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

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

As of 2020, Syria faces growing economic instability and pockets of renewed political unrest, amid ongoing interventions by outside states and new public health challenges posed by the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19). The government of Syrian President Bashar al Asad—backed by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah—has recaptured most areas formerly held by opposition forces but faces persistent challenges from fighters linked to the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIL/ISIS), as well as new protests stemming from deteriorating economic conditions. U.S.-backed local forces have recovered most territory formerly held by the Islamic State, but the group continues to maintain a low-level insurgency.

U.S. policy toward Syria since 2014 has prioritized counterterrorism operations against the Islamic State, which sought to direct external attacks from areas under the group’s control in northeast Syria. Since 2015, U.S. forces deployed to Syria have trained, equipped, and advised local partners under special authorization from Congress and have worked primarily “by, with, and through” those local partners to retake nearly all areas formerly held by the Islamic State. As of July 2020, about 600 U.S. troops remain in Syria, where they continue to support local partner force operations against Islamic State remnants.

In addition to counterterrorism operations against the Islamic State, the United States also has responded to Syria’s ongoing civil conflict by providing nonlethal assistance to Syrian opposition and civil society groups, encouraging diplomatic efforts to reach a political settlement to the civil war, and serving as the largest single donor of humanitarian aid to Syria and regional countries affected by refugee outflows.

The Trump Administration has described U.S. policy towards Syria as seeking (1) the enduring defeat of the Islamic State; (2) a political settlement to the Syrian civil war; and (3) the withdrawal of Iranian-commanded forces.

- **Enduring defeat of ISIS.** U.S.-backed partner forces re-captured the Islamic State’s final territorial strongholds in Syria in March 2019. However, U.S. military officials in 2020 assessed that the group maintains a low-level insurgency in both Syria and Iraq and likely retains an intact command and control structure. The Defense Department has not disaggregated the costs of military operations in Syria from the overall cost of the counter-IS campaign in Syria and Iraq (known as Operation Inherent Resolve, OIR), which had reached \$40.5 billion by September 30, 2019.
- **Political settlement to the conflict.** The United States continues to advocate for a negotiated settlement between the government of Syrian President Bashar al Asad and Syrian opposition forces in accordance with U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254 (which calls for the drafting of a new constitution and U.N.-supervised elections). However, the Asad government has retaken most opposition-held areas by force, thus reducing pressure on Damascus to negotiate. U.S. intelligence officials in 2019 assessed that Asad has little incentive to make significant concessions to the opposition.
- **Withdrawal of Iranian commanded forces.** Administration officials state that the removal of Iran from Syria is a political rather than military goal, and have emphasized that the United States will seek to counter Iranian activities in Syria primarily through the use of economic tools such as sanctions. The United States has on occasion conducted strikes on Iranian-backed militias in Syria when such forces appeared to endanger U.S. or Coalition personnel.

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External Players. A range of foreign states have intervened in Syria in support of the Asad government or Syrian opposition forces, as well in pursuit of their own security goals. Pro-Asad forces operating in Syria include Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia. The United States and a range of regional and European states have at times backed select portions of the Syrian opposition, while also expressing concern about reported ties between some armed opposition groups and extremist elements. Israel has acknowledged conducting over 200 military strikes in Syria, mostly targeting Hezbollah and/or Iranian targets. In addition, Turkey maintains military forces in northern Syria as part of a broader campaign targeting Kurdish fighters.

Humanitarian Situation. As of mid-2020, roughly half of Syria's pre-war population remains internally displaced (6.2 million) or registered as refugees in neighboring states (5.6 million). The United States has directed more than \$11.3 billion toward Syria-related humanitarian assistance since FY2012, and Congress has appropriated billions more for security and stabilization initiatives in Syria and neighboring countries. In July 2020, the Security Council reauthorized cross border humanitarian aid into Syria for a period of one year. The vote restricted aid to a single crossing point at Bab al Hawa following vetoes by Russia and China.

Public Health. Syria has struggled to provide adequate testing for the novel COVID-19 virus, and the extent of the virus's spread in the country is thought to exceed official health ministry counts. As of mid-July, Syria reported less than 500 confirmed cases of COVID-19, as compared to over 86,000 cases in neighboring Iraq, and over 267,000 cases in Iran. Syria contains numerous populations that are particularly vulnerable to infection, including thousands of internally displaced persons and detainees living in overcrowded conditions and lacking adequate access to sanitation facilities. Syria's health care system also has been significantly degraded since the start of the conflict in 2011 as a result of attacks by pro-regime forces on health care workers and infrastructure.

Additional Domestic Challenges. Syria faces an economic crisis, with the value of the Syrian pound dropping to record lows, and the cost of basic staples increasing by over 100% since 2019. In 2020, the Asad government also has confronted a resurgence of armed opposition in previously recaptured areas south of the capital, as well as growing criticism from both domestic and external allies.

The 116th Congress has sought clarification from the Administration concerning its overall Syria policy, plans for the withdrawal of U.S. military forces, the U.S. role in ensuring a lasting defeat for the Islamic State, U.S. investments and approaches to postconflict stabilization, the future of Syrian refugees and U.S. partners inside Syria, and the challenges of dealing with the Iran- and Russia-aligned Asad government.

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Background

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

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

In September 2014, the United States began air strikes in Syria, with the stated goal of preventing the Islamic State from using Syria as a base for its operations in neighboring Iraq. In October 2014, the Defense Department established Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) to “formalize ongoing military actions against the rising threat posed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria.” CJTF-OIR came to encompass more than 70 countries, and bolstered the efforts of local Syrian partner forces against the Islamic State. The United States also gradually increased the number of U.S. personnel in Syria from 50 in late 2015 to roughly 2,000 by 2017.

President Trump in early 2018 called for an expedited withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria,¹ but senior Administration officials later stated that U.S. personnel would remain in Syria to ensure the enduring defeat of the Islamic State. Then-National Security Advisor John Bolton also stated that U.S. forces would remain in Syria until the withdrawal of Iranian-led forces.² In December 2018, President Trump ordered the withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Syria, contributing to the subsequent decision by Defense Secretary James Mattis to resign, and drawing criticism from several Members of Congress. In early 2019, the White House announced that several hundred U.S. troops would remain in Syria.

As the Islamic State and armed opposition groups relinquished territorial control inside Syria, the Syrian government and its foreign partners made significant military and territorial gains. The U.S. intelligence community’s 2018 Worldwide Threat Assessment stated that the conflict had “decisively shifted in the Syrian regime’s favor, enabling Russia and Iran to further entrench themselves inside the country.”³ Coalition and U.S. gains against the Islamic State came largely through the assistance of Syrian Kurdish partner forces, but neighboring Turkey’s concerns about those Kurdish forces emerged as a persistent challenge for U.S. policymakers. In 2019, Turkey launched a cross border military operation attempting to expel Syrian Kurdish U.S. partner forces

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

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

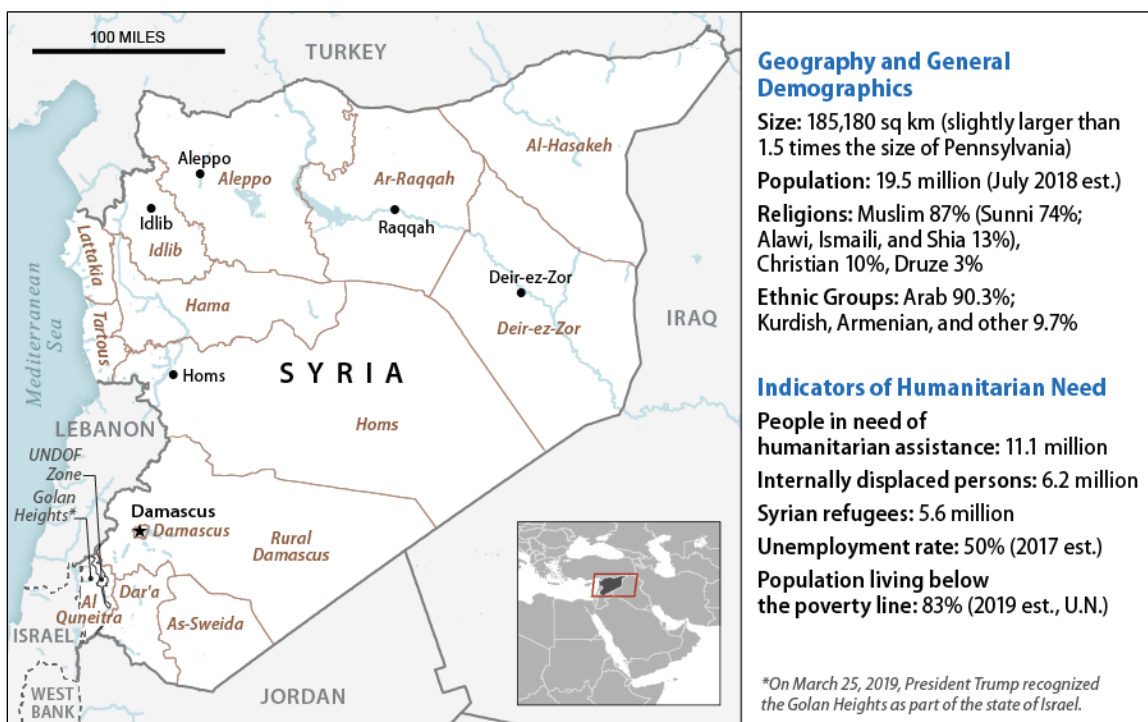
³ Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, February 13, 2018.

from areas adjacent to the Turkish border. In conjunction with the operation, President Trump ordered the withdrawal of some U.S. forces from Syria and the repositioning of others in areas of eastern Syria once held by the Islamic State.

Territorial gains by the Syrian government have pushed remaining armed opposition forces (including Al Qaeda affiliates) into a progressively shrinking geographic space that is also occupied by roughly 3 million Syrian civilians. (Figure 3 and Figure 4 show how territory held by Syrian opposition forces was significantly reduced between 2017 and 2020.) The remaining opposition-held areas of Idlib province in northwestern Syria have faced intensified and ongoing Syrian government attacks since 2019. Unrest in southern areas recaptured by the government in 2020 suggests that security conditions nationwide may remain fluid.

The U.N. has sponsored peace talks in Geneva since 2012, but it appears unlikely that the parties will reach a political settlement that would result in a transition away from Assad. With many armed opposition groups weakened, defeated, or geographically isolated, military pressure on the Syrian government to make concessions to the opposition has been reduced. U.S. officials have stated that the United States will not fund reconstruction in Assad-held areas unless a political solution is reached in accordance with U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254.⁴ In June 2020, the Trump Administration began implementing congressionally enacted sanctions on the Assad government and its financial backers as part of a campaign to deny it revenue to compel Syrian leaders to end the war (see “U.S. Sanctions on Syria”). Some observers have warned of possible unintended effects of new sanctions given fragile economic conditions prevailing in the country.⁵

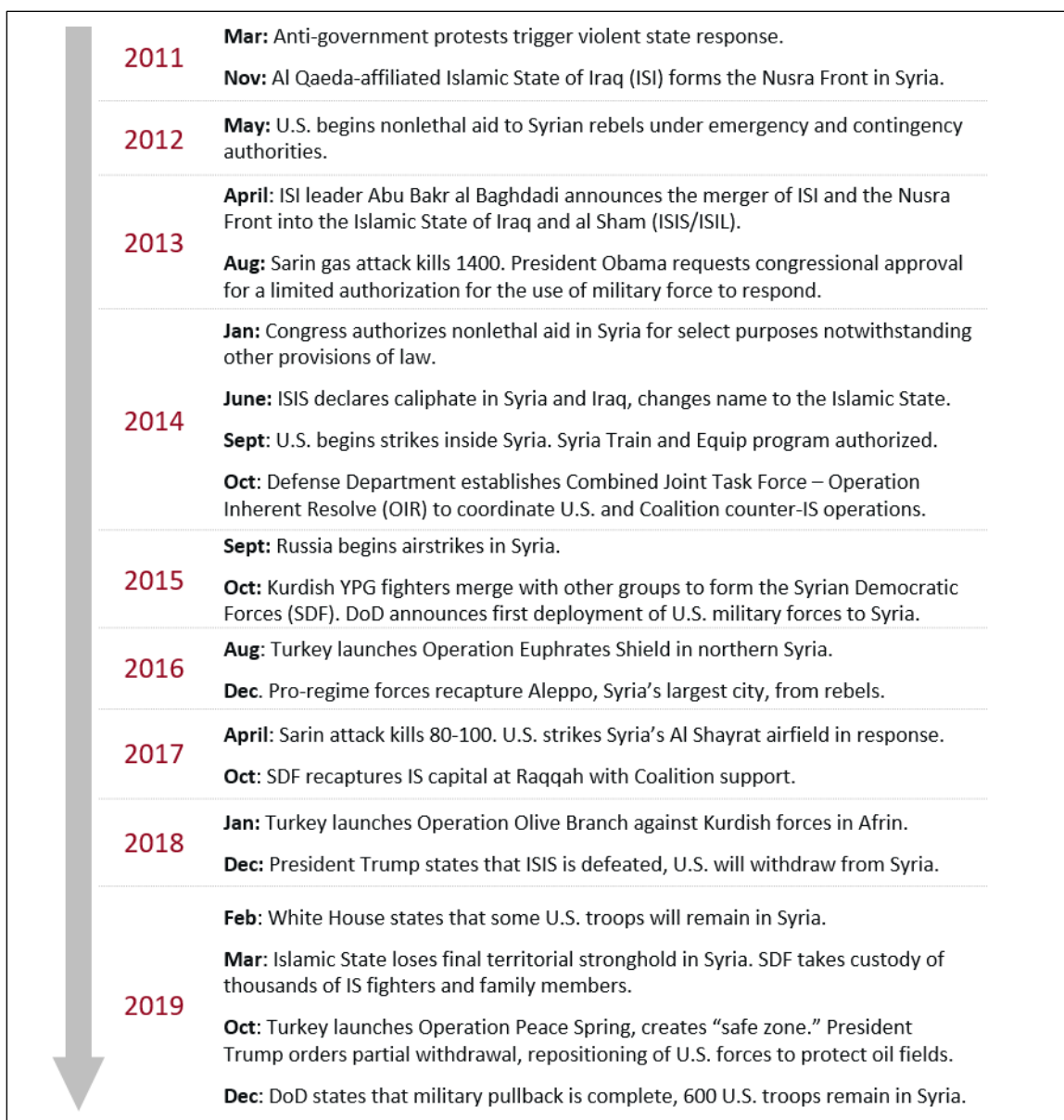
Figure I. Syria: Map and Country Data



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

⁴ State Department, “Joint Statement on the Ninth Anniversary of the Syrian Uprising,” March 15, 2020.

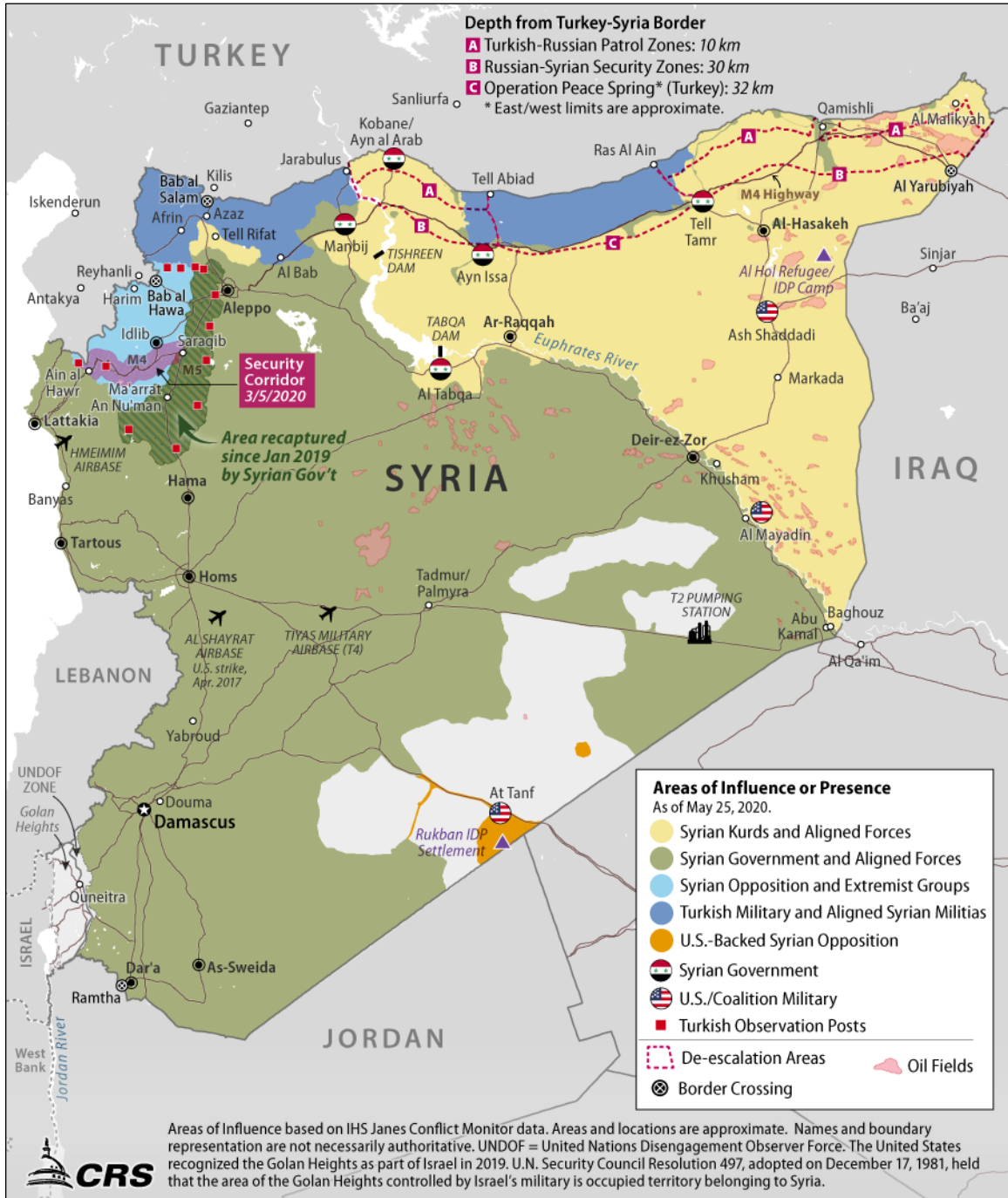
⁵ “Will more Syria sanctions hurt the very civilians they aim to protect?” *War on the Rocks*, June 10, 2020.

