other countries, such as Britain, Germany, and France, have been supplying weaponry to the *peshmerga*.

Humanitarian Airdrops

During early August 2014, the U.S. military conducted airdrops of food and water to those trapped on Sinjar Mountain. In late August, the U.S. military airdropped humanitarian aid to the

³³ Eric Schmitt and Michael Gordon, “U.S. Sees Risks in Assisting a Compromised Iraqi Force,” *New York Times*, July 14, 2014.

³⁴ Craig Whitlock and Greg Jaffe, “U.S. Directly Arms Kurdish Forces,” *Washington Post*, August 12, 2014.

³⁵ U.S. Central Command news release. “U.S. Resupplies Kurdish Forces Fighting ISIL Near Kobani.” October 20, 2014.

³⁶ Press briefing by the Director of Operations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lt. Gen. William Mayville. August 11, 2014.

town of Amerli (in eastern Salahuddin Province), inhabited by ethnic Turkmen Shiite Muslims, which was surrounded by ISIS fighters. In October, U.S. forces airdropped medical supplies as well as weapons and ammunition to Kurdish fighters defending the city of Kobane in Syria from an IS assault.

Building Up a Local Partner Force in Syria

Well before the President's September 10 speech on an anti-Islamic State strategy, Administration officials had asserted that countering the Islamic State will require dealing in some way with the group's branch in Syria. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey on August 21 asserted that the group could not be defeated without accounting for its Syrian branch, stating that the group "will have to be addressed on both sides of what is essentially at this point a nonexistent border."³⁷ As noted above, the U.S. strategy against the Islamic State's Syria branch appears to center on supporting yet-to-be-vetted Syrians, some of whom may be fighting not only the Islamic State but also Syrian government forces. On September 5, President Obama stated,

With respect to the situation on the ground in Syria, we will not be placing U.S. ground troops to try to control the areas that are part of the conflict inside of Syria. I don't think that's necessary for us to accomplish our goal. We are going to have to find effective partners on the ground to push back against ISIL. And the moderate coalition there is one that we can work with. We have experience working with many of them. They have been, to some degree, outgunned and outmanned, and that's why it's important for us to work with our friends and allies to support them more effectively.³⁸

President Obama's requests to Congress for authority and resources to train and equip vetted members of the Syrian opposition in support of U.S. efforts to combat the Islamic State organization—reiterated in the President's September 10 speech—reinvigorated congressional debate on the subject. Some congressional committees acted to consider the President's June 2014 request prior to the August congressional recess, and both houses of Congress considered a revised Administration request in the context of the passage of H.J.Res. 124, the short-term FY2015 continuing resolution, in September. The FY2015 continuing resolution (H.J.Res. 124, P.L. 113-164) authorizes the Department of Defense through December 11, 2014 or until the passage of a FY2015 defense authorization act, to provide overt assistance, including training, equipment, supplies, and sustainment, to vetted members of the Syrian opposition and other vetted Syrians for select purposes. As enacted, H.J.Res. 124 contains a temporary authorization for the training and equipping of vetted Syrians that differs from the Administration's June and September requests and from other pending legislation. When Congress returns, Members may be asked to re-endorse or consider changes to the train and equip authority granted in H.J.Res. 124 during consideration of full-year FY2015 appropriations or defense authorization legislation. For more on this program and related legislation, see CRS Report R43727, *Proposed Train and Equip Authorities for Syria: In Brief*, by Christopher M. Blanchard and Amy Belasco.³⁹

Advocates of continued U.S. support for select opposition groups in Syria have argued that the withdrawal or reduction of such assistance would bolster less cooperative or friendly groups. Advocates have further argued that if the United States withdraws or reduces its support, then it

³⁷ Department of Defense Press Briefing by Secretary Hagel and General Dempsey, August 21, 2014.

³⁸ Remarks by President Obama at NATO Summit Press Conference, September 5, 2014.

³⁹ Available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget_amendments.

may “force” moderate groups to turn to extremist groups for funding and support—thereby increasing the influence of extremists while reducing U.S. leverage.

Critics of continued or expanded U.S. support have argued that such assistance risks exacerbating rivalry among opposition groups and reducing the credibility of groups and individuals seen to be aligned with the United States. Critics of support proposals also have pointed to problems in ensuring the identity and intentions of end users of provided support and the uses of U.S.-provided materiel or training.

The purposes, content, and scope of any expanded U.S. or coalition assistance to armed opposition groups also may be controversial among Syrians. President Obama has suggested that U.S. engagement will 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.⁴⁰ Some Syrian political and military opposition forces appear to resent such a narrow focus and some have indicated they may insist on broader support for their anti-Asad goals as a condition of working with a U.S.-backed coalition against the Islamic State.

Combat Deployments?

President Obama has repeatedly ruled out this option.⁴¹ He has stated that intervention by U.S. combat troops is not capable of fixing the underlying political problems that caused the insurrection. However, comments by Gen. Dempsey at a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on September 14, 2014 and since have presented a potentially more complex picture on this issue.⁴² At the hearing and in subsequent press interviews, Gen. Dempsey indicated he might recommend that U.S. advisers in Iraq work directly with Iraqi and *peshmerga* forces on the battlefield, for example if there were a decision to try to recapture Mosul from Islamic State forces. Still, Gen. Dempsey and other Administration officials have distinguished such “close combat advisory” missions from the introduction of U.S. combat units that would conduct operations against Islamic State forces. President Obama has not indicated whether he would approve such a close combat advisory recommendation, were it to be put forward.

What Has the Strategy Achieved to Date?

