

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

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Summary

The expanding international confrontation with the insurgent terrorist group known as the Islamic State (IS, aka the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or ISIL/ISIS) has reshaped long-standing debates over U.S. policy toward the ongoing civil conflict in Syria, now in its fifth year. The Islamic State controls large areas of northeastern and central Syria, from which it continues to launch assaults on forces opposed to and aligned with the government of President Bashar al Asad. Meanwhile, fighting elsewhere pits government forces and their foreign allies against a range of anti-government insurgents, some of whom have received limited U.S. assistance.

Since March 2011, the conflict has driven more than four million Syrians into neighboring countries as refugees (out of a total population of more than 22 million). More than 7.5 million other Syrians are internally displaced and are among those in need of humanitarian assistance, of which the United States remains the largest bilateral provider, with more than \$4 billion in U.S. funding identified to date. The United States also has allocated nearly \$400 million to date for nonlethal assistance to select opposition groups. President Obama requested \$385 million in FY2015 and FY2016 Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funding for further opposition assistance. FY2016 requests also seek an additional \$600 million in Defense funding for a train and equip program for vetted Syrians first authorized by Congress in 2014, and more than \$1.6 billion in Syria-related FY2016 humanitarian assistance and refugee crisis response funding.

Syrian officials have stated their conditional willingness to serve as partners with the international community in counterterrorism operations in Syria, a position that reflects their apparent desire to create an image and role for the Asad government as a bulwark against Sunni Islamist extremism. However, the Obama Administration and several Members of Congress have rejected the prospect of counterterrorism partnership with President Asad, and Administration officials continue to call for a political transition and describe Asad as having lost legitimacy. Some Members of Congress and observers argue that the United State should seek to remove Asad from power or act militarily to protect Syrian civilians. Others express concern that disorderly regime change could further empower extremists or that civilian protection missions could prolong the conflict or involve the United States and its partners too deeply in stabilizing Syria over the long run.

U.S. officials and Members of Congress continue to debate how best to pursue U.S. regional security and counterterrorism goals in Syria without inadvertently strengthening the Asad government. Similar questions arise in relation to options for countering the Islamic State without bolstering other anti-U.S. Islamists and vice versa. Anti-Asad armed forces and their activist counterparts have improved their coordination in some cases, but remain divided over tactics, strategy, and their long-term political goals for Syria. Powerful Islamist forces seek outcomes that are contrary in significant ways to stated U.S. preferences for Syria's political future. The United Nations Security Council has demanded a halt to the use of chemicals as a weapon of war in the country and seeks continued Asad government cooperation with plans to verifiably dismantle its chemical weapons program.

The 114th Congress is now considering proposed appropriations (H.R. 2685, S. 1558, and H.R. 2772) and authorization legislation (H.R. 1735) related to Syria as well as proposals to authorize the use of military force against the Islamic State. For more information, see CRS Report R43727, *Train and Equip Program for Syria: Authorities, Funding, and Issues for Congress*, by Christopher M. Blanchard and Amy Belasco, and CRS Report R43612, *The "Islamic State" Crisis and U.S. Policy*, by Christopher M. Blanchard et al.

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Overview

Fighting continues across Syria, pitting government forces and their foreign allies against a range of anti-government insurgents, some of whom also are fighting amongst themselves. Government forces are fighting on multiple fronts and have lost or ceded control of large areas of the country to rebels since 2011, but hold most major cities in western Syria (see **Figure 1**). The Asad government continues to receive support from Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. Pro-Asad forces have suffered several battlefield losses since early 2015, but the Asad government has shown no indication of an imminent collapse or an intention to leave power. The Islamic State organization (IS, aka the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or ISIL/ISIS) controls large but relatively less populated areas of northeast and central Syria, including most of the Euphrates River valley and some areas adjacent to Syria's borders with Turkey and Iraq.