Figure 2. Syria Conflict 2011-2019

Source: CRS.

Note: For more information, see CRS In Focus IFI1080, *Syria Conflict Overview: 2011-2018*, by Carla E. Humud.

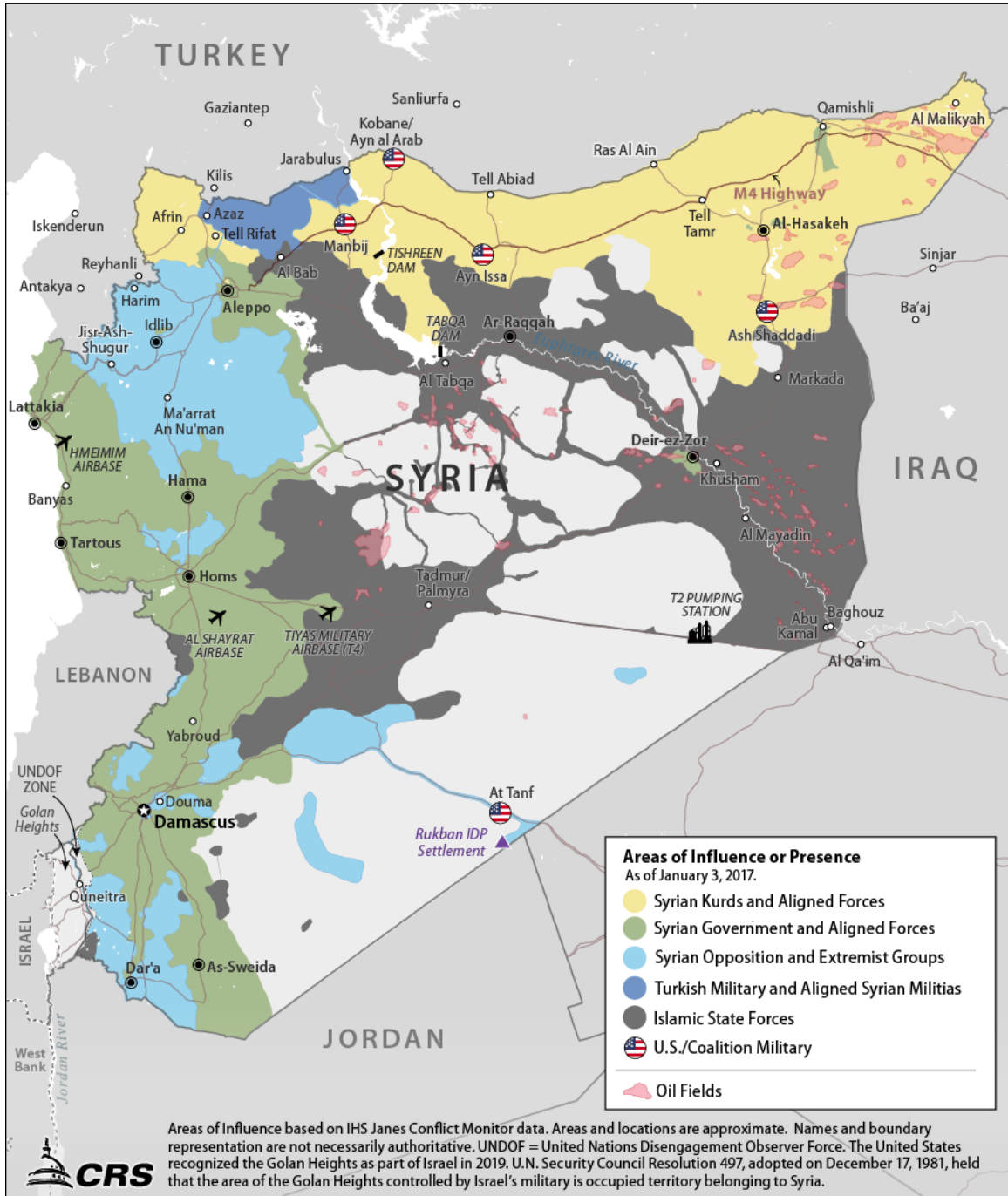
Figure 3. Syria Areas of Influence 2020
As of May 25, 2020



Sources: CRS using area of influence data from IHS Conflict Monitor, last revised May 25, 2020. All areas of influence approximate and subject to change. Other sources include U.N. OCHA, Esri, and social media reports.

Note: U.S. military officials have acknowledged publicly that U.S. forces are operating in select areas of eastern Syria to train, advise, assist, and equip partner forces.

Figure 4. Syria Areas of Influence 2017
As of January 3, 2017



Sources: CRS using area of influence data from IHS Conflict Monitor. All areas of influence approximate. Other sources include U.N. OCHA, Esri, and social media reports.

Note: U.S. military officials have acknowledged publicly that U.S. forces are operating in select areas of eastern Syria to train, advise, assist, and equip partner forces.

Issues for Congress

Prior to the 2019 Turkish military incursion and U.S. withdrawal decisions, the 116th Congress had been considering the Administration's FY2020 requests for defense and foreign aid appropriations, which presumed continued counterterrorism, train and equip, and humanitarian operations in Syria. Members debated legislative proposals that would have extended and amended related authorities and made additional funding available to continue U.S. efforts, including stabilization programs. Following President Trump's withdrawal and redeployment decisions, Congress enacted revisions to the underlying authority for U.S. military train and equip efforts in Syria and appropriated additional funds to continue related operations.

Congress may further consider what, if any, revised defense and foreign assistance needs may be appropriate in connection with revised U.S. plans and any forthcoming changes to U.S. military deployments in Syria or in neighboring Iraq. Similarly, Members may consider how, if at all, Congress should increase, decrease, or reallocate defense, humanitarian, and stabilization resources for FY2021 and what, if any, new or revised oversight mechanisms ought to be employed.

Specific issues for congressional consideration could include the following.

U.S. military operations and authorities

U.S. forces have operated inside Syria since 2015 pursuant to the 2001 and 2002 Authorizations for Use of Military Force (AUMF),⁶ despite ongoing debate about the applicability of these authorizations to current operations in Syria.⁷ In December 2018, President Trump declared the Islamic State “defeated,” raising questions about the authorities underlying a continued U.S. military presence in Syria. Defense and State Department officials continue to highlight the ongoing threat posed by the Islamic State, including to the U.S. homeland.⁸ Islamic State attacks continue in areas of eastern Syria, and oversight reporting suggests that Administration officials believe the group could resurge if military pressure on its remnants lessens.⁹ Nevertheless, some observers have argued that some U.S. military outposts in Syria (such as the U.S. garrison at At Tanf) appear primarily designed to stem the flow of Iranian-backed militias into Syria.¹⁰ In June 2020, President Trump reported to Congress that

United States Armed Forces are conducting a systematic campaign of airstrikes and other necessary operations against ISIS forces in Iraq and Syria and against al-Qa'ida in Syria. A

⁶ At a December 11, 2019, hearing before the House Armed Services Committee, Defense Secretary Esper stated that, “[...] we think we have sufficient authorities right now under the '01 and '02 AUMFs to conduct what we—to do what we need to do in Syria.” Similarly, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley stated, “[...] the '01 AUMF allows us to conduct offensive strike operations against terrorists, Al Qaeda, etc. ISIS, we should all remember, is a direct derivative of Al Qaeda, and it is Al Qaeda in Iraq rebranded as ISIS.”

⁷ During a December 11, 2019, hearing on U.S. Syria policy by the House Armed Services Committee, Rep. Smith stated, “ ... I don't think it's a good idea for us to be relying on the 2001 and 2002 AUMF in 2019. We could talk about what's in the 2001 AUMF and how it applies to now. I think that thing has been stretched beyond all recognition. But the 2002 AUMF, it's just ridiculous that we're still saying that this is an authority. I was here, and I voted for that. The 2002 AUMF was to remove Saddam Hussein from power and stop the threat that he posed.”

⁸ Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley before the House Armed Services Committee, December 11, 2019.

⁹ See reports (issued quarterly) by the Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve.

¹⁰ “U.S. Considering Plan to Stay in Remote Syrian Base to Counter Iran,” *Foreign Policy*, January 25, 2019.

small presence of United States Armed Forces remains in strategically significant locations in Syria to conduct operations and secure critical petroleum infrastructure, in partnership with indigenous ground forces, against continuing terrorist threats emanating from Syria.¹¹

Future of U.S.-SDF Partnership

Following the October 2019 Turkish incursion into northern Syria, the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) sought protection from the Asad government. U.S. Special Representative for Syria Engagement and the Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Ambassador James Jeffrey stated that the SDF and the Asad government reached “an agreement in some areas to coordinate.”¹² In December 2019, senior U.S. military officials acknowledged “dialogue” between the SDF and the Syrian military, but in 2020 have testified that U.S. forces continue to conduct combined operations with the SDF.¹³ U.S. officials have not publicly elaborated on the scale of coordination and/or dialogue between the Syrian military and the SDF, or on how this may impact U.S. interactions with, or funding for, the group.

Who are the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)?

Since 2014, U.S. armed forces have partnered with a Kurdish militia known as the People’s Protection Units (YPG) to counter the Islamic State in Syria. In 2015, the YPG joined with other Syrian groups to form the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), comprising the SDF’s leading component. Turkey considers the YPG to be the Syrian branch of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party), a U.S.-designated terror group that has waged a decades-long insurgency in Turkey. Ankara has strongly objected to U.S. cooperation with the SDF. U.S. officials have acknowledged YPG-PKK ties, but generally consider the two groups distinct.¹⁴

The Syrian Arab Coalition. Roughly 50% of the SDF is composed of ethnic Arab forces, according to U.S. officials;¹⁵ this component sometimes is referred to as the Syrian Arab Coalition (SAC). In 2018, the U.S. military assessed that the SAC probably is unable to conduct counter-IS operations on its own without the support of the SDF’s primary component, the YPG.¹⁶ In 2018, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) described the SAC as “a patchwork of Arab tribal militias, military councils, and former opposition groups recruited by the YPG initially as a ‘symbolic’ move to help attract western support and training.”¹⁷ In 2020, DIA assessed that the YPG maintains control over leadership and decision-making positions within the SDF and SDC-led institutions, demonstrating an “unwillingness to share power with Arabs, even in the Arab-majority regions of the northeast where Arab fighters probably represent a majority of the SDF’s front line forces.”¹⁸

¹¹ President Donald Trump, Letter to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and President Pro Tempore of the Senate, June 9, 2020.

¹² Ambassador James Jeffrey, State Department Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, October 22, 2019.

¹³ Defense Under Secretary for Policy John Rood before the Senate Armed Services Committee, December 5, 2019; CENTCOM Commander Gen. McKenzie before the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 12, 2020.

¹⁴ See, for example, “US admissions of PYD-PKK links growing,” *Anadolu Agency*, February 15, 2018.

¹⁵ Ambassador Jeffrey before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, October 22, 2019.

¹⁶ 2018 assessment referenced in “Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress,” October 1, 2019-December 31, 2019, p. 43.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | January 1, 2020 – March 31, 2020.

Security of U.S. Forces in Syria

Syrian government forces, with the support of Russia, expanded their operations and presence in some areas of eastern Syria evacuated by U.S., Coalition, and SDF forces in 2019. The expanded presence of Syrian government forces in these areas may increase the potential for interactions between remaining U.S. personnel and Syrian or Russian forces, with uncertain implications for force protection and potential conflict. The Syrian government continues to refer to U.S. forces as occupiers and has warned that “resistance” forces might target U.S. personnel.¹⁹ In July 2020, CENTCOM Commander Gen. McKenzie stated, “Over time, [Syrian President] Bashar al-Assad is probably going to turn to the east and increase pressure on us, and we’ll deal with that as it happens.”²⁰

Syrian officials have specifically called for the United States to end what they describe as the “illegal” presence of U.S. forces at Syrian oilfields.²¹ The Defense Department has stated that U.S. forces in Syria maintain “the inherent right to self-defense against any threat, includ[ing] while securing the oil fields.”²² President Trump stated in October 2019 that, “we may have to fight for the oil. It’s okay. Maybe somebody else wants the oil, in which case they have a hell of a fight.”²³ Vice President Pence stated the following month that U.S. troops in Syria will “secure the oil fields so that they don’t fall into the hands of either ISIS or Iran or the Syrian regime.”²⁴

In February 2020, pro-regime forces manning a checkpoint in Qamishli opened fire on Coalition forces conducting a patrol; no Coalition injuries were reported.²⁵ In early 2020, media reports highlighted increasingly frequent “standoffs” between U.S. and Russian personnel along highways in northeast Syria.²⁶ U.S. officials have described these incidents as occurring along a road that is shared by U.S., Russian, and Syrian forces operating in adjacent areas of the northeast, particularly around Qamishli.²⁷ In March, CJTF-OIR reported that Russian ground and air incursions into areas of U.S. operations in Syria continued to occur on a regular basis.²⁸

U.S. forces also may face threats from Islamic State remnants. In 2020, armed drones have targeted U.S. military personnel operating near Syrian oil fields; military officials stated that a March 2020 drone attack was “probably” conducted by the Islamic State using modified commercially available drones.²⁹

¹⁹ Syrian President Asad interview with Russia 24 and Rossiya Sevodnya, *Syria Report*, November 15, 2019.

²⁰ CENTCOM news transcript, “MEI engagement with General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr.” June 11, 2020.

²¹ Louay Falouh, Chargé d'affaires of the Permanent Mission of the Syrian Arab Republic to the United Nations, SC/14061, December 19, 2019.

²² Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, p. 43.

²³ Remarks by President Trump on the Death of ISIS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, October 27, 2019.

²⁴ Remarks by Vice President Pence in a Press Gaggle | Erbil Air Base, November 23, 2019.

²⁵ OIR Spokesman Col. Myles B. Caggins III, statement posted to Twitter (@OIRSpox), February 12, 2020, 6:58 AM.

²⁶ “U.S. Troops in Standoffs With Russian Military Contractors in Syria,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 5, 2020.

²⁷ Department of State transcript, “Ambassador Jeffrey on the Situation in Syria,” February 5, 2020.

²⁸ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | January 1, 2020 – March 31, 2020, p. 9.

²⁹ CENTCOM Commander Gen. McKenzie, AFRICOM Commander Gen. Townsend, and Acting ASD for

Syria Provisions in FY2020 Defense and Foreign Operations Legislation

FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 116-92)

The FY2020 NDAA (P.L. 116-92) extended the Syria Train and Equip program’s authority until the end of 2020, and modified the program’s purposes. Changes under Section 1222 of the act include

- specifying the program’s beneficiaries to include “appropriately vetted Syrian groups and individuals,” striking previous language referencing Syrian opposition forces;³⁰
- amending the program objectives to include securing territory formerly controlled by the Islamic State and supporting the temporary detention and repatriation of IS detainees;
- eliminating some of the details previously reported to congressional committees (such as the concept of operations, timelines, and types of training, equipment, stipends, sustainment, construction, and supplies to be required), while preserving broader reporting requirements on the goals and objectives of authorized assistance, and on the number and role of U.S. military personnel involved;
- removing the previously existing requirement for the Defense Department to use prior approval reprogramming procedures to obligate funds for the Syria T&E program and substituting a more frequent prior notification system (requiring reports no later than 15 days before the expenditure of each 10% increment of FY2019 and FY2020 funds);
- adding new reporting requirements on (1) the relationship between program recipients and civilian governance authorities; (2) U.S. stabilization activities in IS-liberated areas; and (3) IS detainees held by vetted Syrian groups; and
- restricting the provision of U.S. weapons to small arms.

Section 1224 of the act requires the president to identify or designate a senior-level coordinator responsible for the long-term disposition of IS members currently in SDF custody. The congressionally mandated Syria Study Group highlighted the lack of such a coordinator in its September 2019 final report.

The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019

The FY2020 NDAA also incorporates the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 (Title LXXIV). Section 7411 of the act requires the Secretary of the Treasury to make a determination within 180 days of enactment on whether the Central Bank of Syria is a financial institution of primary money laundering concern. If so, the Secretary would be required to impose one or more

International Security Affairs Kathryn Wheelbarger before the House Armed Services Committee, March 10, 2020.

³⁰ This change may reflect a gradual U.S. shift from supporting Syrian opposition forces (now largely defeated by the Syrian government) to a greater reliance on Syrian Kurdish groups (which oppose the Islamic State but not necessarily the Asad government).

of the special measures described in Section 5318A(b) of title 31, United States Code, with respect to the Central Bank of Syria.

Section 7412 directs the President to impose sanctions on any foreign person who the President determines is knowingly providing significant financial, material, or technological support to the government of Syria or to a foreign person operating in a military capacity inside Syria on behalf of the governments of Syria, Russia, or Iran. It also makes eligible for sanctions foreign persons who knowingly sell or provide (1) goods, services, technology, or information that significantly facilitates the maintenance or expansion of the government of Syria's domestic production of natural gas, petroleum, or petroleum products; (2) aircraft or spare aircraft parts that are used for military purposes in Syria in areas controlled by the Syrian government or associated forces; (3) significant construction or engineering services to the government of Syria.