Experts and officials are debating the effectiveness of the strategy. The Administration has argued that the strategy will take a long time – measured in many months, not weeks – to reach its objectives. It asserts that there are distinct achievements, to date. Administration critics argue that the strategy lacks effective partners who can advance against Islamic State-held territory on the ground and suffers from a basic contradiction in not confronting the regime of President Asad of Syria. These critics assert that achieving stated Administration objectives will likely require U.S. or other ground combat troops and expansion of the mission to include pressuring Asad to accept a political solution.

⁴⁰ 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.

⁴¹ White House, op. cit.

⁴² Senate Armed Services Committee. “Hearing on the U.S. Policy Towards Iraq, Syria, and ISIL. September 14, 2014.

Administration officials assert that the accomplishments of the strategy to date include:

- In Iraq, U.S.-led airstrikes halted the Islamic State advance on Irbil and enabled the *peshmerga* and ISF to safely evacuate most of the Yazidi internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Sinjar mountain.⁴³
- Additional strikes helped *peshmerga* and ISF forces drive Islamic State fighters from Mosul Dam, which the Islamic State purportedly could have used to flood large parts of Iraq. *Peshmerga* forces have pushed Islamic State forces from additional parts of northern Iraq in September and early October.
- In September, U.S. airstrikes facilitated efforts by the ISF and Shiite militias to break an Islamic State siege of the Shiite-inhabited town of Amerli.
- With intensive airstrikes and the airdrop of supplies and weaponry to defenders in October, the United States and its partners have to date helped prevent the predominantly Kurdish-inhabited Syrian town of Kobane/Ayn al Arab from capture by Islamic State forces. Still, Gen. Lloyd Austin, Commander of U.S. Central Command, which is leading operations in Syria and Iraq, said on October 17 that "It's highly possible that Kobane may fall."

Critics of the Administration strategy note some setbacks to the strategy as follows:

- That Islamic State forces have continued to gain control over territory in Iraq's Al Anbar province, including seizing the town of Al Hit, and capturing or encroaching on several ISF military bases in the province. Secretary of Defense Hagel told journalists in October that "Anbar Province is in trouble. We know that."⁴⁴
- Islamic State gains in Anbar have positioned Islamic State forces to approach Baghdad and to undermine security in the city – as well as the crucial Baghdad International Airport - through mortar barrages and infiltration by suicide and other bombers. Experts say this encroachment might hinder ISF efforts to take the offensive rather than react to Islamic State maneuvers. Others assert that that the ISF, while supported by Shiite militias and unlikely to lose Baghdad entirely, might yet lose parts of the city.⁴⁵
- The continued ISF loss of territory in Anbar Provinces suggests that there has not been a significant Iraqi Sunni shift to oppose Islamic State forces directly or to comprehensively assist ISF units in anti-IS operations.

⁴³ DOD News release, "Obama Praises Success of Humanitarian Operations in Iraq," August 14, 2014.

⁴⁴ Kirk Semple and Eric Schmitt. "Islamic State Keeps Up Pressure Near Baghdad as Iraqi Troops Stumble." *New York Times*, October 18, 2014.

⁴⁵ Eric Schmitt and Michael Gordon, "U.S. Sees Risks in Assisting a Compromised Iraqi Force," *New York Times*, July 14, 2014.

International Coalition

The outcomes of U.S. strategy might depend on the participation of other actors, both state and non-state. To implement U.S. strategy, U.S. officials have recruited a coalition of countries to help defeat the Islamic State, in large part to build international legitimacy for a military campaign and enlist Sunni help with co-religionists in Iraq and Syria. The Administration has sought - and received - a range of support from international partners, including participation in the air campaign against IS forces, assisting Iraqi government and Iraqi Kurdish forces, arming and training moderate Syrian rebels, increasing intelligence sharing, committing to curb the flow of fighters and resources to the Islamic State, and providing financial support.⁴⁶ President Obama appointed General John Allen as Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL in mid-September, and chaired a meeting of the U.N. Security Council in late September, which addressed this issue.⁴⁷

As of mid-October, the State Department lists 60 countries as members of the “Coalition to Degrade and Defeat ISIL.” Many of the countries participating have been involved since 2012 in response to the evolving conflict in Syria. The participation of the various coalition members, and summaries of some of their contributions are cited below.⁴⁸

The subset of the broad coalition that is attempting to coordinate military operations in Iraq and Syria faces significant challenges. Past attempts at coordination have exposed rifts among regional countries, prompting situations in which the common goal of supporting the Syrian opposition was not enough to overcome other, competing priorities among ostensibly partner states.⁴⁹ Relations between Iraq’s government and the Sunni Arab Gulf states have been consistently strained in the post-Saddam Hussein period, in part because Iraq’s government has been dominated by Shiite factions politically close to Iran. Strikes by Gulf militaries in Iraq may prove controversial to the extent that they may be seen by the populations of Gulf countries as empowering Shiite elements in Iraq. To date, Western and other non-Middle Eastern allies of the United States, such as Australia, Britain, and France, are undertaking airstrikes in Iraq, and not in Syria.

⁴⁶ For a summary of significant foreign contributions to the effort against the Islamic State, see: Justine Drennan. “Who Has Contributed the Most in the Coalition Against the Islamic State. Foreign Policy, October 14, 2014. http://complex.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/10/14/whos_contributed_the_most_in_the_coalition_against_the_islamic_state?wp_login_redirect=0

⁴⁷ State Department Press Statement, “Announcement of General John Allen as Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, Press Statement,” September 13, 2014.