Some opposition forces are formidable, but, as a whole, the anti-Asad movement has lacked unity of purpose, central command, and coordinated support. Various opposition groups have, depending on the circumstances, cooperated and competed. Fighting during 2014 led to advances for opposition forces in areas of southern Syria and gains for Asad's forces and extremists elsewhere at the expense of moderates (**Figure 2**). Through early 2015, significant elements of the opposition clashed with one another, though in recent months, some Islamist and non-Islamist groups have collaborated with apparent success in some areas.

As recently as February 2015, U.S. defense intelligence officials assessed that the conflict was "trending in the Asad regime's favor," but predicted that pro-Asad forces would "continue to struggle and be unable to decisively defeat the opposition in 2015."¹ Nevertheless, by mid-2015, U.S. defense officials were acknowledging rebels' subsequent gains, describing pro-Asad forces as "much weakened," and discussing the possibility that Asad could cede large areas of the country by withdrawing forces from some regions.² Some observers have argued that regime losses in confrontations with IS forces and with other opposition forces are creating public pressure on the government to improve military performance and leadership or to negotiate. In the event of an outright opposition military victory over the Asad regime, intra-opposition competition and conflict could persist. Much of the armed opposition seeks to replace the Asad government with a state ruled according to some form of Sunni Islamic law, which some Sunnis and non-Sunni minority groups oppose. Kurdish groups control some areas of northwestern and northeastern Syria and may seek autonomy or independence in the future.

In conjunction with its high-profile mid-2014 military offensive in Iraq, the Islamic State has worked to consolidate control over territory it holds in Syria, but it has suffered some losses at the hands of Kurdish fighters backed by coalition air strikes. In May and June 2015, the group launched new offensives in central and northern areas of the country, bringing it into conflict with both pro- and anti-Asad forces. The group's rise to prominence has meant that since mid-2014, U.S. and international policy debates about Syria increasingly have focused on potential threats and responses related to the Islamic State, even as the broader conflict has continued and, in some areas, intensified.

¹ Joint Statement of Lieutenant General Vincent R. Stewart, USMC, Director, Defense Intelligence Agency; Lieutenant General William C. Mayville, US Army, Director for Operations, J-3, The Joint Staff; and Mr. Mark S. Chandler Acting Director for Intelligence, J-2, The Joint Staff, before the House Armed Services Committee, February 4, 2015.

² Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) General Martin Dempsey, Remarks at Press Conference with Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, May 7, 2015.

Syria's government has met many of the final requirements associated with the September 2013 chemical disarmament agreement endorsed by the United Nations (U.N.) Security Council in Resolution 2118. All of Syria's declared chemical weapons materials have been removed from the country and more than 98% have been destroyed. The Syrian government has since revealed previously undisclosed chemical weapons-related facilities and as of July 2015, four of 12 facilities had been destroyed, with plans in place for the destruction of the others. Opposition groups continue to report the alleged use of chlorine gas by government forces. For more information on chemical weapons and the U.S.-backed disarmament process, see CRS Report R42848, *Syria's Chemical Weapons: Issues for Congress*, coordinated by Mary Beth D. Nikitin.

In late 2014 and 2015, U.S. diplomatic efforts focused less on active efforts to engineer a negotiated end to fighting and establish a transitional governing body in Syria and more on building regional and international consensus on responding to the advances of the Islamic State. Some members of the Syrian opposition have expressed concern that international efforts to combat the Islamic State will benefit the Asad government and/or undermine international commitments to provide assistance to opposition groups seeking Asad's ouster.

As fighting continues, Syrian civilians continue to suffer in what U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper described in early 2014 as an "apocalyptic disaster." U.N. sources report that since March 2011, the conflict has driven more than four million Syrians into neighboring countries as refugees (out of a total population of more than 22 million; see **Figure 3**). At the end of 2014, an estimated 12.2 million people inside Syria, more than half the population, were in need of humanitarian assistance, of which more than 7.6 million were internally displaced.³ The United States is the largest bilateral humanitarian aid donor, with more than \$4 billion allocated to date.⁴ The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA) and its partners appealed for more than \$6 billion in funding in 2014; that appeal remains underfunded. The 2015 appeal is for \$8.4 billion.