Section 7413 requires the President to determine the areas of Syria controlled by the governments of Syria, Iran, and Russia, and to submit a strategy to deter foreign persons from entering into contracts related to reconstruction in those areas. The bill includes several suspension and waiver authorities for the President, including for nongovernmental organizations providing humanitarian assistance. Its provisions would expire five years after the date of enactment.

The Trump Administration announced the first designations under the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act in June 2020 (see "U.S. Sanctions on Syria" below).

Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020 (P.L. 116-94)

The FY2020 State and Foreign Operations Appropriation Act (Division G of the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020, P.L. 116-94) contains several Syria-related provisions:

- Section 7033(c) makes ESF funds available notwithstanding any other provision of law for assistance for ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq and Syria.
- Section 7035(a) makes NADR funds available for the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF) for programs in areas liberated from the Islamic State.
- Section 7041(i) makes not less than \$40 million in ESF, INCLE, and PKO funds appropriated by this act available, notwithstanding any other provision of law, for nonlethal stabilization assistance for Syria—of which, not less than \$7 million shall be made available for emergency medical and rescue response, and chemical weapons use investigations. These funds may not be used for activities that support Iran or Iranian proxies, or that further the strategic objectives of Russia. They also may not be used in areas of Syria controlled by the Asad government or associated forces.
- Section 7065(a) states that not less than \$200 million of funds appropriated under ESF, INCLE, NADR, PKO, and FMF shall be made available for the Relief and Recovery Fund for assistance for areas liberated or at risk from, or under the control of, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, other terrorist organizations, or violent extremist organizations, including for stabilization assistance for vulnerable ethnic and religious minority communities affected by conflict.
- This section also states that, of the funds made available for the Relief and Recovery Fund, not less than \$10 million shall be made available for programs to promote accountability for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, including in Iraq and Syria.
- Title V of the bill, known as the Global Fragility Act of 2019, establishes a new fund titled the Prevention and Stabilization Fund, and authorizes \$200 million to

be appropriated to the fund for each of the fiscal years 2020 through 2024. These funds are authorized be used to support stabilization of conflict affected areas, and to provide assistance to areas liberated from the Islamic State or other terrorist organizations—as well as to support vulnerable ethnic and religious minority communities affected by conflict. This new fund will replace the Relief and Recovery Fund designation applied in recent appropriations acts.

Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020 (P.L. 116-93)

The Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2020 (Division A of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020, P.L. 116-93) makes \$1.195 billion in the Counter ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) available to counter the Islamic State globally, including to provide training, equipment, logistics support, infrastructure repair, and sustainment to countries or irregular forces engaged in counter-IS activities. No specific amount is designated for Syria in the act, but the accompanying explanatory statement allocates \$200 million for Syria programs, \$100 million less than the Administration’s request. Section 9019 states that no funds made available by the act may be used for the “introduction of United States armed or military forces into hostilities in Syria, into situations in Syria where imminent involvement in hostilities is clearly indicated by the circumstances, or into Syrian territory, airspace, or waters while equipped for combat.”

Select Syria-Related Legislation in the 116th Congress

Special Immigrant Status for U.S. Partner Forces³¹

The October 2019 Turkish military incursion into northern Syria targeted Syrian Kurdish forces that had worked closely with the United States to secure the territorial defeat of ISIS. The same month, three bills were introduced that would each establish a special immigrant visa (SIV) program for certain Syrians³² who had worked with U.S. military forces or the U.S. government. These programs would provide a new avenue under the U.S. immigration system for eligible individuals to be considered for admission to the United States. Upon admission, these individuals would become U.S. lawful permanent residents. Although the particular criteria in the three proposed SIV programs differ, all three would require applicants to obtain a favorable recommendation regarding their work with the U.S. government and be determined to be admissible to United States, which requires clearance of background checks and security screening, among other screening. All three programs would be subject to annual numerical limits, which would apply to the principal applicants but not to their accompanying spouses or children.

Syrian Allies Protection Act (S. 2625). Introduced by Senator Warner, the bill would authorize the Secretary of Homeland Security to provide special immigrant status to a Syrian national who had worked directly with U.S. military forces as a translator or in another role deemed “vital to the success of the United States military mission in Syria,” as determined by the Secretary of Defense, for a period of at least six months between September 2014 and October 2019.

³¹ Andorra Bruno, Specialist in Immigration Policy, contributed to this section. For related information, see CRS Report R43725, *Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Programs*.

³² Two of the bills also reference stateless persons habitually residing in Syria, as Syrian government policy for the past several decades has denied Syrian citizenship to the majority of Kurdish residents.

Applicants would need to obtain a written recommendation from a general or flag officer. The SIV program would be capped at 250 principal applicants per fiscal year.

Syrian Partner Protection Act (H.R. 4873). Introduced by Representative Crow, the bill would authorize the Secretary of Homeland Security to provide special immigrant status to a Syrian national or stateless person habitually residing in Syria who worked for or with the U.S. government in Syria “as an interpreter, translator, intelligence analyst, or in another sensitive and trusted capacity” for an aggregate period of not less than one year after January 2014. The individual’s “service to United States efforts against the Islamic State” would need to be documented in a positive recommendation or evaluation. The SIV program, which would be temporary, would be capped at 4,000 principal applicants per year for five fiscal years.

Promoting American National Security and Preventing the Resurgence of ISIS Act of 2019 (S. 2641). Section 203 of S. 2641, as reported by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, would authorize the Secretary of Homeland Security to provide special immigrant status to a Syrian or stateless Kurd habitually residing in Syria who is or was employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government “in a role that was vital to the success of the United States’ Counter ISIS mission in Syria,” as determined by the Secretary of State in consultation with the Secretary of Defense. The individual must have been so employed for a period of at least one year after January 2014 and must obtain a favorable written recommendation from a senior supervisor. In addition, the applicant must have experienced or must be “experiencing an ongoing serious threat as a consequence of the alien’s employment by the United States Government.” The SIV program would be capped at 400 principal applicants per fiscal year.

The Syrian SIV programs proposed by these bills are generally modeled on the existing temporary SIV programs for Iraqis and Afghans who have worked for or on behalf of the U.S. government, although there are some key differences. For example, under both the Iraqi and Afghan SIV programs, the recommendation or evaluation (attesting to valuable service) that an applicant is required to submit must be accompanied by approval from the appropriate Chief of Mission. The Syrian SIV bills would not require applicants to obtain Chief of Mission approval, although S. 2641 would require an applicant’s recommendation to be approved by a senior foreign service officer designated by the Secretary of State. S. 2641 is also the only one of the three bills to require an applicant to show that he or she has experienced or is experiencing a serious threat as a result of employment by the U.S. government; this is a requirement under both the Iraqi and Afghan SIV programs. In addition, all three Syrian SIV bills include provisions that do not have counterparts under the Iraqi and Afghan programs that would provide for the protection or relocation of applicants who are in imminent danger or whose lives or safety are at risk.

Military Developments

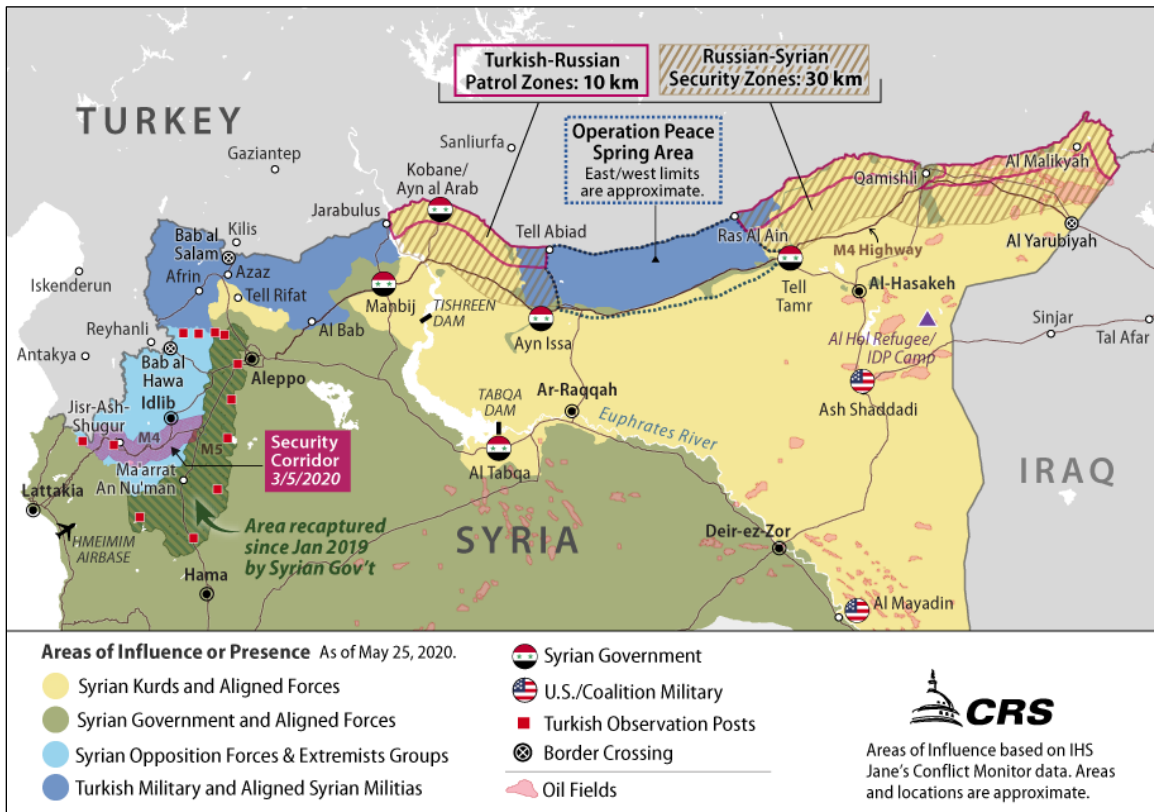
Turkish Incursion into Northern Syria

Operation Peace Spring (2019)

On October 9, 2019, Turkey’s military (and allied Syrian opposition groups) entered northeastern Syria in a military operation targeting Kurdish People’s Protection Unit (YPG) forces. Dubbed Operation Peace Spring (OPS) by Turkey, the operation followed a call between President Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. After the phone call, President Trump ordered a pullback of U.S. forces from the area of the anticipated Turkish incursion. (28 Special Forces Green Berets located along Turkey’s initial “axis of advance” were withdrawn prior to the

Turkish operation.)³³ This drew accusations among many, including some Members of Congress, that the Administration had offered a tacit “green light,” to the Turkish operation, a charge strongly denied by Administration officials who described the U.S. decision to withdraw forces as a matter of personnel safety.³⁴ President Trump said in a statement, “The United States does not endorse this attack and has made it clear to Turkey that this operation is a bad idea.”³⁵

Figure 5. Syria-Turkey Border
As of May 25, 2020



Source: CRS, using areas of influence data from IHS Conflict Monitor.

Note: This map does not depict precisely or comprehensively all U.S. bases or operating locations in Syria.

A subsequent U.S.-brokered ceasefire in mid-October allowed for the withdrawal of SDF forces from the Turkish zone of incursion, roughly corresponding to the area between the towns of Tell Abiad and Ras al Ayn (see **Figure 5**). It also created a Turkish “safe zone” stretching between the two towns, extending to a depth of 32km inside Syria. Separately, Turkey and Russia negotiated

³³ Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley before the House Armed Services Committee, December 11, 2019.

³⁴ At a December 11, 2019, hearing before the House Armed Services Committee, Defense Secretary Esper stated, “[...] when you look at the situation at the time we faced maybe one or two scenarios. One would have been to allow our troops to stand there in the face of a [...] Turkish onslaught which both Chairman Milley and I agreed wasn’t worth risking our soldiers’ lives. Option two would have been an un-credible option, which would be fighting a long-standing NATO ally.”

³⁵ “Turkey’s Syria invasion was a ‘bad idea,’ Trump says,” *Defense One*, October 10, 2019.

security zones east and west of the OPS area, from which SDF forces were also expected to withdraw (to a depth of 30km from the border). These latter areas are being patrolled by a mix of Turkish, Russian, and Syrian forces.

Following the Turkish operation, U.S. forces withdrew from outposts in northern Syria (including Manbij and Ayn Issa); Syrian and Russian forces moved in “to fill the void created by departing U.S. forces.”³⁶ The State Department also moved its Syria Transition Assistance Team personnel inside Syria (START-Forward) out of the country. In the same period, the SDF redoubled its dialogue with the Asad government and reached an agreement to coordinate in some areas.

2020 Developments

In March, Defense Department officials reported that conditions in the Turkish area of incursion (also known as the OPS area) have “stabilized for the time being.”³⁷ However, Turkey reportedly has moved hundreds of people from Turkish-controlled areas of western Syria (known informally as the Euphrates Shield Area) to the newly established OPS area in central Syria, in what some media reports have described as “population transfers.”³⁸ The moves have raised questions regarding whether the previous inhabitants of the OPS area will be permitted to return, and whether the demographics of the area will be permanently altered. In June 2020, U.S. CENTCOM officials stated that U.S. training efforts were on a “COVID pause” and U.S. personnel were awaiting a political decision concerning the future of U.S. forces in the country.³⁹

Islamic State: Ongoing Threats

In March 2019, the Islamic State lost its final territorial stronghold in Syria, as a result of Coalition operations in partnership with the SDF. In October 2019, a U.S. airstrike killed IS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, U.S. military officials warn that the group has not been eliminated, and that it continues to pose a significant threat to local and regional stability. In January 2020, U.S. officials estimated that the Islamic State retained about 14,000-18,000 IS fighters active between Syria and Iraq—similar to estimates provided in mid-2019.⁴¹

A year after the Islamic State lost its final territorial stronghold in Syria, U.S. military officials stated that the group continued to maintain a low-level insurgency, conducting primarily small arms and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks against SDF and Syrian military targets.⁴² CJTF-OIR reported that “al Baghdadi’s death did not result in any degradation of ISIS capabilities in Syria, and ISIS likely retains an intact command and control structure, and a

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | January 1, 2020 – March 31, 2020, p49.

³⁸ “Turkey’s occupation of northern Syria includes population transfers,” *Al Monitor*, May 7, 2020.

³⁹ Brig. Gen. Duke Pirak, Comments to Middle East Institute, June 23, 2020.

⁴⁰ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2019-October 25, 2019.

⁴¹ News conference with Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Ambassador James F. Jeffrey, January 23, 2020; Briefing by Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Ambassador James F. Jeffrey and Counterterrorism Coordinator Ambassador Nathan A. Sales, August 1, 2019.

⁴² Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | January 1, 2020 – March 31, 2020, p. 10.

presence in rural regions of Coalition operating areas in Syria.”⁴³ In July 2020, CENTCOM Commander Gen. McKenzie stated,

The long term future for ISIS, particularly in Syria, is going to be related to our ability to establish local security organizations that can prevent ISIS from growing. There's always going to be a low level ISIS problem. I believe that's going to be endemic. I don't think it's going to go away. But what we want to do in areas where we can control with our SDF partners, is we want to ensure that local security organizations are put in place that can ensure that the responses will be local and they will not require external assistance.⁴⁴

Turkey's October 2019 incursion into Kurdish-held areas of northern Syria temporarily disrupted joint operations with the SDF against the Islamic State.⁴⁵ While joint operations had resumed by late 2019, military officials in March 2020 noted that ongoing tension between Turkey and the SDF “continued to divert SDF attention and resources away from the fight against ISIS.”⁴⁶

Islamic State Detainees

The capture of the final Islamic State stronghold in Syria in March 2019 led to the surrender of thousands of IS fighters, as well as their spouses and children. Since then, the SDF has retained custody of roughly 10,000 IS militants (including approximately 2,000 foreign fighters) at several makeshift prisons in northern Syria. Wives and children of IS fighters (some of whom also may be radicalized) are held at separate IDP camps. The largest of these is Al Hol, which houses about 66,000 individuals, 96% of whom are women or children.⁴⁷ Media reports suggest that the Islamic State continues to operate and recruit within the camp.⁴⁸ Military assessments also have described displacement camps as a “relatively permissive operating environment” for IS supporters.⁴⁹

The SDF has stated that it is unable to assume long-term responsibility for IS detainees and their families, and the United States has urged countries to repatriate their citizens. To date, many countries have been reluctant to do so, citing concerns about their inability to prosecute or successfully monitor individuals who may have been radicalized. Some countries also have stripped IS fighters and/or family members of their citizenship.

The security of facilities housing IS fighters and family members continues to be a significant concern. The Islamic State has urged its followers inside Syria to launch operations to free IS detainees, and U.S. military assessments have noted that the SDF is unable to provide more than

⁴³ Ibid, 50.

⁴⁴ CENTCOM news transcript, “General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. interview with VoA during a recent tour of the region,” July 16, 2020.

⁴⁵ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2019–October 25, 2019.

⁴⁶ Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley before the House Armed Services Committee, December 11, 2019; Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | January 1, 2020 – March 31, 2020, p6.

⁴⁷ UN OCHA Syrian Arab Republic, North East Syria: Al Hol camp, January 13, 2020. Among the population, 46% are Iraqis (30,724), 39% are Syrians (25,780), and 15% are third country nationals (TCNs) (9,597).

⁴⁸ “Guns, Filth and ISIS: Syrian Camp Is ‘Disaster in the Making,’” *New York Times*, September 3, 2019.

⁴⁹ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | January 1, 2020 – March 31, 2020, p. 6.

“minimal security” at Al Hol.⁵⁰ Military officials have warned of the risk of a “mass breakout” from IS detention facilities, and described IS prisoners as “one of the most significant risks to the success of the [defeat-ISIS] mission.”⁵¹ In March 2020, IS prisoners temporarily seized control of part of a prison in Hasakah; SDF forces reported that they contained the uprising and that no IS prisoners escaped.⁵²

Securing IS Detainees: The U.S. Role

The Defense Department has stated that U.S. military forces do not operate within IS detention facilities or within IDP camps for displaced IS family members.⁵³ The Department also has reported that security at IS detention facilities is provided by the U.S.-trained Provincial/Regional Internal Security Forces (PRISF).⁵⁴ The Administration’s FY2021 defense budget request seeks continued support to the PRISF as part of its request for \$200 million in CTEF funds for the Syria Train and Equip Program.