⁴⁸ In February 2012, the Administration helped organize the Friends of Syria Group, a coalition of Western and regional countries that met periodically to discuss ways to support the Syrian opposition, increase pressure on the Asad government, and encourage a negotiated settlement between the two sides. The group last met in Saudi Arabia in late August. The Friends of Syria “Core Group,” also known as the London 11, includes the United States, Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, and the United Kingdom.

⁴⁹ Sunni Arab Gulf states have faced internal divisions—Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and UAE in March 2014 withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar, accusing Doha of pursuing policies at odds with other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. At a meeting of the GCC Foreign Ministers Council in late August 2014, some officials claimed to have made progress in resolving outstanding issues among member states. See “Saudi, UAE and Bahrain Envoys’ Return ‘At Any Time,’” *Gulf Times*, August 31, 2014.

In Syria, it is unclear how potential Sunni coalition partners might assess the effect that bolstering various Syrian forces against the Islamic State is likely to have on the relative strength of the Asad regime and its supporters (Iran, Hezbollah, Russia). Potential partners' calculations about the costs and benefits of participating in any coalition in Iraq and/or Syria might be affected by their perceptions of various factors such as the urgency of acting directly, the soundness of U.S. strategy, the level of U.S. commitment, and potential progress toward political solutions (particularly in Iraq) that are more inclusive of Sunni Arabs or less conducive to Iranian strategic goals.

The following sections will discuss the role that selected partner countries are playing in the coalition, and examine factors that could potentially constrain their participation.

Turkey⁵⁰

U.S. strategic objectives regarding Turkey, a Sunni-majority country, in connection with efforts to cooperate against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq appear to include:

- Avoiding attacks on or the destabilization of Turkey;
- Minimizing the use of Turkish territory by extremists; and
- Using Turkish territory and airspace and/or partnering with Turkish forces for military purposes and to further strengthen and diversify Sunni support within the anti-IS coalition.

Following the September 20, 2014, release by the Islamic State of 49 hostages associated with the Turkish consulate in Mosul, Iraq,⁵¹ Turkish leaders have indicated willingness to consider deeper participation in the anti-IS coalition.⁵² Turkey's parliament voted on October 2, 2014, to approve potential military operations in Syria and Iraq launched from Turkey by Turkish or foreign forces. However, a complicated array of considerations arguably affects Turkish calculations regarding direct military involvement or the furnishing of its territory or airspace for coalition use. This includes Turkey's role to this point in Syria's protracted conflict, as well as Turkish parliamentary elections scheduled for June 2015. For a detailed analysis of Turkey's policy and actions on the Islamic State issues, see: CRS Report IN10164, *Turkey-U.S. Cooperation Against the "Islamic State": A Unique Dynamic?*, by Jim Zanotti.

Saudi Arabia⁵³

Saudi Arabia first participated in coalition airstrikes against Islamic State targets in Syria on September 22-23 and continues to participate in coalition airstrikes against Islamic State targets. Most recently, U.S. military sources have reported Saudi fighter aircraft participation in airstrikes

⁵⁰ Prepared by Jim Zanotti, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs. For more background on Turkey's dealings with Iraq and Syria, see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

⁵¹ The release reportedly occurred in exchange for Turkey's release of 180 Islamic State detainees.

⁵² Turkey already is reportedly allowing the use of its territory and airspace for humanitarian and logistical purposes, and adopting additional measures to curb the flow of foreign fighters to Syria. Murat Yetkin, "Turkey joins anti-ISIL coalition, opens Incirlik for logistics ops," *Hurriyet Daily News Online*, September 10, 2014.

⁵³ Prepared by Christopher Blanchard, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs.

on October 3, 4, 7, 10, 12, 13, and 19. Some reports suggest that a fighter aircraft contingent of 4 to 6 Saudi F-15 aircraft are being used in these strikes, although U.S. and Saudi authorities have not commented specifically on the number or types of Saudi aircraft or ordnance used in these operations. Saudi Arabia also reportedly has agreed to host a U.S. training facility for vetted Syrians as part of the congressionally endorsed program to develop a force to protect Syrians from Islamic State attacks and support conditions that will lead to a negotiated settlement in Syria's civil war. Saudi Arabia also has made humanitarian contributions to support Syrian and Iraqi citizens, including a \$500 million donation in July 2014 to support displaced Iraqis.

Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah has called for international cooperation to combat violent extremist groups in the Middle East, including the Islamic State. In August 2014, Saudi Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdelaziz bin Abdullah bin Mohammed Al al Shaykh declared "the ideas of extremism ... and terrorism" to be the "first enemies of Muslims," and stated that all efforts to combat Al Qaeda and the Islamic State were required and allowed because those groups "consider Muslims to be infidels." The statement, coupled with state crackdowns on clerics deviating from the government's anti-terrorism messaging, signal the kingdom's desire to undercut claims by the Islamic State, Al Qaeda, and their followers that support for the groups and their violent attacks is religiously legitimate. In conjunction with the Saudi government's expanded efforts to dissuade Saudi citizens from supporting the Islamic State and other extremist groups, Saudi security entities continue to arrest cells of individuals suspected of plotting attacks, recruiting, or fundraising for some terrorist groups.

Aside from training-related assistance, U.S. officials conceivably could seek intelligence and diplomatic support from Saudi officials and may attempt to leverage the kingdom's relationships with Sunni Arab community leaders in western Iraq and eastern Syria in conjunction with efforts to combat the Islamic State and other terrorist groups there. The kingdom's vast financial resources also could be brought to bear in support of displaced Syrian and Iraqi civilians, to influence Iraqi and Syrian armed groups, or to contribute to the costs of U.S. or other countries' military operations. The Syria-related "train and equip" authority authorized by Congress in September 2014 authorizes the U.S. government to accept financial and material contributions for an assistance or training program for vetted Syrians. Military bases in Saudi Arabia could potentially be used in support of joint operations. However, the presence of foreign military forces in the kingdom historically has been a politically controversial subject.