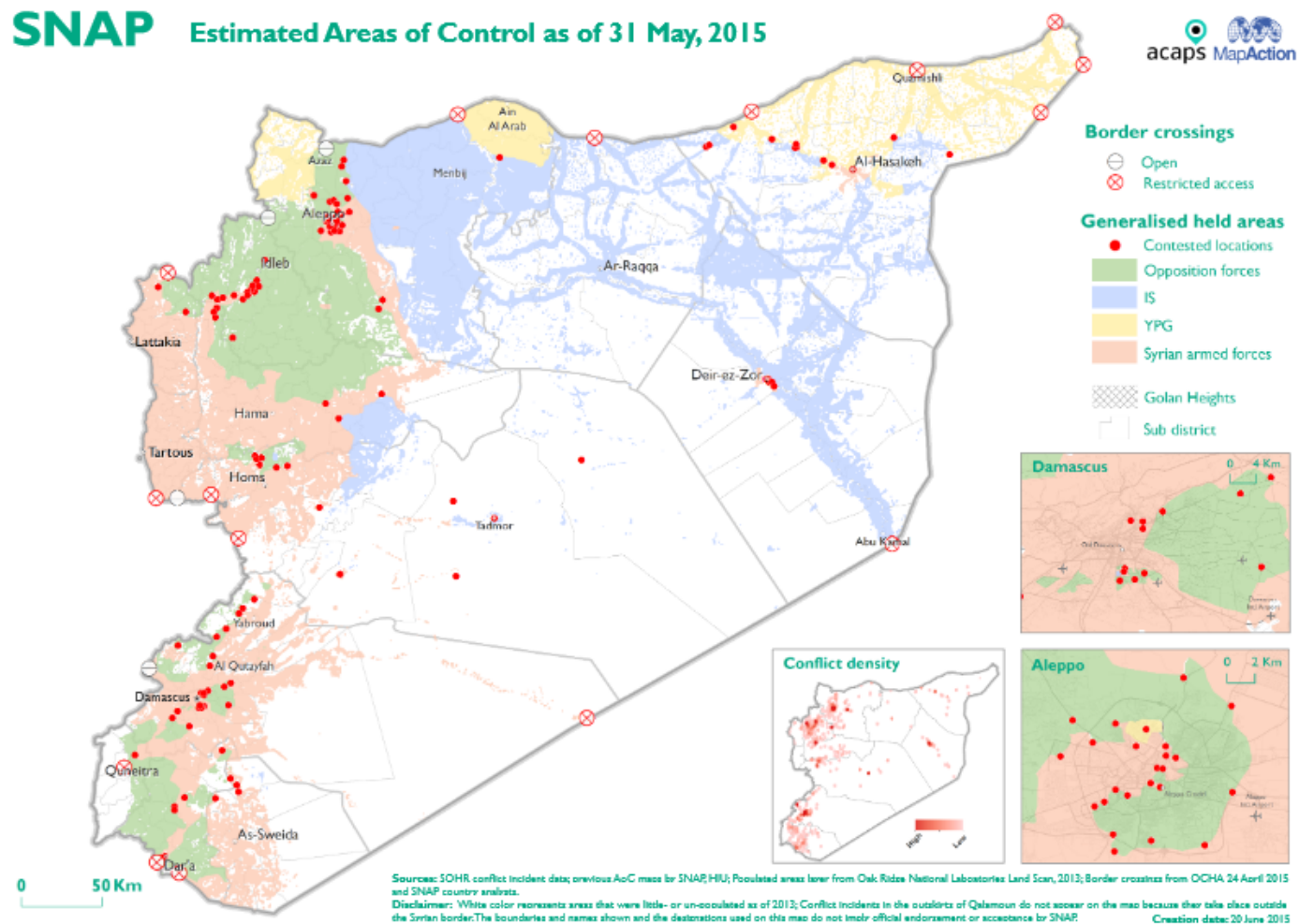
In Congress, Members are weighing the relative risks and rewards of action in Syria against the Islamic State and the Asad government while conducting oversight of expanded overt lethal and nonlethal assistance to vetted members of select opposition groups, to include the provision of military training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