Various parts of the FY2021 defense budget request could be used, directly or indirectly, to support the security of detention facilities and IDP camps. The request includes \$15 million for basic life support services at detention facility sites. It also includes funds for stipends for local forces, infrastructure repair, and sustainment.

In 2020, CJTF-OIR reported that it had established the Northeast Syria Coordination Group (NESCG) to replace its former dedicated prison support mission in Syria. The NESCG, which is not permanently based inside Syria, will coordinate with local and international partners on detainee issues.⁵⁵

Idlib Crisis

Northern areas of Idlib province are the only remaining area of Syria still under the control of armed opposition groups actively seeking the removal of Syrian President Asad. Armed groups operating in Idlib represent the remnants of armed opposition groups that have challenged Asad’s rule since 2011, as well as extremist groups that emerged during the course of the conflict—some of which are affiliated with Al Qaeda and embrace an external operations agenda.

A Syrian government offensive and related fighting displaced nearly a third of the population of Idlib between December 2019 and February 2020, in what U.S. officials described as “the largest internal displacement of people that we’ve seen in such a short period of time in Syria in the whole war.”⁵⁶ At the same time, ongoing fighting in Idlib province in early 2020 between opposition groups (backed by Turkey), and Syrian government forces (backed by Russia and Iran) resulted in the deaths of dozens of Turkish soldiers. The attacks on Turkish soldiers, some of which may have been conducted by Russia or with Russian involvement, raised the possibility

⁵⁰ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2019-June 30, 2019, p. 5.

⁵¹ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | January 1, 2020 – March 31, 2020, pp6-8.

⁵² “Kurdish-led forces put down revolt by ISIS detainees at prison in Syria,” *Washington Post*, March 30, 2020.

⁵³ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | January 1, 2020 – March 31, 2020

⁵⁴ Justification for FY 2021 Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO), Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF), February 2020.

⁵⁵ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | January 1, 2020 – March 31, 2020

⁵⁶ State Department, “Background Briefing With Senior Administration Official,” Special Briefing, February 14, 2020.

that conflict in Syria between two major powers could escalate.⁵⁷ Turkey, which publicly blamed the Syrian government for the deaths, launched what it dubbed Operation Spring Shield against Syrian military forces, downing three Syrian military aircraft.

Idlib Ceasefire. On March 5, Russian President Putin and Turkish President Erdogan reached an accord to prevent further clashes between their forces. The agreement contains three main provisions: a ceasefire along the “line of contact” in the Idlib de-escalation area, the establishment of a security corridor (6km deep to the north and 6km deep to the south from the M4 highway), and joint Russian-Turkish military patrols along the M4 from the settlement of Trunba to Ain al Hawr (see **Figure 6**, below).⁵⁸ Turkish and Russian military personnel continue to conduct joint awareness patrols pursuant to the agreement. U.S. officials in June 2020 stated that the ceasefire was holding, despite some “minor shelling back and forth.”⁵⁹ Turkey reportedly has increased its military presence in Idlib since the agreement was signed, and expressed a willingness to renew operations if necessary.⁶⁰

Key Players

State Actors. Military forces from five countries currently operate or maintain forces in or around Idlib, a province in northwest Syria that shares a border with Turkey and is slightly larger than the state of Delaware. These include:

- **Syria.** Syrian military forces operating in Idlib have sought to 1) protect regime strongholds in neighboring Latakia from attack by Idlib-based rebels, and 2) reassert control over Syria’s primary north-south (M5) and east-west (M4) highways, both of which transit through Idlib.⁶¹
- **Russia.** Russian aircraft have enabled Syrian ground operations in Idlib.⁶² In some areas, Russian ground forces also have been used to occupy areas captured from anti-Asad forces and to deter counteroffensives.
- **Turkey.** Turkey maintains twelve formal observation posts in or near Idlib established as part of 2018 negotiations with Russia, as well as numerous informal military posts.
- **Iran.** Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) forces have supported Syrian military operations in Idlib, according to U.S. officials.⁶³
- **United States.** The United States does not maintain military forces in Idlib, but since 2014 has conducted airstrikes in the province targeting Al Qaeda linked groups.

⁵⁷ “Deciphering Turkey’s darkest night in Syria,” *Al Monitor*, February 28, 2020.

⁵⁸ Additional Protocol to the Memorandum on Stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-Escalation Area, March 6, 2020 (as released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 432-06-03-2020).

⁵⁹ Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS James Jeffrey on the Virtual Meeting of Ministers of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Small Group, June 5, 2020.

⁶⁰ *Silencing the Guns in Syria’s Idlib*, International Crisis Group, May 14, 2020.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² State Department, “Senior State Department Official on the Situation in Syria,” Special Briefing, February 28, 2020.

⁶³ “Escalation of Violence in Idlib,” Press Statement, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, February 4, 2020.

Non-State Actors. A variety of non-state actors operate in Idlib, including armed groups opposed to the Asad government as well as extremist groups who oppose the Asad government but may also embrace an external operations agenda against U.S. or European targets. These include:

- **Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS).** HTS is the successor group to the Nusra Front, which was established in late 2011 as Al Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria. In 2019, HTS captured most of Idlib province from other rebel groups, and it runs a local government in the area. U.S. officials estimate that 7,000-10,000 HTS members operate in Idlib, while a U.N. committee estimates that the group has 12,000-15,000 fighters.⁶⁴
- **Hurras al Din (HD).** Also identified by the U.S. intelligence community as linked to Al Qaeda, HD maintains an estimated 3,500-5,000 fighters in Idlib, according to U.N. estimates—up to half of whom are foreign fighters.⁶⁵ HD has been described as the successor to the Khorasan Group, an Al Qaeda cell composed of foreign operatives that sought to use Syria as a launching pad for attacks against the West, before being largely eliminated by U.S. airstrikes.⁶⁶ A U.S. drone strike in Idlib in June 2020 killed HD leader Khaled al Aruri.
- **Syrian National Army (SNA).** U.S. officials have described the SNA as “Syrian opposition forces fighting against the Assad regime who are supported and supplied and commanded to some degree by Turkey.”⁶⁷
- **Hezbollah.** Lebanese Hezbollah fighters have operated in Syria in support of the Asad government since at least 2013 and as of 2020 were operating in Idlib province, according to U.S. officials.⁶⁸
- **Other Iran-backed militias.** Iran-backed fighters of various nationalities reportedly have been killed in Idlib, including members of the Zainabiyoun Brigade (Pakistani Shi’a militia) and the Fatemiyoun Brigade (Afghan Shi’a militia).⁶⁹
- **Islamic State.** A limited number of Islamic State fighters are believed to operate in Idlib. A U.S. airstrike in Idlib in October 2019 killed Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.

⁶⁴ Ambassador James Jeffrey at a press briefing on February 5, 2020; U.N. Security Council Report S/2020/53, January 20, 2020.

⁶⁵ U.N. Security Council Report S/2020/53, January 20, 2020.

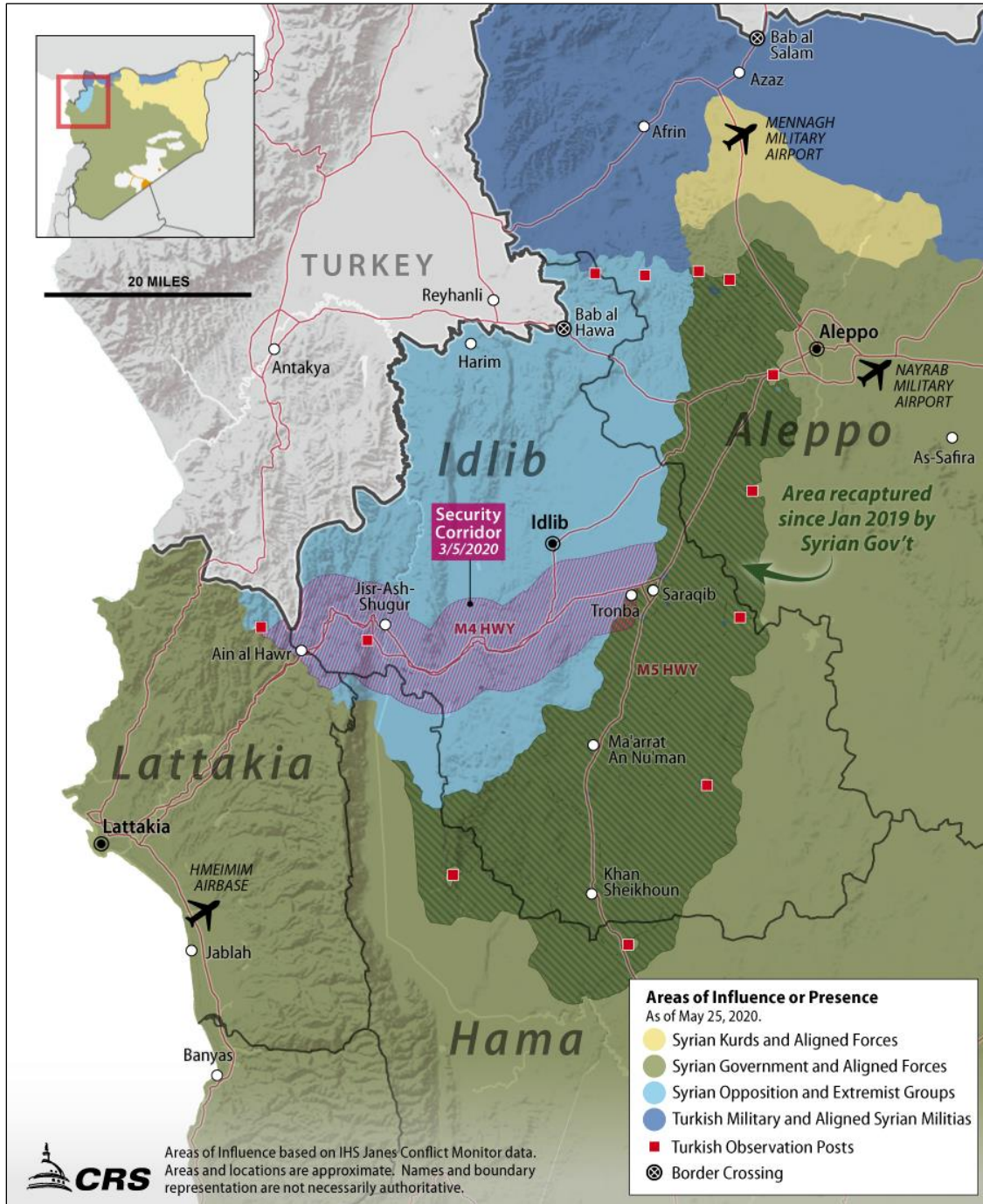
⁶⁶ “U.S. Used Missile With Long Blades to Kill Qaeda Leader in Syria,” *New York Times*, June 24, 2020.

⁶⁷ State Department Special Briefing, “Senior State Department Official Previewing the Upcoming D-ISIS Ministerial and Syria Small Group Meetings,” November 12, 2019.

⁶⁸ “Escalation of Violence in Idlib,” Press Statement, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, February 4, 2020.

⁶⁹ “IRGC trained militias suffer losses in northwest Syria,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, February 14, 2020.

Figure 6. Idlib and its Environs
As of May 25, 2020



Source: CRS, using areas of influence data from IHS Conflict Monitor.

Notes: Areas of influence approximate and subject to change.

Political Developments

Non-State Governance Structures

Governance varies widely across Syria, both within and outside of government controlled areas. While the Asad government has recaptured most areas formerly held by opposition forces, in limited cases it has permitted local governance committees to operate in recaptured areas, due in part to financial and manpower shortages.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, a number of other groups have asserted varying levels of control (ranging from de-facto to largely aspirational) outside of government-held areas. These include:

Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). The AANES was established by PYD-linked Kurdish authorities in northeast Syria following the area's liberation from the Islamic State. The area administered by the AANES (roughly a third of the country), is the largest area of Syria that remains outside of Asad government control. Primary components include the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as well as the SDF's political wing, known as the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC). AANES leaders have stated that the body is not aligned with either the Asad government or with opposition forces.⁷¹

Syrian Salvation Government. The SSG was established in late 2017 and is closely affiliated with Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)—which the United States has designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization due to its links to Al Qaeda. The SSG administers most areas of Idlib province that remain outside of Syrian government control. The SSG consists of a self-designated prime minister and roughly a dozen ministries. It provides services—such as utilities— but also has imposed restrictions on residents, particularly women.⁷² The U.N. has stated that HTS in Idlib has “systematically imposed rules and codes of conduct on civilians living in areas under its control that are fundamentally contrary to human rights.”⁷³

National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, aka *Etilaf*, Syrian Opposition Coalition, SOC. The SOC was established in 2012 in Doha, Qatar, as an umbrella group encompassing an ideologically diverse range of political groups opposed to the Asad government. In late 2012 the Obama Administration recognized the SOC as “the legitimate representative of the Syrian people in opposition to the Asad regime,”⁷⁴ without conferring upon the group the legal authority of a state.⁷⁵ Based in Turkey, the SOC does not control territory inside Syria. The group frequently has served as an interlocutor with international actors, and plays a leading role in U.N. brokered peace talks with the Syrian government. However, it exerts little, if any, influence over armed groups operating inside Syria.

Syrian Interim Government (SIG). In 2013, the SOC established the SIG to serve as a political institution capable of assuming power following what many at the time hoped would be the imminent fall of the Asad regime. Its founders also sought—unsuccessfully—to establish the SIG as a civilian authority over Syrian armed groups via the body's self-appointed Defense Ministry.

⁷⁰ “Bridging the Gap: Local Governance Committees in ‘Reconciled’ Areas of Syria,” *Chatham House*, April 2020.

⁷¹ Testimony of Ms Ilham Ahmed, Executive President, Syrian Democratic Council, before the House Oversight and Reform National Security Subcommittee, October 23, 2019.

⁷² “The Best of Bad Options for Syria’s Idlib,” *International Crisis Group*, March 14, 2019.

⁷³ Report of the U.N. Secretary General to the U.N. Security Council, April 23, 2020, S/2020/327.

⁷⁴ “Obama Recognizes Syrian Opposition Group,” *ABC News*, December 11, 2012.

⁷⁵ “U.S. Will Grant Recognition to Syrian Rebels, Obama Says,” *New York Times*, December 11, 2012.

The SIG continued to operate even as the Assad government regained territory and the likelihood of a political transition began to appear more remote. The SIG maintained offices in Idlib, until it was forced out following the establishment of the HTS-affiliated SSG in 2017. Over time, the SIG became increasingly affiliated with the Turkish government; currently it operates out of Turkish-controlled areas of Aleppo province. One report described this arrangement as follows:

The SIG is formally the authority managing the areas taken over by armed groups funded and armed by Turkey, namely the Euphrates Shield Area (ESA), which covers areas north and northeast of Aleppo; the Olive Branch Area, around Afrin northwest of Aleppo; and the Peace Spring area, which was taken recently. In practice, however, it is the Turks that control these regions through their various proxies, including armed groups and civilian entities.⁷⁶

Political Negotiations

The Geneva Process

Since 2012, the Syrian government and opposition have participated in U.N.-brokered negotiations under the framework of the Geneva Communiqué. Endorsed by both the United States and Russia, the Geneva Communiqué calls for the establishment of a transitional governing body with full executive powers. According to the document, such a government “could include members of the present government and the opposition and other groups and shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent.”⁷⁷ The document does not discuss the future of Assad.

Subsequent negotiations have made little progress, as both sides have adopted differing interpretations of the agreement. The opposition has said that any transitional government must exclude Assad.⁷⁸ The Syrian government maintains that Assad was reelected (by referendum) in 2014, and notes that the Geneva Communiqué does not explicitly require him to step down. The Syrian government position is that a transitional government can be achieved by simply expanding the existing government to include members of the opposition. Assad has stated that a comprehensive solution to the current conflict must begin by “striking at terrorism” (which his government defines broadly to include most opposition groups) and by ending external interference in Syria.⁷⁹

Who is the Syrian government negotiating with?

The Syrian opposition is diverse and fractured, and the specific groups involved in negotiations with the Assad government have fluctuated over time. At present, the Syrian opposition is represented at U.N. sponsored talks by the Syrian Negotiations Commission (SNC). The SNC was established in 2017, expanding the existing High Negotiations Committee which had been formed in 2015 under Saudi auspices. The most significant change was the inclusion within the SNC of political groups (notably the Moscow platform and the Cairo platform) which are

⁷⁶ “Use of Turkish Lira to be Expanded in Northern Areas,” *Syria Report*, December 18, 2019.

⁷⁷ Action Group for Syria, Final Communiqué, June 30, 2012, <http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniquéActionGroupforSyria.pdf>.

⁷⁸ Lara Seligman, Colum Lynch, “As Assad Gains Ground, New Syria Talks Offer Little Hope of Peace,” *Foreign Policy*, November 12, 2019.

⁷⁹ Interview of Syrian President Assad by Syrian state TV, October 31, 2019. Transcript by state news agency SANA, accessible on *Syria Report*.

viewed by some oppositionists as having ties to the Asad government or its external backers.⁸⁰ The SNC continues to be headed by Naser Hariri of the SOC, who also led the HNC. As with its previous iteration, the SNC does not include representatives from Kurdish-led SDF forces that control the northern third of Syria, reportedly at Turkey's request.⁸¹ However, the SDF has negotiated separately with the Asad government, particularly following Turkey's October 2019 incursion into northern Syria.