Jordan⁵⁴

The Obama Administration considers the kingdom of Jordan to be an important part of the anti-Islamic State coalition. Jordan is one of the signatories of the recently-issued Jeddah Communiqué that expressed regional Arab states' commitment to stand united against the threat posed by all terrorism, including the Islamic State. Many Jordanians likely fear that an overt Jordanian presence in Iraq would give the Islamic State or radicalized Jordanian citizens further cause to target the kingdom.

The Jordanian Air Force has conducted strikes in both Iraq and Syria. In mid-October, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL General John Allen expressed the

⁵⁴ Prepared by Jeremy M. Sharp, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs. For more information, see CRS Report RL33546, *Jordan: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

Administration's "support for the targeted airstrikes by the Jordanian Air Force in Syria."⁵⁵ Jordan has approximately 85 combat aircraft, including at least 60 F-16s, and its fighters flew alongside U.S. planes in striking the Islamic State's front lines around the besieged Syrian city of Kobane. However, it is unlikely that Jordanian contributions to any multilateral effort will consist of ground forces.⁵⁶

Jordan could make other contributions to U.S. efforts, such as intelligence sharing, continued overt training of Iraq Special Forces, and possible clandestine training of Syrian rebels. Jordanian intelligence was reportedly pivotal to the U.S. finding and killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian national who founded the Islamic State's antecedent, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQ-I). Several media reports suggest that Jordanian Special Operations forces assisted U.S. troops in an unsuccessful attempt to rescue American journalist James Foley, who had been held captive by the Islamic State prior to his recent execution. Politically, Jordan has ties to Sunni tribes in Western Iraq who could be valuable partners in the fight against the Islamic State. Currently, approximately 1,700 U.S. military personnel are stationed in Jordan, presumably to bolster its security.⁵⁷

Europe and Other Allies⁵⁸

On the sidelines of NATO's Wales Summit, held on September 4-5, the United States and United Kingdom (U.K.) co-chaired a discussion on the Islamic State. NATO member countries France, Germany, Canada, Turkey, Italy, Poland, and Denmark, and observer state Australia, reportedly joined the United States and U.K. in agreeing to coordinate efforts to fight the group.⁵⁹ The alliance as a whole did not commit to a substantive response beyond stating in the summit communique that it would consider any future request from the Iraqi government to launch a training and capacity-building mission for Iraqi security forces.⁶⁰ NATO previously conducted a military training mission in Iraq from 2008-2011.

France hosted a meeting of foreign ministers from 26 countries (including European and Middle Eastern countries as well as Russia and China), the Arab League, European Union, and U.N. on September 15 that produced further pledges to defeat the Islamic State and provide military assistance to the Iraqi government. Specific military commitments remain unclear, however. France, Germany, and the U.K. have been providing weapons to Kurdish forces in Iraq, as well as non-lethal equipment and humanitarian aid.⁶¹ European countries continue to rule out using ground forces, but France announced it had begun reconnaissance flights over Iraq, and France and the U.K. have been considering whether to join the United States in conducting airstrikes. As in the United States, debates in these two countries encounter more difficult legal and political questions in relation to possible strikes inside Syria.

⁵⁵ U.S. State Department Press Release, "Remarks to the Press on Countering ISIL," October 15, 2014.

⁵⁶ "Allies Vow Support, Offer Few Specifics," *Wall Street Journal*, September 12, 2014.

⁵⁷ Elements of these forces include Patriot missile systems, fighter aircraft, and related support, command, control, and communications personnel and systems.

⁵⁸ Prepared by Derek Mix, Analyst in European Affairs.

⁵⁹ Sam Jones, "NATO States to Form Military Coalition to Fight ISIS," *Financial Times*, September 5, 2014.

⁶⁰ Julian Hale, "NATO Weighs Training Mission to Iraq," *Defense News*, September 12, 2014.

⁶¹ "Hollande Visits Iraq Ahead of Paris Conference on Fighting Islamic State," *RFI*, September 12, 2014; Noah Barkin, "Defending Arming of Kurds, Merkel Calls Islamic State a Threat to Europe," *Reuters*, September 1, 2014; and UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, "Iraq: UK Government Response," September 13, 2014.

Iranian Involvement in the Iraq Crisis

Apparently pursuing its own interests, Iran has been generally cooperating with U.S. policy in Iraq, but the United States has ruled out formally bringing Iran into any U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition. It remains to be seen how Iran may respond to any expanded U.S. efforts to provide support or training to Syrian opposition groups, which Iran may view as a threat to its interests. On Syria, the United States and Iran have generally been on opposite sides: the United States supports Asad's ouster in favor of a transition regime, whereas Iran is materially supporting Asad's remaining in power.

On Iraq, however, Islamic State gains appeared to align the interests of Iran and the United States in Iraq, but not in Syria. After the Islamic State capture of Mosul, Secretary of State John Kerry stated that the United States was "open to discussions [with Iran on Iraq] if there's something constructive that can be contributed by Iran."⁶² U.S. diplomats have reportedly discussed the Islamic State crisis at margins of recent talks on Iran's nuclear program. Iran abandoned its longtime ally Maliki⁶³ and helped compel him to yield power in favor of Hayder Al Abbadi. The U.S. State Department has consistently refuted assertions that the bilateral discussion on Iraq could provide Iran additional leverage in the ongoing nuclear talks with the United States and its partner countries.⁶⁴

In actions that appear to further U.S. objectives in Iraq, Iran reportedly has been delivering arms and ammunition to Iraq and the *peshmerga*. In early July, Iran returned to Iraq about a dozen of the 100+ Iraqi combat aircraft that were flown to Iran at the start of the 1991 war between Iraq and the United States-led coalition. Iranian pilots apparently also are flying the aircraft: in July 2014 Iran announced that one of its pilots had died in operations in Iraq.⁶⁵ Iran reportedly has provided weapons to Syrian Kurds fighting Islamic State forces in northern Syria.