The negative effects of the humanitarian and regional security crises emanating from Syria appear to be beyond the power of any single actor, including the United States, to independently contain or fully address. The region-wide flood of Syrian refugees, the growth of armed extremist groups in Syria, and the spread of conflict to neighboring Lebanon and Iraq are negatively affecting overall regional stability. To date, U.S. policy makers and their counterparts have appeared to feel both compelled to respond to these crises and cautious in considering potentially risky options for doing so, such as the commitment of military combat forces or the provision of large-scale material assistance to armed elements of the opposition. In light of these conditions and trends, Congress may face tough choices about U.S. policy toward Syria and the related expenditure of U.S. relief and security assistance funds for years to come.

³ UNOCHA Security Council Briefing on Syria, November 25, 2014.

⁴ USAID, Syria Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #6, Fiscal Year (FY) 2015, June 25, 2015.

Figure 1. Syria Conflict Map: Estimated Areas of Control as of May 31, 2015



Source: ACAPS (Assessment Capacities Project)/Map Action, Syria Needs Assessment Project, June 20, 2015.

Notes: All areas approximate. White color denoted sparsely populated or unpopulated areas. See map originator's sources and disclaimer notes in the map.

Conflict situation in 2014

Conflict situation in 2014

Major focus of aerial attacks

- Asad regime
- US/Coalition

Areas of influence*

- Asad regime
- Iraqi Security Forces (ISF)
- Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)
- Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN)
- Kurdish-controlled
- Moderate opposition
- Contested

*Estimated extent of geographic areas where a government or non-state armed group is dominant or control is contested, excluding areas of minimal population. These areas are changing and reflect the situation as of:

- December 29, 2014 (Iraq)
- December 22, 2014 (Syria)

Timeline of 2014 key events

January

- The first shipment of chemical weapons leaves Syria from **Latakia** port. The Geneva II peace talks begin in January and end in February with little progress being made.

February

- Asad regime aerial bombings take place in **Aleppo**, **Damascus**, and **Dar'a**.
- Infighting intensifies between rival rebel factions in **Dayr az Zawr** and **Al Hasakah** governorates.

March

- Opposition gains control of **Kassab** and parts of **Latakia**, but loses control to Syrian military and Hizbollah in June.
- On 16 March, Hizbollah and regime forces recapture **Yabrud**.

April

- Fighting intensifies between anti-government ISIL fighters and Iraqi government forces near **Al Fallujah** and **Ar Ramadi**.

May

- Rebels evacuate **Homs** under heavy regime shelling.
- Regime aerial bombings continue in **Aleppo**, and cities in **Dar'a**, **Damascus Countryside**, and **Idlib** governorates.

June

- ISIL and Sunni tribal groups overrun **Mosul** and much of the governorates of **Ninawa**, **Salah ad Din**, and parts of northern **Diyaala**. The UN announces that removal of Syria's chemical weapons is complete.

July

- Barrel bomb attacks are reported in **Dar'a** and **Damascus Countryside** governorates.

August

- US and allies begin airstrikes against ISIL targets in Iraq.
- Syrian opposition armed groups engage Lebanese army around **Aarsal**.
- ISIL overruns **Tabqa** regime airbase in **Ar Raqqah** governorate.
- Moderate rebels begin counter-offensive in **Hamah**.

September

- US and allies begin missile and airstrikes against ISIL targets inside Syria.

October

- Kurdish Peshmarga ground forces, aided by Coalition airstrikes, begin counter-offensive against ISIL near **Kobane**.

November

- Iraqi forces regain some territory from ISIL. ISIL gains control of **Ar Ramadi** and **Hit**.

December

- Fighting intensifies between Asad regime forces and armed opposition groups in **Dar'a**.