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

While the United States continues to call for a political settlement to the conflict, the U.S. intelligence community since 2018 has assessed that Asad is “unlikely to negotiate himself from power”⁸² or make meaningful concession to the opposition:

The regime's momentum, combined with continued support from Russia and Iran, almost certainly has given Syrian President Bashar al-Asad little incentive to make anything more than token concessions to the opposition or to adhere to UN resolutions on constitutional changes that Asad perceives would hurt his regime.⁸³

In October 2019, Ambassador Jeffrey testified that the United States continues to support U.N.-led political negotiations in Geneva pursuant to UNSCR 2254.⁸⁴ State Department officials have identified three points of leverage that the United States and its foreign partners could use to encourage the Asad regime to accept a political settlement: the withholding of reconstruction assistance, barring Syria's re-entry into the Arab League, and refusing to restore diplomatic relations with Damascus.⁸⁵

United States officials have repeatedly expressed its view that Geneva should be the sole forum for a political settlement to the Syria conflict, possibly reflecting concern regarding the Russia-led Astana Process (see below). However, the United States supported efforts by the U.N. Special Envoy for Syria to stand up a Syrian Constitutional Committee, an initiative originally stemming from the Russian-led Sochi conference in January 2018 (see below).⁸⁶ In December 2018, Norwegian diplomat Geir Pederson succeeded Staffan de Mistura as U.N. Special Envoy for Syria. In September 2019, Pederson announced the successful formation of the Syrian Constitutional Committee. Pederson stated that the committee would be facilitated by the United Nations in Geneva (see “Constitutional Committee,” below).⁸⁷

⁸⁰ “Syria opposition agree on united delegation for peace talks,” *France 24*, November 24, 2017. See also, “Where Do We Go From Here? A First-Hand Account from Syria,” Council on Foreign Relations, March 15, 2018.

⁸¹ “Turkey targets US-backed Syrian Kurdish peace talks,” *Al Monitor*, May 12, 2020.

⁸² Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, February 13, 2018.

⁸³ Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, January 29, 2019.

⁸⁴ Ambassador James Jeffrey, Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, October 22, 2019.

⁸⁵ “Syria Peace Talks to Open After a Long, Strange Month,” *New York Times*, October 28, 2019.

⁸⁶ Media Note, “The Secretary's Special Representative for Syria Engagement, Ambassador James Jeffrey Travels to Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia,” October 15, 2018.

⁸⁷ “U.N. announces formation of Syrian constitutional committee,” *Washington Post*, September 23, 2019.

The Astana Process

Since January 2017, peace talks hosted by Russia, Iran, and Turkey have convened in the Kazakh capital of Astana. These talks were the forum through which three “de-escalation areas” were established—two of which have since been retaken by Syrian military forces. The United States is not a party to the Astana talks but has attended as an observer delegation.

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

We have started to see signs that the Russians and the regime wanted to draw the political process away from Geneva to a format that might be easier for the regime to manipulate. Today makes clear and the [Joint Statement] makes clear that 2254 and Geneva remains the exclusive platform for the political process.⁸⁸

In January 2018, Russia hosted a “Syrian People’s Congress” in Sochi, in which participants agreed to form a constitutional committee comprising delegates from the Syrian government and the opposition “for drafting of a constitutional reform,” in accordance with UNSCR 2254.⁸⁹ The conference was boycotted by most Syrian opposition groups and included mainly delegates friendly to the Assad government.⁹⁰ The statement noted that final agreement regarding the mandate, rules of procedure, and selection criteria for delegates would be reached under the framework of the Geneva process.

Constitutional Committee. The committee, whose formation took nearly two years, consists of 150 delegates—50 each representing the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition, as well as a “middle third” list comprising 50 Syrian-national delegates selected by the U.N. from among the country’s legal experts, civil society members, political independents, and tribal leaders. The committee includes a limited number of Kurds but does not include representatives from the YPG, the SDF or the SDF’s political wing—the Syrian Democratic Council, SDC—which administer large areas of northern Syria.⁹¹ The committee met for the first time in Geneva in October 2019, where it formed a smaller 45-member Constitution-drafting group. The current Syrian constitution was approved in a February 2012 referendum, replacing the constitution that had been in place since 1973.

⁸⁸ Background Briefing on the Joint Statement by the President of the United States and the President of the Russian Federation on Syria, November 11, 2017.

⁸⁹ Final statement of the Congress of the Syrian national dialogue, Sochi, January 30, 2018.

⁹⁰ “Syrian Peace Talks in Russia; 1,500 Delegates, Mostly Pro-Assad,” *New York Times*, January 30, 2018.

⁹¹ “Syrian Kurds protest ‘unjust’ exclusion from constitutional committee,” *Middle East Eye*, October 2, 2019.

Humanitarian Situation

As of mid-2020, an estimated 6.2 million Syrians are internally displaced, and an additional 5.6 million Syrians are registered with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as refugees in nearby countries.⁹² The U.N. Secretary-General regularly reports to the Security Council on humanitarian issues and challenges in and related to Syria pursuant to Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020).⁹³

Humanitarian conditions in Syria have deteriorated significantly in 2020. Eighty percent of Syrians lived below the poverty line as of early 2020. In June 2020, U.N. officials reported that the Syrian Pound had lost more value in the last six months than in the first nine years of the crisis.⁹⁴ The depreciating informal exchange rate has resulted in soaring food prices, reducing access to basic food million people in 2019. staples for many families. In May 2020, the World Food Programme announced that an estimated 9.3 million people in Syria—more than half the current population, and the highest level ever recorded in Syria—are now food insecure, up from an estimated 7.9⁹⁵

Cross-Border Aid Endangered

The Syrian government has long opposed the provision of humanitarian assistance across Syria's border and across internal lines of conflict outside of channels under Syrian government control. Successive U.N. Security Council resolutions have nevertheless authorized the provision of such assistance. UNSCR 2449 authorized cross-border and cross-line humanitarian assistance until January 10, 2020. Russia and China abstained in the December 2018 vote that approved the resolution, and the Russian representative argued at the time that “new realities ... demand that [the mandate] be rejiggered with the ultimate goal of being gradually but inevitably removed.”⁹⁶

Crossing Points for Aid Reduced. On December 20, 2019, Russia and China vetoed a U.N. Security Council resolution that would have renewed the authorization enabling U.N. agencies to deliver aid into Syria from two points in Turkey and one in Iraq for another 12 months. U.N. officials warned that without cross-border operations, “we would see an immediate end of aid supporting millions of civilians.”⁹⁷ On January 10, 2020, the Security Council approved Resolution 2504, re-authorizing cross border aid into Syria via two of the four existing border crossings—Bab al Salam and Bab al Hawa, both in Turkey—for a period of six months (rather

⁹² Reliefweb, Syrian Arab Republic. Latest figures available at <https://m.reliefweb.int/country/226/syr?figures-display=all>.

⁹³ Reports submitted by/transmitted by the Secretary-General to the Security Council available at <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/reports-secretary-general>.

⁹⁴ Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria; New York, 29 June 2020

⁹⁵ U.N. Document S/2020/427, Letter dated 21 May 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General and the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council, May 27, 2020.

⁹⁶ United Nations Security Council, 8423rd meeting, December 13, 2018, S/PV.8423.

⁹⁷ “Russia and China Block Cross-Border Aid Deliveries to Syria,” *New York Times*, December 20, 2019.

than one year). The continued use of border crossings at Ramtha (Jordan) and Al Yarubiyah (Iraq) was not authorized.⁹⁸

Per UNSCR 2504, the authorization for all cross-border aid deliveries was set to expire on July 10, 2020. In May 2020, leaders of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee urged Secretary of State Pompeo to intensify U.S. efforts at the Security Council to renew the authorization for Syria cross-border aid and to push for the re-opening of the Yarubiyah crossing.⁹⁹ On July 7, Russia and China vetoed a Security Council draft resolution that would have re-authorized the border crossings at Bab al Salam and Bab al Hawa for twelve months. The United States subsequently vetoed a Russian draft resolution which would have re-authorized only Bab al Hawa for a period of six months.

Limited Reauthorization until 2021. On July 11, the Security Council passed a resolution reauthorizing cross border aid for a period of one year, eliminating the Bab al Salam crossing and leaving only a single approved crossing point at Bab al Hawa. U.N. officials previously had emphasized the importance of the Bab al Salam crossing in addition to Bab al Hawa, stating, “Both border crossings are required to sustain delivery. While the transshipment capacity of Bab al-Salam is lower than that of Bab al Hawa, Bab al-Salam provides direct access to parts of northern Aleppo that host some of the highest concentrations of displaced people in the country. 1.3 million people live in the area accessed from Bab al-Salam, and 62% of these people are displaced.”¹⁰⁰

Public Health Impact. Prior to the de-authorization of Al Yarubiyah for cross-border aid deliveries, the WHO had used the crossing to transfer medical supplies and equipment to northeast Syria. Since its closure, medical facilities in the area have faced shortages, prompting the WHO to appeal to the Security Council to re-instate the crossing point.¹⁰¹ Both the Syrian and Russian governments have long pushed to eliminate cross-border aid, arguing that aid should instead be provided via cross-line deliveries from Damascus. However, U.N. officials have stated that, “Cross-line deliveries to the north east from Damascus have not filled the gap in critical medical supplies that were, until January this year, delivered through Al Yarubiyah border crossing.”¹⁰²

Vulnerable Areas

Numerous humanitarian challenges have arisen since the outbreak of the Syria conflict in 2011. International organizations currently describe conditions in the below areas as particularly dire, and have noted that the risk these areas face is magnified by the threat posed by COVID-19. In

⁹⁸ “Security Council beats midnight deadline, renews Syria cross-border aid in contentious vote,” U.N. News, January 10, 2020.

⁹⁹ Foreign Affairs Committee Press Release, “McCaul, Risch, Menendez, Engel, Call on Administration to Intensify Efforts to Restore Cross-Border Humanitarian Operations at Syrian Border,” May 12, 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria; New York, 29 June 2020

¹⁰¹ “Syria: Aid Restrictions Hinder Covid-19 Response,” Human Rights Watch, April 28, 2020. The WHO later appeared to drop the specific provision regarding Al Yarubiya, leading observers to question whether the organization faced external pressure. See, “WHO changes to U.N. Syria memo risk stoking Trump-fueled criticism,” *Reuters*, April 29, 2020.

¹⁰² Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria, New York, 29 April 2020.

each of these areas, displaced populations reside in overcrowded conditions with inadequate access to sanitation. Officials have warned that the virus could spread rapidly among the population in these areas, overwhelming the limited capacity of local health care systems.

Northwest Syria (Idlib, Aleppo, Hama). Military operations by pro-Syrian government forces in and around Idlib displaced nearly a million people between December 2019 and February 2020. In April, U.N. officials stated that, “The [March 2020] ceasefire may have brought a degree of respite, but the humanitarian situation in the north-west is as dismal as it has ever been.”¹⁰³ U.N. officials estimate that displaced families make up two-thirds of the population of northwest Syria, and that, of these, 70% are in need of humanitarian assistance.¹⁰⁴

Northeast Syria (Raqqah, Hasakah, Deir ez Zor). Over four million people reside in the area, including thousands of internally displaced persons and Islamic State prisoners in severely overcrowded conditions.

Al Hol IDP Camp (Hasakeh). Built to house a maximum of 10,000 persons, the camp currently houses nearly 70,000 displaced persons, many of whom fled the Islamic State’s final outpost in eastern Syria. An estimated 94% of residents are women and children. According to the Kurdish Red Crescent, at least 517 people, mostly children, died inside the Al Hol camp in 2019, due to malnutrition, inadequate healthcare for newborns, and hypothermia.¹⁰⁵

Rukban IDP Camp (Rural Damascus). In 2015, thousands of Syrians fleeing the advance of regime forces became stranded at what is known as “the berm”—a stretch of no man’s land between the Syrian and Jordanian border. As of May 2020, roughly 10,000 people remained at Rukban, which falls within 50 km of the U.S. military garrison at At Tanf.¹⁰⁶ The Syrian government has not permitted any humanitarian convoys to access the area since September 2019. In May 2020, Amnesty International called on Jordan to allow relief aid for Rukban to transit through Jordanian territory, as well as to allow those in need of urgent medical care to receive treatment in Jordan.¹⁰⁷ Jordanian officials, which declared the area around Rukban to be a closed military zone following a 2016 suicide bombing, have maintained that any aid to Rukban must be provided from Syrian territory.¹⁰⁸

U.S. Humanitarian Funding

The United States is the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to the Syria crisis, drawing from existing funding from global humanitarian accounts and some reprogrammed funding.¹⁰⁹ As of July 2020, total U.S. humanitarian assistance for the Syria crisis since 2011 had reached over \$11.3 billion (including \$696 million in humanitarian funds announced by U.S. officials at the

¹⁰³ Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria, New York, 29 April 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria; New York, 29 June 2020.

¹⁰⁵ “More than 500 dead in Syria’s Al-Hol in 2019: medics,” *AFP*, January 16, 2020.

¹⁰⁶ “Jordan: Authorities must allow urgent medical care for displaced Syrians in Rukban during COVID-19,” Amnesty International, May 7, 2020.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ “FM reiterates Jordan’s support for political solution in Syria,” *Jordan Times*, April 20, 2020.

¹⁰⁹ USAID Fact Sheet: U.S. Assistance for the People of Syria, January 26, 2018.

June 2020 Brussels donor conference).¹¹⁰ These funds have gone towards meeting humanitarian needs inside Syria, as well as towards support for communities in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt that host Syrian refugees.¹¹¹

International Humanitarian Funding

Multilateral humanitarian assistance in response to the Syria crisis includes both the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) and the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP). The 3RP is designed to address the impact of the conflict on Syria’s neighbors, and encompasses the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, the Jordan Response Plan, and country chapters in Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt. It includes a refugee/humanitarian response coordinated by UNHCR and a “resilience” response (stabilization-based development assistance) led by the U.N. Development Program (UNDP).¹¹²

In parallel to the 3RP, the HRP for Syria is designed to address the crisis inside the country through a focus on humanitarian assistance, civilian protection, and increasing resilience and livelihood opportunities, in part by improving access to basic services. This includes the reconstruction of damaged infrastructure (water, sewage, electricity) as well as the restoration of medical and education facilities and infrastructure for the production of inputs for sectors such as agriculture.¹¹³

The 2020 3RP appeal for Syria seeks \$5.2 billion, and the 2020 HRP for Syria seeks \$3.4 billion, on par with previous years.¹¹⁴ Since 2013, the annual 3RP appeals for Syria have been funded at roughly 60%.¹¹⁵

In March 2020, the U.N. launched the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan to fund COVID-19 response efforts in priority countries, including Syria. Coordinated by UNOCHA, the appeal sought \$2 billion for various U.N. entities. In May, the appeal was updated to \$6.7 billion.

In June, the European Union hosted the fourth annual donors’ conference in Brussels for Syria and regional states affected by the Syria crisis. Attendees pledged \$5.5 billion in humanitarian aid for 2020, as well as nearly \$2.2 billion for 2021 and beyond.¹¹⁶ International financial institutions and donors also announced \$6.7 billion in concessional loans.

¹¹⁰ State Department Press Statement, “The United States Announces Additional Humanitarian Assistance for the Syrian People,” June 30, 2020.

¹¹¹ State Department Fact Sheet: U.S. Humanitarian Assistance in Response to the Syria Crisis, March 14, 2019.

¹¹² For additional details, see UNDP and UNHCR, *3RP Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan 2017–2018: In Response to the Syria Crisis: Regional Strategic Overview*, December 5, 2016.

¹¹³ For additional details, see UNOCHA, *2017 Syrian Arab Republic Humanitarian Response Plan: January-December 2017*.

¹¹⁴ Syria Refugee Response and Resilience Plan (3RP) 2020 (Regional response plan), Financial Tracking Service, UNOCHA.

¹¹⁵ 3RP Financial Summary – Q4 2019, April 27, 2020.

¹¹⁶ Council of the EU Press Release, “Brussels IV Conference on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region': co-chairs' declaration,” June 30, 2020.

Public Health Developments

As of mid-2020, Syria has experienced relatively few confirmed cases of COVID-19, despite the presence of multiple risk factors. The Syrian government has reported the lowest confirmed case counts in the region.¹¹⁷ However testing capacity is significantly limited compared to neighboring states—in mid-July UNOCHA reported that the Syrian government had increased its daily testing capacity to 345, up from 70 in early May.¹¹⁸

Syrian officials reported what they described as Syria’s first case of COVID-19 on March 22; informal reports suggest that the virus may have been present in the country for some time. Additional cases have subsequently been reported, the majority in government-controlled areas in and around Damascus.¹¹⁹ Syrian Ministry of Health data does not include areas outside of central government control.

- **Northeast Syria.** In Kurdish controlled areas of northeast Syria, the first confirmed case of the virus was reported on April 17. As of early July, six cases had been confirmed in the northeast.¹²⁰ Because none of the confirmed cases had any travel history or known contact with suspected cases, WHO has stated that, “it is assumed that there has been some undetected transmission. Despite the limited number of cases in NES, the risk of large-scale transmission continues to remain high.”¹²¹
- **Northwest Syria.** In opposition-held areas of northwest Syria (in and around Idlib), local doctors in March reported deaths that appeared consistent with the virus, but were unable to confirm due to lack of testing capability.¹²² As mid-July, four positive cases had been recorded in the northwest.¹²³

In May, the Syrian government began to lift some previously imposed restrictions; July reports from Syria’s Ministry of Health showed an increase in the number of new cases.¹²⁴ Some observers assess that that number of confirmed cases reported by the Syrian government understates the spread of the virus.¹²⁵

The capacity of the Syrian government to respond to an outbreak is limited. Syria’s medical facilities have been significantly damaged or destroyed over the past decade of violent conflict. In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that it had documented over 500 attacks on medical facilities since 2016. A March 2020 study by the London School of Economics estimates that there are only about 325 ICU beds with ventilators across the entire country, mostly

¹¹⁷ COVID-19 Daily Update, World Health Organization Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office. Most recent confirmed case numbers available on Twitter @WHO ERMO.