Many observers remain skeptical that that the United States could or should cooperate with Iran in either Iraq or Syria. Iran helped establish many of the Shiite militias that fought the United States during 2003-2011, and Iran reportedly has sent Islamic Revolutionary Guard-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) personnel into Iraq to advise the Shiite militias fighting alongside the ISF. The participation of the militias has increased tensions with Iraq's Sunnis, including those who live in mostly Shiite-inhabited Baghdad and in mixed provinces such as Diyala. Anecdotal reports indicate that some Shiite militia fighters have carried out reprisals against Sunnis who the militias accuse of supporting the Islamic State. Some of the Shiite militiamen who are fighting in Iraq had returned from Syria, where they were helping President Asad against Sunni-led armed rebels. On Syria, Iran continues to support Asad militarily, thereby countering U.S. efforts to compel Asad to yield power to a transition regime.

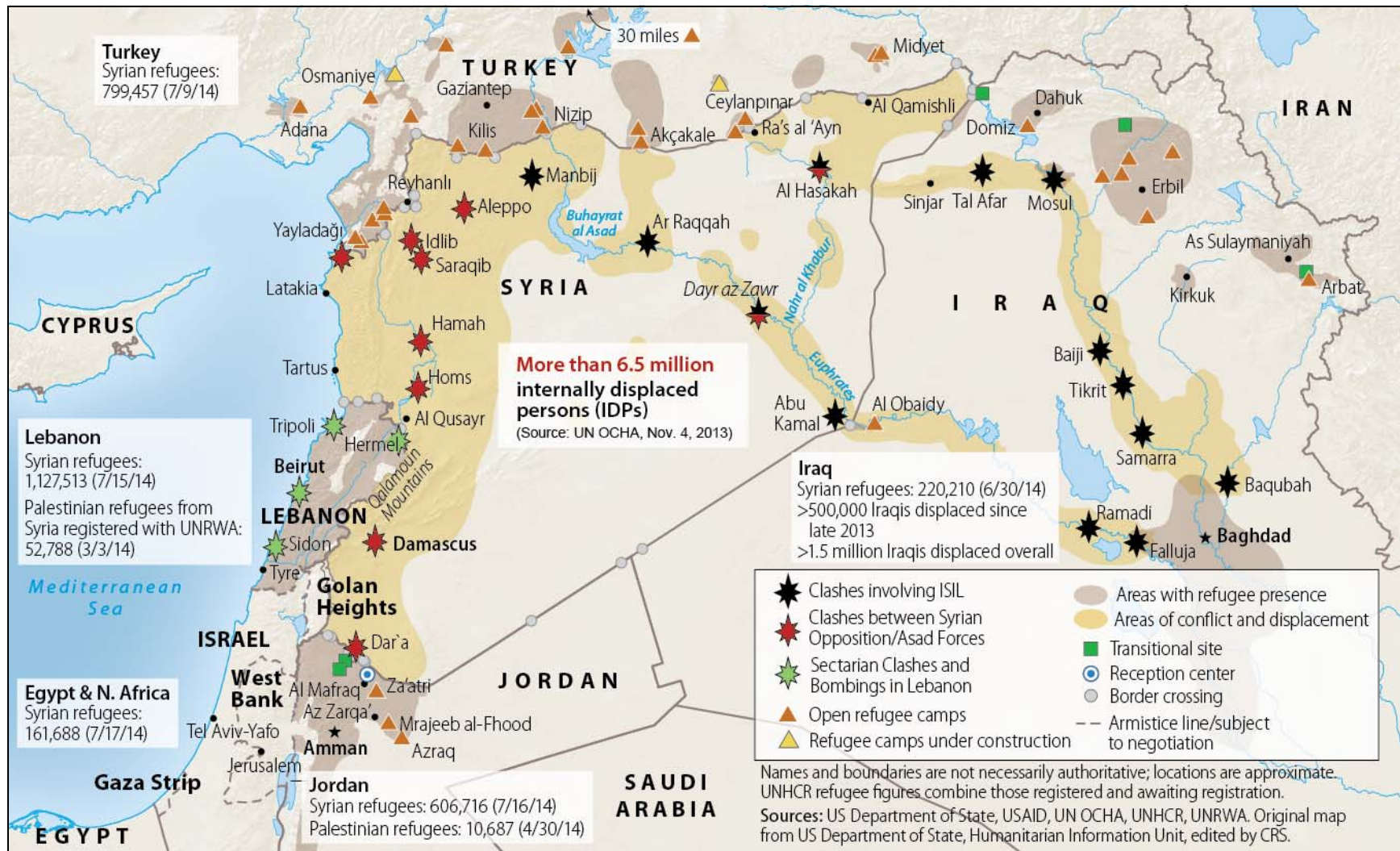
⁶² Michael Gordon and David Sanger, "U.S. Is Exploring Talks with Iran on Crisis in Iraq," *New York Times*, June 17, 2014.