Names and boundary representation are not necessarily authoritative

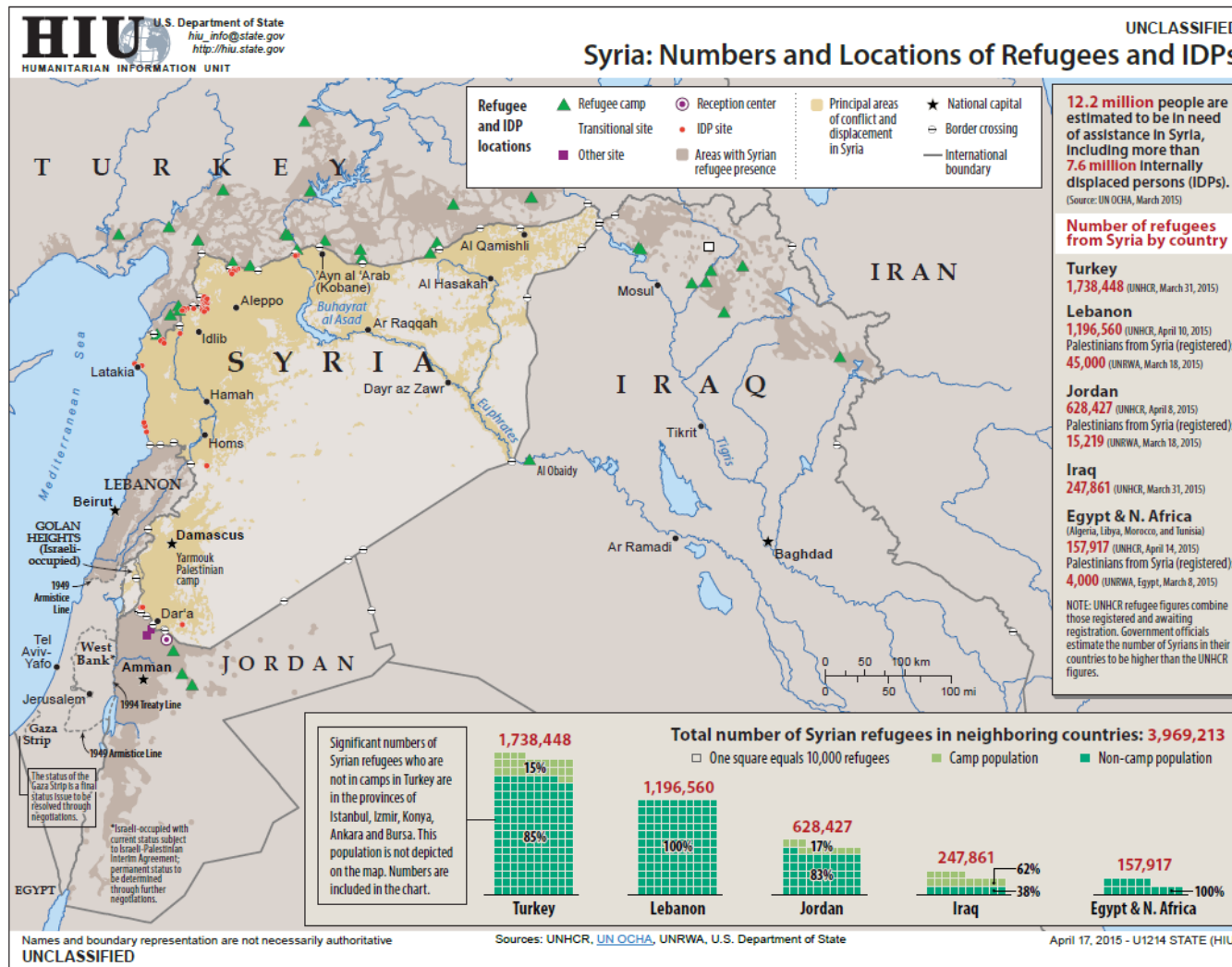
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Sources: Institute for the Study of War, ReliefWeb, USAID, U.S. Department of State, U.S. CENTCOM

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Figure 3. Syria: Humanitarian Situation Map and Graphic (as of mid-April 2015)



Source: U.S. State Department, Humanitarian Information Unit, Syria: Numbers and Locations of Refugees and IDPs, April 17, 2015.