¹¹⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Preparedness and Response to COVID-19 Monitoring Report no.1, 14 July 2020.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ UNOCHA and WHO, Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Response Update No. 7, July 5, 2020.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² “‘Wash Our Hands? Some People Can’t Wash Their Kids for a Week.’” *New York Times*, March 19, 2020.

¹²³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Preparedness and Response to COVID-19 Monitoring Report no.1, 14 July 2020.

¹²⁴ “Coronavirus Update: Pandemic Spreads Across Syria,” *Syria Report*, July 15, 2020.

¹²⁵ “Coronavirus cases suspiciously low in Syria, but new uptick is spurring the government to act,” *Washington Post*, July 18, 2020.

in government-held urban centers.¹²⁶ Syrian health officials have blamed the ventilator shortage on western sanctions (see “U.S. Sanctions on Syria”).¹²⁷

U.S. Aid to Syria for COVID-19

In March 2020, the United States announced it would provide an additional \$16.8 million in humanitarian assistance for Syria in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹²⁸ Separately, CJTF-OIR officials announced in April that the Coalition had provided \$1.2 million in supplies for COVID-19 prevention efforts to coalition partners in northeast Syria. A coalition statement reported that the equipment would help protect medical staff in northeast Syria, as well as guards responsible for securing Islamic State prisoners. A coalition spokesperson stated, “Under Section 1209 of the United States’ 2015 National Defense Authorization Act, the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) provides financial support to the SDF to conduct their counter-ISIS operations. In the context of COVID-19, the CTEF also authorizes the use of funds to procure personal protective equipment for our partners in Syria and their ISIS detainees. Every purchase must go through the appropriate request and review processes.”¹²⁹

U.S. Policy

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

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

As Syria’s conflict has changed over time from civil unrest to nationwide military conflict involving multiple internal and external actors to the apparent resurgence of the Asad government, to renewed instability driven by economic decline, the policies, approaches, and

¹²⁶ Gharibah, Mazen and Mehchy, Zaki (2020) *COVID-19 pandemic: Syria’s response and healthcare capacity*. Policy Memo. Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

¹²⁷ “Economic Pressures Force Government to Relax Stay-At-Home Restrictions,” *Syria Report*, April 15, 2020.

¹²⁸ State Department Factsheet, “The United States is Leading the Humanitarian and Health Assistance Response to COVID-19,” March 30, 2020.

¹²⁹ CJRF-OIR News Release, “Coalition provides COVID-19 equipment in NE Syria,” April 4, 2020.

priorities of the United States and others also have changed. The United States and its Syrian and regional partners have not succeeded in inducing or compelling Syrian President Bashar al Asad to leave office or secured a fundamental reorientation of Syria's political system as part of a negotiated settlement process. The United States continues to advocate for an inclusive negotiated solution, and has responded to Asad's resumption of political and security control by expanding economic sanctions on the regime. Forceful interventions in Syria by Russia, Iran, Turkey, the United States, and Israel have created a fundamentally different set of calculations for policymakers to consider relative to those that prevailed prior to the conflict.

Trump Administration Statements on Syria Policy

Since 2018, U.S. policy in Syria has sought three primary goals: the enduring defeat of the Islamic State, a political settlement to the Syria conflict pursuant to UNSCR 2254, and the withdrawal of Iranian-backed forces.¹³⁰ The October 2019 Turkish military incursion into northern Syria and subsequent withdrawal and/or repositioning of the bulk of U.S. forces in the country raised questions about whether U.S. policy in Syria had (or would) shift. Ambassador Jeffrey has since reaffirmed that previously articulated U.S. goals for Syria remain U.S. policy.¹³¹ When asked whether the enduring defeat of the Islamic State could be accomplished without ground forces, Jeffrey stated, "We need ground forces. They do not necessarily have to be American."¹³²

In December 2019, Defense Secretary Mark Esper stated that, "The United States strategy in the Middle East seeks to ensure the region is not a safe haven for terrorists, is not dominated by any power hostile to the United States and contributes to a stable global energy market."¹³³ Esper added that the overarching U.S. goal with regard to Syria is to support a U.N.-sponsored political settlement to the conflict that addresses those three objectives, clarifying that the hostile power in the Syria context is Iran.

Administration officials have stated that the United States continues to work with the SDF, despite the group's decision following the Turkish incursion to coordinate in some areas with the Asad government. Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley stated, "[...] we're still working with [the SDF] in the eastern portion of northeast Syria, and then they are working with the Russian and Syrian regime in—in other parts of Syria."¹³⁴ In response to questioning from Members of Congress, U.S. military leaders in December 2019 confirmed that U.S. policy in Syria remains to work "by with and through" local partners. When asked about what conditions would need to be in place for U.S. forces to withdraw from Syria, Esper stated, "[...] when we

¹³⁰ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2019–October 25, 2019, p. 27.

¹³¹ Ambassador James Jeffrey before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, October 22, 2019; Ambassador James Jeffrey, Hudson Institute online livestream event, May 15, 2020 ("Transcript: Maximum Pressure on the Assad Regime for its Chemical Weapons Use and Other Atrocities.")

¹³² Ambassador James Jeffrey before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, October 22, 2019.

¹³³ Defense Secretary Mark Esper before the House Armed Services Committee, December 11, 2019.

¹³⁴ Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley before the House Armed Services Committee, December 11, 2019.

could consider redeploying if you will would be when we feel confident that local security and police forces are capable of handling any type of resurgence [...] of ISIS.”¹³⁵

U.S. Sanctions on Syria

The United States has maintained economic sanctions on Syria since 1979, when the Syrian government was found to be a state sponsor of acts of international terrorism. The Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003 (P.L. 108-175; 22 U.S.C. 2151 note) required additional restrictions on U.S. exports, investments, transactions, and diplomatic relations because of Syrian interference in Lebanon and its support for U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) including Hezbollah and Hamas. The United States has imposed additional sanctions under nonproliferation legislation since the early 1990s and under national emergency authorities since the beginning of the conflict in 2011.¹³⁶ In 2013, the State Department determined that the government of Syria had used chemical weapons in contravention of international law, requiring another round of economic and diplomatic restrictions. For national security reasons, however, restrictions would be applied on a case-by-case basis.¹³⁷

U.S. officials have described sanctions as both a tool for changing Syrian government behavior, and a punitive measure designed to isolate Syria in response to ongoing human rights abuses by the Asad government. In November 2018 and March 2019, the Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued advisories warning of the risk of U.S. sanctions for parties involved in petroleum shipments to the government of Syria. OFAC stated that the United States aimed to “disrupt support for the Assad regime by preventing the normalization of economic and diplomatic relations [...] The United States is committed to isolating the Assad regime and its supporters from the global financial and trade system in response to the continued atrocities committed by the regime against the Syrian people.”¹³⁸

The State Department has noted that U.S. sanctions “will remain in place until the Syrian regime and Russia permanently and verifiably adhere” to UNSCR 2254.¹³⁹ In May 2020, President Trump renewed for an additional year the national emergency authorities with respect to Syria, including associated sanctions.¹⁴⁰

In June, the Trump Administration released regulations providing for the implementation of Executive Order 13894 of October 2019, based in part on requirements enacted in the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, which provides for sanctions against individuals determined by the U.S. government

to be responsible for or complicit in, or to have directly or indirectly engaged in, or attempted to engage in, any of the following in or in relation to Syria:

¹³⁵ Defense Secretary Mark Esper before the House Armed Services Committee, December 11, 2019.

¹³⁶ “U.S. Relations with Syria,” State Department Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, July 23, 2018.

¹³⁷ Department of State. Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation. “Determinations regarding Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria Under the Chemical and Biological Weapons Control and Warfare Elimination Act of 1991,” Public Notice 8460, September 4, 2013, 78 *Federal Register* 55236.

¹³⁸ Department of the Treasury, “OFAC Advisory to the Maritime Petroleum Shipping Community,” March 25, 2019.

¹³⁹ “The State Department Imposes Sanctions on Individual Responsible for the Violence in Northern Syria,” State Department Press Statement, March 17, 2020.

¹⁴⁰ White House Statement, “Text of a Notice on the Continuation of the National Emergency with Respect to the Actions of the Government of Syria,” May 7, 2020.

- (1) actions or policies that further threaten the peace, security, stability, or territorial integrity of Syria; or
- (2) the commission of serious human rights abuse....

The Administration then announced the designation of 39 individuals and entities pursuant to Executive Order 13894. Those designated include Syrian President Bashar al Asad, his wife Asma, and other members of the Asad family and supporters of the government. Secretary of State Pompeo said

We will continue this campaign in the coming weeks and months to target individuals and businesses that support the Assad regime and obstruct a peaceful, political resolution of the conflict as called for by UNSCR 2254. We anticipate many more sanctions and we will not stop until Assad and his regime stop their needless, brutal war against the Syrian people and the Syrian government agrees to a political solution to the conflict as called for by UNSCR 2254.¹⁴¹

U.S. Assistance to Vetted Syrian Groups

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

U.S. Military Presence in Syria

U.S. forces have operated in Syria in support of the counter-IS campaign since 2015. The Special Operations Joint Task Force, Operation Inherent Resolve (SOJTF-OIR), led by Major General Eric T. Hill, has been “the primary advise, assist and accompany force in Syria, working closely with the SDF.”¹⁴² SOJTF-OIR has reported to the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), which leads the international coalition to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.¹⁴³ In September 2019, Lieutenant General Robert “Pat” White assumed command of CJTF-OIR. U.S. forces have operated in northern and eastern Syria in partnership with the SDF and in southeast Syria in partnership with the Maghawir al Thawra militia near the At Tanf garrison adjacent to the tri-border area shared by Syria, Jordan, and Iraq (**Figure 3**).

Military Authorities

U.S. strike operations against the Islamic State and Al Qaeda-affiliated targets in Syria are conducted pursuant to the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF). U.S. forces have operated in Syria for train and equip program purposes as well as to advise and assist U.S. partner forces, whether or not those specific partner forces were trained and/or armed under the train and equip program. Such “advise and assist” activities may have been conducted pursuant to the authorities outlined by train and equip program provisions or pursuant to other defense authorities defined in law or asserted by the executive branch. This includes military operations against IS targets conducted pursuant to the 2001 AUMF. U.S. operations in Syria also are supported in part by the 2014 request of the Iraqi government to the U.N. Security Council for military support to address the threat of terrorism emanating from Syria. It remains to be seen

¹⁴¹ U.S. State Department, Press Statement on Syria Caesar Act Designations, June 17, 2020.

¹⁴² Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Jarrard via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq, October 31, 2017.

¹⁴³ See <http://www.inherentresolve.mil> for an organization chart.

whether the Iraqi government may seek to amend or rescind that request in light of some Iraqis' efforts to expel foreign military forces from Iraq and the ongoing U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue.

U.S. Repositions Forces in 2019

Following an October 6 call between President Trump and Turkish President Erdogan, the White House announced that Turkey would “soon be moving forward with its long-planned operation into Northern Syria,” and that U.S. forces would “no longer be in the immediate area.”¹⁴⁴ A total of 28 Special Forces Green Berets located along Turkey’s initial “axis of advance” subsequently withdrew from the border area.¹⁴⁵ On October 9, Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring into northern Syria. On October 14, Defense Secretary Esper announced that, at the President’s direction, the United States would withdraw the approximately 1,000 remaining U.S. troops in northeast Syria. Esper stated that, “Due to Turkey’s irresponsible actions, the risk to U.S. forces in northeast Syria has reached an unacceptable level. We are also at risk of being engulfed in a broader conflict.”¹⁴⁶ In an October 19 briefing, Esper reinforced that “all forces” except those at At Tanf garrison in southeast Syria would be withdrawn “within weeks.”¹⁴⁷

On October 21, Secretary Esper stated that U.S. troops located next to oil fields in northeast Syria “are not in the present phase of withdrawal. The present phase of withdrawal from northeast Syria involves those troops up along the border.” Esper added that the focus for troops remaining in Syria would be to “deny access, specifically revenue, to ISIS and any other groups that may want to seek that revenue to enable their own malign activities.”¹⁴⁸ On October 21, President Trump stated, “We’ve secured the oil [...] We want to keep the oil. And we’ll work out something with the Kurds so they have some money, they have some cash flow.”¹⁴⁹

Military officials stated on November 7, “I would be cautious with saying that ‘the mission [is] to secure the oil fields.’ The mission is the defeat of ISIS. The securing of the oil fields is a subordinate task to that mission, and—and the purpose of that task is to deny ISIS the—the revenues from that oil infrastructure.”¹⁵⁰ On November 13, President Trump stated, “We’re keeping the oil. We have the oil. The oil is secure. We left troops behind, only for the oil.”¹⁵¹ On December 11, Defense Secretary Esper clarified, “We are there to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS. So, a sub task of that, as we’ve directed to our commander on the ground, is to deny ISIS access to that oil, because whoever controls that oil controls a resource that allows them to buy weapons, equipment, fighters, to provide for their communities, etc.”¹⁵²

¹⁴⁴ White House Statement from the Press Secretary, October 6, 2019.

¹⁴⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley before the House Armed Services Committee, December 11, 2019.

¹⁴⁶ Department of Defense, “Statement by Secretary of Defense Dr. Mark T. Esper Regarding Turkey, Syria Border Actions,” October 14, 2019.

¹⁴⁷ DOD transcript, “Secretary of Defense Esper Media Engagement En Route to Afghanistan,” October 19, 2019.

¹⁴⁸ DOD transcript, “Remarks by Secretary Esper in a Joint Press Conference With Senior Afghan Officials and Resolute Support Mission Commander,” October 21, 2019.

¹⁴⁹ Remarks by President Trump in Cabinet Meeting, October 21, 2019.

¹⁵⁰ Department of Defense Press Briefing by Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Jonathan Rath Hoffman and Navy Rear Admiral William D. Byrne Jr., Vice Director, Joint Staff, November 7, 2019.

¹⁵¹ Remarks by President Trump and President Erdoğan of Turkey Before Bilateral Meeting, November 13, 2019.

¹⁵² Defense Secretary Mark Esper before the House Armed Services Committee, December 11, 2019.

On December 5, Secretary Esper stated in an interview with Reuters that the U.S. military withdrawal from Syria was complete.¹⁵³ Esper stated that approximately 600 U.S. troops would remain in Syria. A DOD Inspector General report on Operation Inherent Resolve covering the period October-December 2019 stated that U.S. forces in northern Syria had been reduced from approximately 1,000 to 500. An additional 100 U.S. troops would remain at the At Tanf garrison in the tri-border area of southeast Syria. In March 2020, CENTCOM Commander Gen. McKenzie stated that U.S. forces continue to operate alongside the SDF in what he termed the Eastern Syria Security Area (ESSA).¹⁵⁴ CJTF-OIR has defined the ESSA as spanning from Deir ez Zor in the south to the M4 highway in the north, and stretching east to the Iraqi border (see **Figure 5**).¹⁵⁵ In April, officials stated that U.S. training programs in Syria and Iraq under Operation Inherent Resolve, temporarily suspended due to COVID-19, would resume “as conditions permit.”¹⁵⁶

Table I. Evolution of U.S. Military Presence in Syria

2015	Oct: White House announces that less than 50 U.S. Special Operations Forces will deploy to Syria to support operations against the Islamic State. ¹⁵⁷
2016	Dec: Force Management Level (FML) for U.S. personnel in Syria increased to allow the deployment of up to 500 individuals.
2017	Dec: DOD states that approximately 2,000 U.S. personnel are operating in Syria. ¹⁵⁸
2018	Jan: Secretary of State Tillerson states that “the United States will maintain a military presence in Syria focused on ensuring that ISIS cannot re-emerge.” ¹⁵⁹ Mar: President Trump states that U.S. troops will leave Syria “very soon.” ¹⁶⁰ Nov: Special Representative for Syria Engagement James Jeffrey states that, “U.S. troops will stay on in Syria we say until the enduring defeat of ISIS.” ¹⁶¹ Dec: President Trump announces U.S. forces will be returning from Syria “now.” ¹⁶²

¹⁵³ “Exclusive: U.S. military completes pullback from northeast Syria, Esper says,” *Reuters*, December 5, 2019.

¹⁵⁴ CENTCOM Commander Gen. McKenzie before the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 12, 2020

¹⁵⁵ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | January 1, 2020 – March 31, 2020.

¹⁵⁶ Statement by the Political Directors of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Small Group, April 16, 2020.

¹⁵⁷ Press Briefing by the Press Secretary Josh Earnest, October 30, 2015.

¹⁵⁸ “Pentagon Announces Troop Levels in Iraq, Syria,” DoD News, December 6, 2017.

¹⁵⁹ Rex Tillerson, “Remarks on the Way Forward for the United States Regarding Syria,” Hoover Institute at Stanford University, January 17, 2018.

¹⁶⁰ Remarks by President Trump on the Infrastructure Initiative, March 30, 2018.

¹⁶¹ Telephonic Press Briefing with James Jeffrey, Special Representative for Syria Engagement, November 7, 2018.

¹⁶² Video posted to Twitter (@realDonaldTrump), December 19, 2018, 3:10 PM.