⁶³ Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Iran Dramatically Shifts Iraq Policy to Confront Islamic State," Reuters, September 2, 2014.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

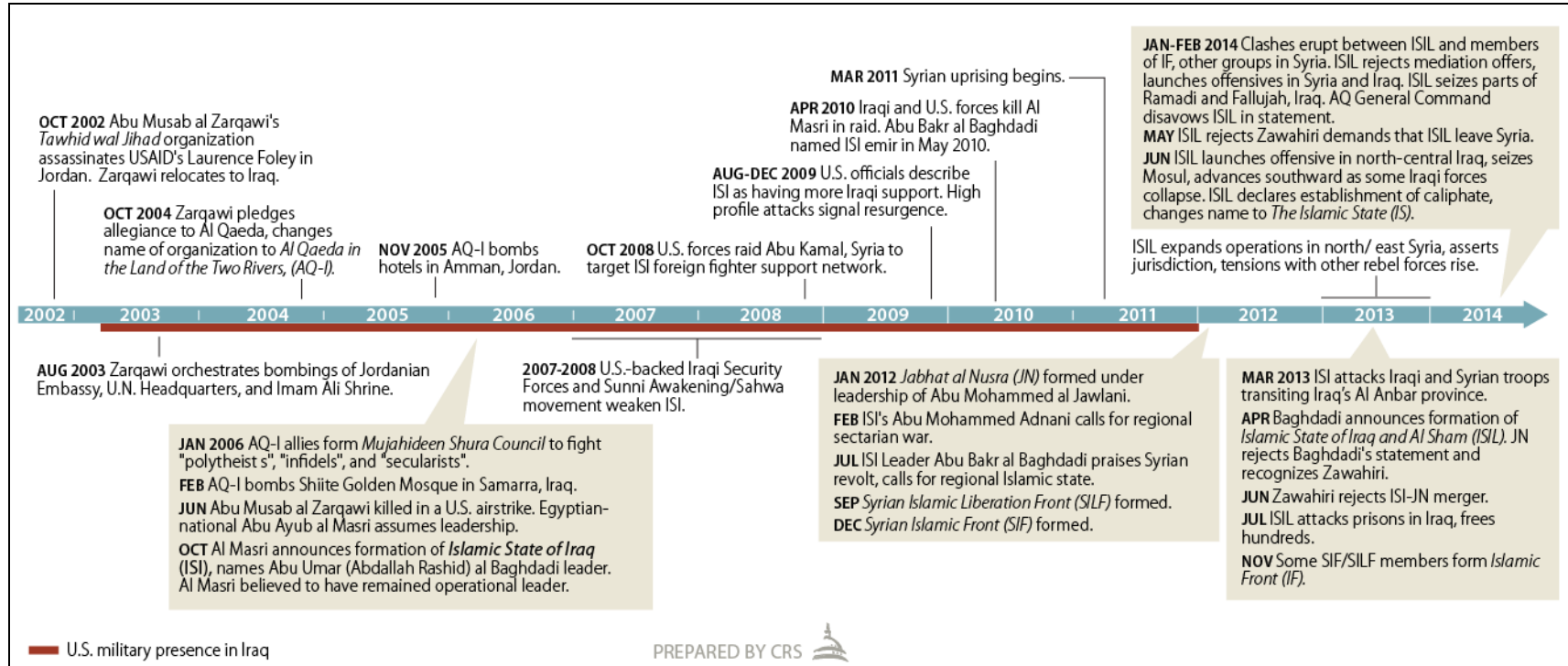
⁶⁵ "Iran News Agency Reports Death of Iranian Pilot in Iraq," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, July 5, 2014.

Figure 1. Iraq, Syria, and Regional Unrest



Notes: Clash symbols in Syria and Iraq denote areas where recent clashes have occurred, not necessarily areas of current control.

Figure 2. Evolution of IS/ISIL and Extremist Groups in Iraq and Syria, 2002-2014



Selected Additional Issues Raised by the Crisis

Humanitarian Impact and Response⁶⁶

An estimated 1.8 million people have been displaced in Iraq in 2014 creating an urgent humanitarian crisis.⁶⁷ The actual displacement figures remain fluid and impossible to fully ascertain. Particularly in conflict areas in northern and central Iraq, it is difficult to monitor and track the mass and sometimes multiple displacements. Of the 1.8 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), an estimated 850,000 are seeking shelter in Iraq's Kurdistan region, while increased movements to central and southern Iraq are straining the response capacities of host communities.⁶⁸ There is an immediate need for food, water, shelter, and health services.⁶⁹ There are also increasing concerns about the rise in sectarian tensions across the country made worse by the conflict situation and large numbers of IDPs. Although the needs of all IDPs in Iraq remain significant, civilians trapped in conflict-affected areas, whose access to basic services is curtailed or non-existent, are considered to be in need of lifesaving humanitarian assistance.⁷⁰ Recent situations, such as those involving Sinjar Mountain and the siege of the town of Amerli, where potential major humanitarian and human rights disasters were reportedly largely averted, highlight the plight of IDPs, particularly those who are surrounded by Islamic State forces.

While national and international humanitarian efforts have been severely constrained in providing assistance and protection to these IDPs, on August 13, 2014, the Special Representative of the U.N. Secretary-General for Iraq, Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, announced that the United Nations had declared a "Level 3 Emergency" for Iraq to help facilitate mobilization of resources for the humanitarian response.⁷¹ With the Level 3 declaration, U.N. and humanitarian partners continue to increase staffing and resources, but they are calling for guarantees of safe and unhindered access of humanitarian staff and in the distribution of relief supplies.

The U.N. Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) is coordinating the humanitarian response by the U.N. Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and some partner organizations and with the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). UNOCHA launched a revised Strategic Response Plan (SRP) for Iraq in June, requesting \$312.1 million in funding to include humanitarian support for the significantly increased caseload of IDPs and a wider geographical

⁶⁶ This section was prepared by Rhoda Margesson, Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy.