2015	Oct: White House announces that less than 50 U.S. Special Operations Forces will deploy to Syria to support operations against the Islamic State. ¹⁵⁷
2019	<p>Feb: White House states U.S. will leave some forces in Syria, seeks troop contributions from allies to offset planned U.S. withdrawal.</p> <p>6 Oct: President Trump directs withdrawal of U.S. troops from areas of northern Syria in advance of Turkish military incursion; 28 U.S. Special Forces withdraw.¹⁶³</p> <p>14 Oct: President Trump directs the full withdrawal of the roughly 1,000 remaining U.S. troops in northern Syria.¹⁶⁴</p> <p>21 Oct: Secretary Esper states that U.S. troops located near Syrian oil fields will remain to deny the Islamic State or “other groups” access to oil revenue.¹⁶⁵</p> <p>5 Dec. Secretary Esper states that the pullback of U.S. forces in Syria complete; roughly 600 U.S. troops to remain inside the country.¹⁶⁶</p>

Syria Train and Equip Program

Overview

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

Congress has not appropriated funds specifically for the Syria train and equip program since the program’s inception. Rather, through 2019, Congress required the Department of Defense to reprogram funds from global counterterrorism assistance accounts to operations and maintenance accounts to support program activities, with each reprogramming subject to the prior approval of the four congressional defense committees. Amendments to the train and equip authority included in the FY2020 NDAA changed this procedure and shifted the requirement to prior notification of each 10% increment of available funds. (**Table 2** provides information about program funding and related requests.)

¹⁶³ White House Statement from the Press Secretary, October 6, 2019; Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley before the House Armed Services Committee, December 11, 2019.

¹⁶⁴ Department of Defense, “Statement by Secretary of Defense Dr. Mark T. Esper Regarding Turkey, Syria Border Actions,” October 14, 2019.

¹⁶⁵ DOD transcript, “Remarks by Secretary Esper in a Joint Press Conference With Senior Afghan Officials and Resolute Support Mission Commander,” October 21, 2019.

¹⁶⁶ “Exclusive: U.S. military completes pullback from northeast Syria, Esper says,” *Reuters*, December 5, 2019.

Table 2. Syria Train and Equip Program: Appropriations Actions and Requests
Thousands of Dollars

	FY2015 Approved Transfers	FY2016 Approved Transfers	FY2017 Defense Appropriation	FY2018 Request	FY2019 Defense Appropriation	FY2020 Defense Appropriation	FY2021 Request
	225,000 (O&M FY15)	116,453 (CTPF FY15/16)	220,000 (CTEF)	500,000 (CTEF)	252,000 (CTEF)	200,000 (CTEF)	200,000 (CTEF)
	220,500 (CTPF FY15/16)	300,000 (CTPF FY16/17)					
	279,500 (CTPF FY15/16)	—					
	-157,408 (CTPF FY15/16)	—					
Net Total	567,592	416,453	220,000	500,000	252,000	200,000	200,000
Combined Net Total	2,356,045						

Source: Executive branch appropriations requests and reprogramming notifications.

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

In February 2020, the DOD Inspector General released the results of an audit of accountability processes for CTEF-funded equipment designated for transfer to vetted Syrians. The audit found some deficiencies in the CTEF-Syria (CTEF-S) program’s tracking, reporting, storage, and security for equipment prior to transfer to partner forces, including weapons and ammunition. Special Operations Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (SOJTF-OIR) took steps to remediate the concerns identified, and the DOD-IG considers its recommendations closed.¹⁶⁷

FY2021 Defense Funding Request

The Administration’s FY2021 defense funding request seeks \$200 million in CTEF funds for the Syria Train and Equip Program, to “develop and sustain a force of 10,000 personnel to secure, defend, and stabilize territory previously controlled by ISIS.”¹⁶⁸ This represents a shift from the FY2020 request, which envisioned a vetted Syrian opposition (VSO) force of 61,000.¹⁶⁹ The

¹⁶⁷ DOD Inspector General, Results in Brief - Audit of the DoD’s Accountability of Counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria Train and Equip Fund Equipment Designated for Syria, February 13, 2020.

¹⁶⁸ Justification for FY 2021 Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO), Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF), February 2020.

¹⁶⁹ Justification for FY 2020 Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO), Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF), March 2019.

FY21 request notes that the Defense Department adjusted its planning in light of the additional drawdown of U.S. forces in Syria.

The request calls for continued support to the following groups operating in eastern Syria:

- **Finish Forces**, (commando and counterterrorism units) which conduct raids and clearance operations against Islamic State cells in urban areas.
- **Internal Security Forces**, which provide civil protection and security via checkpoints and city patrols.
- **Provincial Internal Security Forces (PRISF)**, which provide wide area security (including perimeter security operations for uninhabited areas to limit IS freedom of movement). The PRISF also provide security at facilities for Islamic State detainees.

The request also calls for continued support to a group in southeastern Syria, **Jaysh Maghawir ath Thawra (MaT)**. MaT operates out of the At Tanf garrison in the Syria-Iraq-Jordan tri-border area. In addition, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), “through its military councils and oil protection force, remains a committed partner eligible for military assistance as it continues to counter ISIS.”

Roughly a quarter of the request would provide logistical support, supplies, and services to VSOs, including \$15 million for basic life support services (subsistence, latrines, power generation) at detention facility sites operated by local partner forces in Syria.

U.S. Nonlethal and Stabilization Assistance

The Administration’s FY2020 foreign assistance budget request reflected the Trump Administration’s intent to end U.S. nonlethal (non-humanitarian) assistance for the Syrian opposition, and to shift funding responsibility for stabilization projects to coalition partners. From 2012 through 2018, the United States provided nonlethal assistance to some Syrian opposition groups for specific, congressionally approved purposes. The United States also has funded stabilization efforts in areas of northeastern Syria liberated from Islamic State control. Although the Administration’s FY2020 and FY2021 requests sought no Syria-specific funding, Congress appropriated funds for Syria programs and directed specific amounts for stabilization and other priorities (see below).

Background

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

expanded and amended these authorities to focus on areas of congressional priority and to put into place oversight and reporting requirements.¹⁷⁰

Nonlethal and Stabilization Aid to Syria: 2017-2020

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

FY2017 Funds. In January 2017, the Obama Administration notified Congress that it intended to spend \$230 million in FY2017 ESF-OCO funds (originally appropriated under the Further Continuing and Security Assistance Appropriations Act, 2017, P.L. 114-254) to support stabilization in areas liberated from the Islamic State in Syria. In August and September 2018, the Trump Administration notified Congress of plans to reprogram those funds and instead rely on contributions from foreign partners—reflecting a broader assessment by the Administration that the United States was bearing more than its share of costs in regards to Syria stabilization. \$214 million in FY2017 funds ultimately were obligated for Syria programs.

FY2018 Funds. The FY2018 appropriations act (P.L. 115-141) designated \$500 million in FY2018 funds from various foreign assistance accounts for a “Relief and Recovery Fund” (RRF) for areas liberated or at risk from the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations. The accompanying explanatory statement stated that funds were appropriated, among other purposes, “for non-lethal assistance programs to address the needs of civilians affected by conflict in Syria in a manner consistent with the prior fiscal year,” but neither the act nor the statement allocated a specific amount for Syria. FY2018 RRF funds were available for Syria stabilization, but as of June 2020, FY2018 monies had only been notified for Syria-related atrocity crime accountability programs as directed by the act.

FY2019 Funds. The FY2019 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-6) stated that, of the funds appropriated under the ESF, INCLE, and PKO accounts, no less than \$40 million should be made available for nonlethal stabilization assistance for Syria, of which not less than \$7 million should be made available for emergency medical and rescue response, and chemical weapons use investigations. Notably, the act stated only that nonlethal assistance is to be provided for

¹⁷⁰ The FY2014 foreign operations appropriations act (Section 7041(i) of Division K of P.L. 113-76), as expanded and extended by the FY2015 act (Section 7041(h) of Division J of P.L. 113-235), made FY2015 and prior year ESF funding available “notwithstanding any other provision of law” for select nonlethal purposes inside Syria. The FY2016 appropriations act (Section 7041(h) of Division K of P.L. 114-113) extended this authority further, granting notwithstanding exceptions for FY2016 ESF funds as well as for FY2016 funds in the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) and Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) accounts. The Obama Administration used the INCLE and PKO accounts to support justice sector activities in opposition-held areas of Syria and to provide nonlethal assistance to select armed opposition groups. The appropriations acts for FY2017 (Section 7041(j) of Division J of P.L. 115-31) and FY2018 (Section 7041(k) of Division K of P.L. 115-141) further amended and specified the categories of assistance authorized to be provided from these accounts. Prior to the enactment of specific notwithstanding authority by Congress, the President was required to assert emergency and contingency authorities (i.e., Sections 451 and 614 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended) to provide nonlethal assistance to the unarmed Syrian opposition and to communities inside Syria.¹⁷⁹ In 2012, the Administration began to use these emergency and contingency authorities to provide food rations and medical supplies to the National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC) and the Turkey-based Syrian Military Council (SMC).

stabilization purposes. This was a significant departure from the FY2018 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 115-141), which authorized the use of appropriated funds for 14 listed purposes, including establishing inclusive local governance, bolstering the viability of the Syrian opposition, developing civil society and independent media, and countering extremism. In October 2019, the White House announced \$50 million for stabilization, religious and ethnic minority communities, accountability, first responders, and the removal of explosive remnants of war (ERW).¹⁷¹ To date, \$54.5 million in FY2019 funds have been notified for Syria, including \$35.5 million in ESF-OCO funds and \$19 million in ESF-OCO, INCLE, and NADR-CW funds allocated to the RRF.

FY2020. The Administration’s FY2020 State and Foreign Operations request for Syria sought no ESDF or NADR funding for Syria-specific programs, in contrast to the FY2019 request which sought \$130 million and \$44.5 million for Syria programs in the two accounts, respectively. Similar to the FY2019 Consolidated Appropriations Act, the FY2020 Further Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-94) makes not less than \$40 million available for nonlethal stabilization in Syria, and specifies that no less than \$7 million shall be used for emergency medical and rescue response, and chemical weapons use investigations.

Table 3. Nonlethal and Stabilization Funding for Syria
\$, millions

Fiscal Year	FY2017	FY2018	FY2019	FY2020	FY2021
Syria Request	745 ESF-OCO 1 INCLE-OCO 44 NADR-OCO 50 PKO-OCO	150 ESDF 41.5 NADR	130 ESDF 44.5 NADR	-	-
Total Syria Request	840	191.5	174.5	-	-
Other Admin request (not Syria-specific)	1,000 RRF	50 RRF	40 RRF	145 RRF	5,900 IHA 135 RRF
Syria-specific Appropriations	-	-	40 ESF/INCLE/PKO	40 ESF/INCLE/PKO	TBD
Other Appropriations	169 RRF	500 RRF	200 RRF	200 RRF	TBD
Actual	214	2.5	54.5 (initial)	-	TBD

Source: U.S. State Department data, FY2017- FY2021 Budget Request Materials.

Notes: ESF = Economic Support Fund; ESDF = Economic Support and Development Fund; INCLE = International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement; NADR = Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining and Related Programs; PKO = Peacekeeping Operations; RRF = Relief and Recovery Fund; IHA = International Humanitarian Assistance.

FY2021 Request. The Administration’s FY2021 State and Foreign Operations request seeks no funds for Syria-specific programs. The request would allocate \$135 million to the Relief and Recovery Fund, to support efforts in places including Syria. The request also seeks \$5.9 billion

¹⁷¹ White House Statement from the Press Secretary, October 12, 2019.

for the new International Humanitarian Assistance account (IHA) to address humanitarian needs in crisis areas including Syria.

Syria START Programs

Following the closure of U.S. Embassy Damascus in February 2012, several regionally based teams were established to monitor and implement U.S. assistance programs. A Syria Transition Assistance and Response Team (START) operated from Turkey and coordinated U.S. humanitarian and foreign assistance to northern Syria, including assistance to opposition-held areas. In Jordan, the Southern Syria Assistance Platform (SSAP) monitored and coordinated comparable U.S. humanitarian and foreign assistance to southern and eastern Syria, including assistance to opposition-held areas. The State Department and USAID also deployed a small team of U.S. civilian assistance officials (known as START Forward) inside areas of northern Syria where DOD-trained and/or equipped local forces were in control.

These programs have undergone significant changes since 2018. Some START programs were amended and/or ended in 2018 in line with the Administration's plans to focus on stabilizing former IS-held areas to the east. Cross-border SSAP programs reportedly were halted in mid-2018, after Syrian military forces regained control of southwestern Syria.¹⁷² In late 2018, the announced withdrawal of U.S. forces was preceded by the withdrawal of U.S. civilian personnel from northern Syria. In 2019, the Administration announced that some U.S. forces would remain in Syria, and START Forward personnel redeployed to the country in July.¹⁷³ In October 2019, following the Turkish military incursion into northern Syria, START Forward personnel were again withdrawn from Syria, although most Department of State and USAID assistance activities continued outside of the Turkish incursion zone.¹⁷⁴

Stabilization Programming in Areas Liberated from the Islamic State

To date, stabilization programming for areas of northeast Syria liberated from IS control has comprised four primary lines of effort: (1) demining, (2) promotion of local governance and civil society, (3) rehabilitation of basic infrastructure, and (4) promotion of economic growth and development.¹⁷⁵ U.S. funding has included support for ethnic and religious minorities, civil society and local governance, first responders, justice and accountability efforts, restoration of essential services, community security, and ERW-removal.

In March 2020, USAID reported that it was funding approximately 240 projects in northeast Syria, largely agricultural projects focusing on economic growth and food security. USAID also reported that donor funds were “nearly expended,” and future donor commitments uncertain. As a result, the agency reported that, “USAID programming has decelerated pending an infusion of additional resources.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Written Statement of Robert W. Jenkins, Deputy Assistant Administrator, U.S. Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance, USAID, before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East & North Africa, November 29, 2018.

¹⁷³ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2019–October 25, 2019, p. 42.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁷⁵ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | April 1, 2019 – June 30, 2019, p. 35.

¹⁷⁶ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | January 1, 2020 – March 31, 2020, p. 9.

In addition to funding shortfalls, some stabilization projects were relocated as a result of Turkey's October 2019 incursion into northern Syria, the subsequent establishment of the Turkish-controlled OPS area, and the expansion of Russian and Syrian military units into areas formally patrolled by U.S. forces. As of 2020, ongoing stabilization projects throughout the country face the additional challenge of adjusting operations to account for the threat posed by COVID-19.

Outlook & Challenges

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

- the stabilization and governance of areas recaptured from the Islamic State;
- the resolution of security threats posed by extremist groups in northwest Syria;
- the return and reintegration of internally and externally displaced Syrians;
- the reconstruction of conflict-damaged areas;
- the management of Syria-based threats to Syria's neighbors; and
- the terms of a post-conflict political order in Syria.

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

Consolidating Gains against the Islamic State

U.S. efforts to prevent the resurgence of the Islamic State have focused on stabilization programming in IS-liberated areas as well as ongoing support to local partner forces. The Trump Administration in 2019 sought to shift financial responsibility for stabilization programs (which have included activities such as restoring electricity to liberated areas) to coalition partners, while also redeploying U.S. military personnel within and out of Syria. The State Department has reported that stabilization activities via the START (Turkey-based), SSAP (Jordan-based), and START-Forward platforms continue, albeit "almost exclusively with Coalition contributions."¹⁷⁷ To the extent that it relies on contributions by coalition partners, the future of stabilization programming in Syria appears uncertain.

As noted above, the Trump Administration did not seek funds for Syria stabilization in its FY2020 budget request, but Congress appropriated funds for this purpose. The Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020 states that not less than \$40 million shall be made available for nonlethal stabilization assistance for Syria. The act also makes additional funds available for IS-liberated areas, including via the Relief and Recovery Fund and the Prevention and Stabilization Fund. These funds could be used for stabilization activities in Syria, but are not specifically designated as such.

The Administration has come under some scrutiny for failing to obligate funds appropriated by Congress for Syria stabilization. The Syria Study Group report, issued in September 2019,

¹⁷⁷ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2019-October 25, 2019, p. 42.

recommended that the Administration obligate unspent funds in the Relief and Recovery Fund designated for areas liberated from the Islamic State (Congress has not appropriated these funds on a country-specific basis, but has used explanatory statement language to authorize their use in specific countries).

U.S. support to local partner forces has been another key element in the U.S. effort to securing the enduring defeat of the Islamic State and consolidating coalition gains. While the Administration in 2019 reduced its troop presence in Syria from roughly 1,000 to 600 forces, senior U.S. military leaders have emphasized their view that a continued U.S. military presence in Syria is vital to preventing the re-emergence of the Islamic State. In December 2019, Joint Chief of Staff Chairman Gen. Milley stated, “If we withdraw all our capabilities and support to the indigenous governments and we don’t continue to operate by, with, and through them, then I believe that the conditions will be set for [an Islamic State] resurgence.”¹⁷⁸ Milley assessed that, in his view, the SDF does not have “the independent capability” to prevent an Islamic State resurgence in the absence of U.S. support. Moreover, ongoing political debate in Iraq concerning the future of U.S. and other foreign forces in that country may affect related U.S. and coalition operations in Syria during 2020.

Preserving Relationships with Partner Forces

Numerous Members of Congress have expressed concern about what they describe as the abandonment of U.S. Kurdish allies in Syria. In October 2019, Senator Menendez stated

It was the Kurds who were largely our ground forces. It’s the Kurds that lost about 11 to 13,000 of their people. It’s the Kurds that were detaining over 10,000 ISIS fighters and families for us [...] when you betray the person who you—the entity who you were fighting on the battlefield with and you basically leave them when you’re finished using them and say, you know, you’re on your own, it’s a hell of a way to send a global message that, in fact, don’t fight for the United States because when they’re finished with you they’ll let you die on the battlefield.

President Trump has defended his decision, stating, “We never agreed to protect the Kurds for the rest of their lives [...] Where’s an agreement that said we have to stay in the Middle East for the rest of humanity, for the rest of civilization, to protect the Kurds?”¹⁷⁹ Defense Secretary Esper also stated, “The handshake with the Kurds, with the SDF in particular, was a handshake that we would ensure that we would defeat ISIS. It was not a handshake that said yes, we would also help you establish an autonomous Kurdish state. It was also not a handshake that said yes, we would fight Turkey for you.”¹⁸⁰ At the same time, U.S. military officials have stated that “allies and partners, both nation states but also indigenous partners like the SDF, are important to fulfill our national security objectives.”¹⁸¹ Some have noted that the U.S. raid that killed Islamic State leader

¹⁷⁸ Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley before the House Armed Services Committee, December 11, 2019.