⁶⁷ In addition, there are reportedly more than 1.1 million Iraqis who were earlier displaced. Many had sought refuge in Syria between 2003 and 2011 and are thought to remain displaced. There are also over 141,000 Iraqi refugees living in other countries, according to the State Department on September 10, 2014. Although this section is focused primarily on the situation in Iraq, displacements and movement of populations in Iraq are intertwined with the conflict in neighboring Syria.

⁶⁸ As of September 2, 2014, Iraq is hosting more than 215,000 refugees from Syria, of which 209,000 are in the Kurdistan region and much smaller numbers are dispersed elsewhere in Iraq, including approximately 4,500 in Anbar province.

⁶⁹ Assessment Capacities Project, "Humanitarian Implications of Violence in Northern and Central Iraq," September 4, 2014.

⁷⁰ UNOCHA, "Iraq IDP Crisis: Situation Report No. 9," August 23-29, 2014; UNOCHA, "Iraq: Displacement—Humanitarian Snapshot," August 28, 2014.

⁷¹ U.N. Assistance Mission for Iraq, Press Release, "U.N. Declares a 'Level 3 Emergency' for Iraq to Ensure More Effective Humanitarian Response," August 13, 2014.

focus. Total U.S. government humanitarian funding to Iraq in FY2014 (as of September 10, 2014) is more than \$186 million.⁷²

The U.N. Secretary-General issued a statement on August 7, 2014, condemning the attacks in Iraq and the impact on vulnerable minority communities.⁷³ The members of the U.N. Security Council also issued a statement condemning the situation in Nineveh and urging the international community to provide support to those in need. The Security Council reiterated that widespread or systematic attacks directed against a civilian population because of their ethnic background or political or religious beliefs could constitute a crime against humanity, and further, that all parties must abide by international humanitarian law. It urged the parties to stop human rights violations and enable humanitarian access and the delivery of assistance.⁷⁴

Responses to Threats to U.S. Personnel, Facilities, and Citizens⁷⁵

The crisis has prompted the Administration to undertake a number of measures to ensure the safety of its personnel in Iraq, including direct military action, relocation of personnel, and deployment of additional protective assets. The Department of State has also repeatedly warned U.S. citizens unaffiliated with the U.S. government of the threats to their security.

President Obama affirmed on August 9 that the protection of American diplomats and military personnel in the city of Irbil was among the principal justifications for conducting targeted airstrikes against ISIL in the area. He also asserted that the United States would “take action” in response to any further threat to U.S. facilities or personnel.⁷⁶

A number of diplomatic personnel had previously been moved to the Consulate General in Irbil from the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. On June 15, the Department of State announced that while the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad would remain open, a number of personnel would be “temporarily relocated” to Consulate Generals in Basrah and Irbil as well as to Department of State facilities in Amman, Jordan. The relocations were reportedly carried out by non-military means. The announcement stated that a “substantial majority of the U.S. Embassy presence in Iraq” would remain in place and that, with an expected addition of security personnel, the Embassy would be “fully equipped” to carry out “its national security mission.”⁷⁷ On August 10, the Iraq Travel Warning was updated to announce that “a limited number” of additional staff had been relocated from the Embassy in Baghdad and the Consulate General in Erbil to the Consulate General in Basrah as well as to Department of State facilities in Amman, Jordan.⁷⁸ Despite these measures,

⁷² U.S. Department of State, “United States Announces Additional Humanitarian Assistance for Iraq Crisis,” Fact Sheet, September 10, 2014; USAID, “Iraq—Complex Emergency,” Fact Sheet #3, Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, August 28, 2014.

⁷³ United Nations, New York, “Statement Attributable to the Spokesman for the Secretary-General on Attacks on Yazidis and Other Minority Groups in Iraq,” August 7, 2014.

⁷⁴ U.N. Security Council, Press Statement on Iraq, SC/11515, IK/683, August 7, 2014.

⁷⁵ Prepared by Alex Tiersky, Analyst in Foreign Affairs. For more information on this issue, see CRS Insight IN10090, *Crisis in Iraq: Securing U.S. Citizens, Personnel, and Facilities*, by Alex Tiersky. This section was last updated on August 15, 2014.

⁷⁶ The White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the President on Iraq,” press release, August 9, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/09/statement-president-iraq>.

⁷⁷ Department of State Spokesperson, “Press Statement: Iraq,” press release, June 15, 2014.

⁷⁸ Department of State, “Iraq Travel Warning,” updated August 10, 2014, <http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/> (continued...)

President Obama on August 9 affirmed that “we’re not moving our embassy anytime soon. We’re not moving our consulate anytime soon.”⁷⁹

Military assets and personnel have played a key role in securing U.S. diplomatic facilities and personnel in Iraq. News reports suggested that roughly 200 Marine Corps guards and contractors were in place at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad prior to the crisis to protect the Embassy.⁸⁰ Since the crisis began, the White House has announced three deployments to reinforce that number. On June 16, the White House informed Congress that up to approximately 275 U.S. military personnel were being dispatched to Iraq to assist with the temporary relocation of diplomatic personnel, a deployment undertaken with the consent of the Government of Iraq.⁸¹ On June 30, the White House announced the deployment of up to an additional 200 U.S. Armed Forces personnel to provide increased security to the U.S. Embassy and its support facilities, as well as to reinforce the Baghdad International Airport. According to the White House notification to Congress, provided “consistent with” the War Powers Act, the deployed forces would be accompanied by helicopters and unmanned drones. The force “is deploying for the purpose of protecting U.S. citizens and property, if necessary, and is equipped for combat,” according to the statement, and may/will “remain in Iraq until the security situation becomes such that it is no longer needed.”⁸² The Department of Defense had also previously confirmed that it “has airlift assets at the ready should State Department request them, as per normal interagency support arrangements.”⁸³ On September 2, 2014, the Administration announced that an additional 350 U.S. military personnel would deploy to Iraq for similar purposes.