¹⁷⁹ Remarks by President Trump in Cabinet Meeting, October 21, 2019.

¹⁸⁰ Secretary of Defense Mark Esper before the House Armed Services Committee, December 11, 2019.

¹⁸¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley before the House Armed Services Committee, December 11, 2019.

Abu Bakr al Baghdadi was reportedly made possible by information provided by an informant run by Kurdish intelligence officers.¹⁸²

It is unclear whether or how changes in U.S. posture in Syria during 2019 will durably reshape the U.S. relationship with Syrian Kurds. Military officials in late 2019 stated that joint U.S.-SDF operations against the Islamic State had resumed, and Congress has appropriated funds for the continued training and equipping of partner forces in Syria including the SDF. However, the perceived uncertainty regarding U.S. policy in Syria and the future of the U.S. military presence may prompt U.S. partner forces, including Kurds, to seek support elsewhere—including from U.S. adversaries.

In early 2019, CJTF-OIR assessed that it was possible the SDF would splinter into separate security force factions, depending in part on their negotiations with the Syrian government. CJTF-OIR reported that the SDF “seeks to maintain semi-autonomous control of northeastern Syria, either by controlling the territory with support from Coalition forces or by striking a deal favorable to the constituent parts of the SDF with the Syrian regime and Russia.”¹⁸³ It is possible that as part of such an arrangement, the Syrian government and/or Russia could insist on limitations being placed on U.S. operations, with uncertain but potentially negative effects on U.S. operations against the Islamic State.

Countering Iran

U.S. military assessments continue to highlight the risks posed by foreign states operating in Syria, particularly Iran. In late 2019, CENTCOM reported that Iran continued to maintain a presence inside Syria in support of the Asad government and Iran’s own strategic objectives.¹⁸⁴ CJTF-OIR reported to the DOD OIG that Iran’s goals in Syria include “retaining access to Hezbollah in Lebanon, maintaining the ability to strike Israel from Syrian territory, maintaining a military presence and military influence in Syria, and recouping investment through securing economic and security contracts in Syria.”¹⁸⁵

Some Members of Congress have raised concerns about Iranian drones conducting overflight operations of U.S. bases in Syria and Iraq, which Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Milley has described as “a very serious threat.”¹⁸⁶ On at least two occasions in 2017, the U.S. Air Force shot down armed Iranian UAVs that had advanced towards coalition forces in Syria with “hostile intent.”¹⁸⁷ Pro-Iranian militias operating in Syria, such as Kata’ib Hezbollah (KH), also may pose a threat to U.S. forces. In December 2019, the United States launched retaliatory airstrikes on two KH facilities in eastern Syria (and three KH facilities in Iraq) following a KH rocket attack in

¹⁸² “Kurdish informant provided key intel in operation that killed ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,” *NBC News*, October 28, 2019; “Trump’s Syria Troop Withdrawal Complicated Plans for al-Baghdadi Raid,” *New York Times*, October 27, 2019.

¹⁸³ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2019-March 31, 2019.

¹⁸⁴ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2019-October 25, 2019, p. 32.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley before the House Armed Services Committee, December 11, 2019.

¹⁸⁷ “DoD Official: Sole Focus in Iraq, Syria Remains on ISIS,” CENTCOM, June 20, 2017.

northern Iraq that killed a U.S. contractor. U.S. personnel in Syria may be vulnerable to additional attacks by Iran-backed forces, particularly following the January 2020 U.S. airstrike that killed Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) Commander Qassem Soleimani.

Addressing Humanitarian Challenges in Extremist-Held Areas

The international response to the humanitarian crisis in Idlib reflects a broader debate regarding humanitarian assistance and counterterrorism, and how donors should balance the needs of civilians against the risks that extremist groups could inadvertently benefit from, divert, or influence the distribution of humanitarian assistance.¹⁸⁸ Areas of Idlib province are the most significant zone remaining outside of government control in western Syria, and the civilian population has been described as caught between various extremist groups operating in the area (some affiliated with Al Qaeda), and Syrian military forces which seek to bring the province under central government control. Nevertheless, the presence of extremist groups in Idlib has complicated the provision of humanitarian assistance to the province, out of concern that aid could fall into the hands of Al Qaeda affiliated groups.¹⁸⁹ Similarly, U.S. military assessments have stated that, within camps for internally displaced persons, “DoD, DoS, and USAID have struggled to address the often competing needs of providing security, isolating ISIS members and supporters, preventing the spread of ISIS ideology, and providing for the health and welfare of camp residents—who are mostly women and children.”¹⁹⁰

Assisting Displaced Syrians

Conflict in Syria has taken the lives of hundreds of thousands of people and has displaced millions within the country and beyond its borders. As the intensity of conflict has declined in some areas of the country, displaced Syrians have faced difficult choices about whether or how to return to their home areas amid uncertainty about security, potential political persecution, crime, economic conditions, lost or missing documentation, and prospects for recovery. In 2018, the Asad government passed legislation enabling the state to designate land anywhere in the country for redevelopment and displace its current residents—a measure which could alter the demographics of formerly opposition-held areas and complicate the return of refugees and displaced persons.¹⁹¹ Humanitarian advocates and practitioners continue to raise concerns about the security and protection of returnees and displaced individuals in light of conditions in many areas of the country and questions about the Syrian government’s approach to political reconciliation.¹⁹²

In addition, mechanisms and mandates that have provided for the delivery of humanitarian assistance across the Syrian border without the consent of the Syrian government are facing

¹⁸⁸ See for example, Jessica Trisko Darden, “Humanitarian assistance has a terrorism problem. Can it be resolved?” *War on the Rocks*, January 3, 2019; Joel R. Charny, “Counter-terrorism and humanitarian action: the perils of zero tolerance,” *War on the Rocks*, March 20, 2019.

¹⁸⁹ “US tightens counter-terror clampdown on Syria aid,” *The New Humanitarian*, September 21, 2018.

¹⁹⁰ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | January 1, 2020 – March 31, 2020, p. 7.

¹⁹¹ “Law No. 10 of 2018: Housing, Land, and Property,” Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, December 10, 2018.

¹⁹² See for example, Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2020: Syria* (pp. 539-546).

increasingly forceful opposition by Russia and China at the U.N. Security Council. These states argue that the situation on the ground has changed, making it possible for aid to transit through official checkpoints, and that cross border aid mechanisms should be evaluated and adjusted in light of these developments.¹⁹³ In January 2020, the Security Council renewed a more limited mandate for cross-border delivery of humanitarian assistance for six months instead of twelve. The United States remains the leading donor for international humanitarian efforts related to Syria, and U.S. policymakers may face a series of decisions about whether or how to continue or adapt U.S. support in light of changing conditions and administrative and logistical constraints.

Preventing Involuntary Refugee Returns

Despite the various impediments to the safe and voluntary return of refugees to Syria, neighboring states that have hosted thousands of Syrian refugees since the beginning of the crisis in 2011 are increasingly calling for refugees to return home. In Lebanon, which hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees per capita (Syrian refugees are estimated to comprise up to a quarter of the population) political leaders have stated that the return of refugees should not be contingent on a political solution to the Syrian conflict.¹⁹⁴

In a September 2019 address to the U.N. General Assembly, Lebanese President Aoun argued that the conditions for the “safe and dignified return” of refugees to Syria have been met, stating, “per international reports, the security situation on most of the Syrian territories has become stable, the military confrontations have become confined to the Idlib region, and the Syrian State has officially declared, time and again, that it welcomes the return of its displaced citizens.”¹⁹⁵ Aoun stated that more than 250,000 displaced persons had returned to Syria, and accused some states of trying to hinder refugee return by “sowing fear among the displaced.”¹⁹⁶ In some cases, the return of refugees to Syria has been facilitated by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).¹⁹⁷ It is unclear whether all refugees departed Lebanon voluntarily.¹⁹⁸ UNHCR has continued to assess that conditions are not right for the large-scale return of refugees to Syria.

Turkey, which hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees overall, has proposed using international funds to resettle a portion of its refugee population in territory it currently occupies in northern Syria.¹⁹⁹ In November 2019, President Erdogan presented the U.N. Secretary General with a plan for “new settlement areas for the return of Syrian refugees.”²⁰⁰ The plan, which was reviewed by some media organizations, reportedly would require more than \$26 billion in foreign

¹⁹³ “Describing Vast Scale of Need, Humanitarian Official Urges Security Council to Renew Authorization for Lifesaving Cross-Border Aid Delivery in Syria,” SC/14061, December 19, 2019.

¹⁹⁴ “Aoun Calls for Gradual Return of Syrian Refugees,” *Asharq Al Awsat*, March 8, 2018.

¹⁹⁵ Address by Lebanese President Michel Aoun at the 74th session of the U.N. General Assembly, September 25, 2019.

¹⁹⁶ Address by Lebanese President Michel Aoun at the 74th session of the U.N. General Assembly, September 25, 2019.

¹⁹⁷ “Aoun: Lebanon Could Organize Return of Syrian Refugees with Damascus,” *Asharq Al Awsat*, May 4, 2019; “The return of Syrian refugee families from the camps of Ersal to the village of Essal el-Ward in Syria,” July 12, 2017, <http://www.lebarmy.gov.lb>.

¹⁹⁸ Amnesty International, “Lebanon: Authorities must immediately halt deportation of Syrian refugees,” August 27, 2019.

¹⁹⁹ “Turkey Wants Refugees to Move to a ‘Safe Zone.’ It’s a Tough Sell.” *New York Times*, November 1, 2019; “Erdogan renews call for ‘safe zone’ support as Syrians return,” *Al Monitor*, December 17, 2019.

²⁰⁰ “Readout of the Secretary-General’s meeting with H.E. Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, President of Turkey,” <http://www.un.org/sg/en>, November 1, 2019.

assistance.²⁰¹ Some observers have questioned whether the plan would alter the demographics of northern Syria by moving (primarily) Sunni Arab refugees into areas formerly administered by Kurdish forces.²⁰² U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres “stressed the basic principles relating to the voluntary, safe and dignified of return of refugees,” but stated that UNHCR would form a team to study the Turkish proposal.²⁰³ In late 2019, human rights organizations stated that it is “likely” that hundreds of Syrian refugees had been detained and returned to Syria.²⁰⁴ In a December 2019 hearing, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper also stated that Turkey was beginning to return refugees to northern Syria.²⁰⁵

Managing Reconstruction Aid

In 2017, U.N. Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura estimated that Syria’s reconstruction will cost at least \$250 billion, and a group of U.N.-convened experts estimated in August 2018 that the cost of conflict damage (including lost economic opportunity during the conflict) could exceed \$388 billion.²⁰⁶ The Trump Administration has stated its intent not to contribute to the reconstruction of Asad-controlled Syria absent fundamental political change and to use U.S. diplomatic influence to discourage other international assistance to Asad-controlled Syria. Congress also has acted to restrict the availability of U.S. funds for assistance projects in Asad-controlled areas.²⁰⁷

In the absence of U.S. engagement, other actors such as Russia or China could conceivably provide additional assistance for reconstruction purposes, but may be unlikely to mobilize sufficient resources or adequately coordinate investments with other members of the international community to meet Syria’s considerable needs. Predatory conditional assistance could also further indebt the Syrian government to these or other international actors and might strengthen strategic ties between Syria and third parties in ways inimical to U.S. interests. A lack of reconstruction, particularly of critical infrastructure, could delay the country’s recovery and exacerbate the legacy effects of the conflict on the Syrian population, with negative implications for the country’s security and stability.

Supporting a Political Settlement to the Conflict

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

²⁰¹ “Turkey Pitches Plan to Settle 1 Million Refugees in Northern Syria,” *Foreign Policy*, December 18, 2019.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ “Readout of the Secretary-General’s meeting with H.E. Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, President of Turkey,” <http://www.un.org/sg/en>, November 1, 2019.

²⁰⁴ “Sent to a war zone: Turkey’s illegal deportations of Syrian refugees,” Amnesty International, October 25, 2019.

²⁰⁵ Defense Secretary Mark Esper before the House Armed Services Committee, December 11, 2019.

²⁰⁶ Security Council Briefing on the Situation in Syria, Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, November 27, 2017; and, U.N. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, “Experts discuss post-conflict reconstruction policies after political agreement in Syria,” August 7, 2018.

²⁰⁷ Section 7041(i)(2)(C) of Division G of P.L. 116-94 states that FY2020 funds made available for authorized purposes in Syria “should not be used in areas of Syria controlled by a government led by Bashar al-Assad or associated forces.”

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

Monitoring Destabilizing Economic and Political Trends

In 2020, international organizations have highlighted what they describe as "Syria's severe economic crisis."²⁰⁸ In April, the World Food Program reported that the price of basic food staples in Syria has increased by more than 100% over the past year; since mid-March some areas have seen average price increases of 40%-50% for food staples.²⁰⁹ In early June 2020, some analysts highlighted what they described as the collapse of the Syrian pound (SYP), which briefly traded at over 3,000 to the dollar (as compared to 1,000 SYP to the dollar in January 2020, and 50 SYP to the dollar pre-2011).²¹⁰ President Asad also has faced rare public criticism, including from key family members²¹¹ and foreign allies.²¹² Renewed protests in some parts of the country have highlighted public discontent at state corruption and worsening economic conditions.²¹³ At the same time, renewed unrest in some areas previously recaptured from opposition forces have prompted some analysts to describe Asad's position as vulnerable despite the regime's military gains.²¹⁴ It remains to be seen whether deteriorating economic conditions in Syria eventually could erode broader support for Asad among regime loyalists, and potentially represent a new destabilizing element within the country's civil conflict.

²⁰⁸ Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria, New York, 29 April 2020.

²⁰⁹ Ibid; "Food Prices Across Syria Double In A Year: WFP," *AFP*, April 27, 2020.

²¹⁰ "Currency Collapse Increases Social and Political Risks," *Syria Report*, June 10, 2020; "Syrian pound hits new lows over regional tensions – traders," *Reuters*, January 13, 2020.

²¹¹ "Syria's Assad seeks to control economy, goes after cousin," *Associated Press*, June 4, 2020.

²¹² "Ex-Russia envoy to Syria slams Assad regime as unfit to rule," *Middle East Monitor*, April 21, 2020; "Has Moscow really turned against Assad?" *Atlantic Council*, May 12, 2020.

²¹³ "Protest in southwest Syria against faltering economy, corruption," *Al Jazeera*, June 7, 2020.

²¹⁴ "Syria's Assad is confronting the toughest challenges of the 9-year war," *Washington Post*, May 25, 2020; "Assassinations in southern Syria expose limits of Assad's control," *Financial Times*, April 28, 2020.

Appendix. Syria Study Group Findings and Recommendations

In September 2019, the congressionally mandated Syria Study Group (SSG) released its final report and recommendations. The group's principal findings were as follows (direct quotations):

- The liberation of ISIS-held territory does not eliminate the group's threat to the United States.
- The ISIS detainee population is a long-term challenge that is not being adequately addressed.
- Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups remain active in Syria and threaten the United States.
- Despite Israeli air strikes and U.S. sanctions, Iran continues to entrench itself in Syria; Russia and Iran show few serious signs of divergence.
- Assad has not won the conflict in Syria.
- Progress toward a political settlement to the Syria conflict has stalled, and Assad shows no willingness to compromise with his opponents.
- The United States underestimated Russia's ability to use Syria as an arena for regional influence.
- U.S.-Turkey relations are strained in Syria by starkly diverging views of the SDF. A Turkish incursion into northeastern Syria would represent a major setback to U.S. aims in Syria and a new crisis for the U.S.-Turkish relationship.
- Although the SDF has been a highly effective partner in the fight against ISIS, it must undergo a transition to ensure stability in northeastern Syria.
- The Assad regime's systematic targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure constitutes war crimes and demands accountability, as well as enhanced efforts to protect civilians.
- Syria's humanitarian crisis, not least the challenges posed by internally displaced people and refugees, will reverberate for decades. Most refugees are unlikely to return voluntarily given current conditions in Syria.
- Despite these challenges, the United States maintains leverage to shape an outcome in Syria that protects core U.S. national security interests.

The group's principal recommendations were as follows:

- Halt the U.S. military withdrawal, consolidate gains in IS liberated areas, help local communities establish alternate forms of governance
- Update the U.S. military mission to head off an IS insurgency
- Prepare contingency scenarios for an IS resurgence, a military engagement with Iranian and/or Russian proxies forces, and a Turkish incursion into northeast Syria
- Return START Forward personnel to Syria, restart U.S. stabilization funding, obligate unspent funds in the Relief and Recovery Fund
- Press the SDF to govern more inclusively and sever links with PKK leadership
- Develop an internationally coordinated strategy for addressing the challenge posed by IS detainees in Syria; designate one senior U.S. official charged with implementing a coherent strategy to address all IS detainees populations; increase CTEF funding and update authorized activities for Syria

- Assist the Iraqi Security Forces in preventing an IS resurgence in Iraq
- Continue to isolate the Asad regime through sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and denial of reconstruction aid
- Test Russia’s willingness to support a political settlement but avoid making concessions to Moscow
- Prevent further entrenchment by Iran and its proxies through continued support of Israeli airstrikes, sanctions enforcement, and maintaining the U.S. military presence at the At Tanf garrison in southeastern Syria
- Seek areas for cooperation with Turkey to address its legitimate security concerns while pressing Turkey to avoid any incursion into northeast Syria
- Address humanitarian crisis in Idlib while countering the presence of terrorist groups

Bolster humanitarian efforts; support neighboring states hosting refugees. Oppose efforts to forcibly return Syrian refugees; resume accepting Syrian refugees in the United States.

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