The State Department has also communicated with U.S. citizens in Iraq about threats to their safety. It posted on June 16 an “Emergency Message for U.S. Citizens: Announcement of Relocation of U.S. Embassy Staff,” which urged “U.S. citizens to avoid travel to Iraq because of current safety and security concerns” and advised those concerned about their safety to “make plans to depart by commercial means.” The statement emphasized that the Embassy should not be contacted with requests for assistance with travel arrangements, and that the Embassy “does not offer ‘protection’ services to individuals who feel unsafe.” While the Embassy remained open, the statement said, Embassy services for U.S. citizens throughout Iraq would be limited due to the security environment.⁸⁴

A number of U.S. citizens working in various other capacities in Iraq have also been evacuated in response to the crisis. For example, on June 12, the Department of State confirmed that a number of U.S. citizen contract employees to the Iraqi Government, who were performing services in

(...continued)

english/alertswarnings/iraq-travel-warning.html.

⁷⁹ The White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the President on Iraq,” press release, August 9, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/09/statement-president-iraq>.

⁸⁰ Dan Lamothe, “U.S. companies pulling contractors from Iraqi bases as security crumbles,” *The Washington Post*, June 12, 2014.

⁸¹ The White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the Press Secretary on the War Powers Resolution Report for Iraq,” press release, June 16, 2014.

⁸² The White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Letter from the President—War Powers Resolution Letter regarding Iraq,” June 30, 2014.

⁸³ “DOD Provides Security Help for Baghdad Diplomatic Facilities,” *American Forces Press Service*, June 15, 2014.

⁸⁴ Department of State, “Emergency Message for U.S. Citizens: Announcement of Relocation of U.S. Embassy Staff,” press release, June 16, 2014, <http://iraq.usembassy.gov/em-06162014.html>.

connection with the U.S. Foreign Military Sales Program in Iraq, were “temporarily relocated” by their companies due to security concerns.⁸⁵

Possible Questions for Congressional Consideration⁸⁶

What are overall U.S. priorities in the strategy against the Islamic State organization, and how are these priorities shaping the U.S. response?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy against the Islamic State that have been articulated by President Obama? What factors could hinder the implementation or effectiveness of the strategy?

With respect to Iraq, is it realistic and worthwhile for U.S. officials and lawmakers to act in expectation that Iraq’s government can resolve or manage the country’s sectarian, ethnic, and regional differences?

Please assess the range of Iraqi Sunni views of the Islamic State. With respect to Iraq, what effect, if any, has the replacement of Maliki by Haydar al-Abbadi had on Sunni Arab support for the Islamic State? How have jihadist and tribal figures responded to the Islamic State’s declaration of a caliphate in areas under its control?

With respect to Syria, to what extent, if any, is the long term success of U.S. strategy dependent on any changes in the composition of the Syrian government? How have various Syrian forces reacted to U.S. and coalition airstrikes since September 2014? How has the Syrian government responded? If U.S. and coalition airstrikes shift from targeting Islamic State targets that facilitate IS operations in Iraq to a broader campaign against the group and other extremists, how might these reactions change?

How, if at all, should the effort against the Islamic State shape congressional consideration of pending authorization and appropriations legislation for defense and foreign assistance?

To what extent do the Islamic State’s gains reflect its organizational capabilities? To what extent do these gains reflect the weaknesses, divisions, or limitations of its adversaries?

What options are available for assisting locally organized forces in areas under Islamic State control, or in areas threatened by the Islamic State, who may effectively resist or disrupt the group’s operations? How might such options affect the willingness of the regional governments to continue to cooperate with the United States?

To what extent do the interests of Iran and the United States conflict or coincide, with respect to the Islamic State issue? To what extent, if any, do efforts by Iran to support Iraq’s government and

⁸⁵ Department of State Deputy Spokesperson, Daily Press Briefing, June 12, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/06/227573.htm#IRAQ>.

⁸⁶ Prepared by Christopher Blanchard and Jim Zanotti, Specialists in Middle Eastern Affairs.

Shiite militia forces contradict or support those of the United States? Please answer with respect to Iran's policy of supporting the Asad regime in Syria?

What are the connections, if any, between this crisis and other key regional issues, such as international diplomacy on Iran's nuclear program?

To what extent will the governments of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey support anti-Islamic State entities in areas adjacent to their territory?

What might be the broader strategic implications of increased U.S. assistance to the current Iraqi government? What has been the reaction of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to increased U.S. support for the Iraqi government, which the Gulf leaders assert is closely aligned with Iran? How might Iran respond?

How are Kurdish efforts to control Kirkuk and its energy resources likely to affect the security situation in that area generally and in Iraq specifically? What is the likelihood that the Kurds will implement a formal secession from Iraq in the near future? How should these considerations affect U.S. policy toward the KRG?

Are changes to U.S. global counterterrorism policies and practices necessary in light of developments related to the Islamic State?

What are the humanitarian implications of the crisis? Please discuss the situation for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), particularly those displaced in the last several months. What are the most pressing assistance needs and priorities?

What are the challenges for an effective humanitarian response by the international community? How would you assess the international humanitarian operation so far? What action is the U.S. government taking in support of international humanitarian efforts?

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