FY2016 Legislation and Issues for Congress

The 114th Congress is now considering proposed appropriations (H.R. 2772, H.R. 2685, and S. 1558) and authorization legislation (H.R. 1735) related to Syria as well as proposals to authorize the use of military force against the Islamic State. Key issues under consideration in relation to proposed legislation include:

- **What is the United States' overall strategy toward the Syria conflict in general and toward the Islamic State in Syria and the Asad government in particular? How might U.S. strategies in Iraq and Syria best be aligned?** Members of Congress continue to express a range of views concerning U.S. strategy toward the conflict in Syria, combatting the Islamic State, and coordinating responses to the crises in Iraq and Syria. Several legislative proposals call on the Administration to provide Congress with new or updated strategy reports on these topics.
- **What authority and funding should be provided for U.S. assistance to Syrians, including opposition elements? What authority and funding should be provided for the Syria train and equip operation for vetted Syrians that was first authorized and funded by Congress in late 2014?** While some proposals to rescind funding and authority for the train and equip program have thus far failed to garner sufficient congressional support for enactment, Members continue to debate the proper scope, pace, and goals of the program. Particular attention is being paid to questions regarding the types of support that U.S. forces may provide to program trainees upon their return to Syria and what implications if any such support might have for U.S. involvement in the wider Syria conflict.
- **How if at all should the United States respond to calls from regional partners and some Syrians for the imposition of no-fly zone or safe zone arrangements for the protection of civilians in areas of Syria?** In response to ongoing indiscriminate attacks on civilians in Syria by pro-Asad forces and some of their opponents, some Members of Congress and outside observers are calling for new attention to be paid to proposals for the establishment of areas safe from air and/or ground attack inside Syria.

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

Background: Syria, its People, and the Conflict

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

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

Syria's Diverse Population

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

Despite the secular nature of the ruling Baath party, religious sects have been important to some Syrians as symbols of group identity and determinants of political orientation. The Asads and the Baath party have cultivated Alawites as a key base of support, and elite security forces have long been led in large part by Alawites, although some officers and most rank and file military personnel have been drawn from the majority Sunni Arab population and other minority groups. The government violently suppressed an armed uprising led by the Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s, killing thousands of Sunni Muslims and others.⁵

Religious, ethnic, geographic, and economic identities overlap in influencing the views and choices of Syrians about the current conflict. Within ethnic and sectarian communities are important tribal and familial groupings that often provide the underpinning for political alliances and commercial relationships. Socioeconomic differences abound among farmers, laborers, middle-class wage earners, public sector employees, military officials, and the political and

⁵ In a March 1980 intelligence product, the Central Intelligence Agency described the then-prevailing dynamic among members of the regime and military in relation to the Islamist upheaval as follows: "President [Hafiz al] Assad has committed his minority Alawite government to a risky course with his reported decision to use the military more freely to crush civil unrest in Syrian cities. This may intimidate his domestic opponents in the short run, but unless Assad is able to reestablish order quickly, it will also further erode his domestic support and could eventually bring about his ouster. By committing the military, Assad is playing his last major card to keep his regime in power. Army discipline may well collapse in the face of widespread riots. This could lead to a bloody war between Sunni Muslim and Alawite units. The Alawites, however, may choose to topple Assad before such turmoil develops in order to keep their position secure." Central Intelligence Agency Directorate of Intelligence, "SPECIAL ANALYSIS - SYRIA: Assad's Prospects," National Intelligence Daily, March 17, 1980; in U.S. State Department, Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1977–1980, Volume IX, Arab-Israeli Dispute, August 1978– December 1980, pp. 1102-4.

commercial elite. Many rural, less advantaged Syrians originally supported the opposition movement, while urban, wealthier Syrians appeared to have mixed opinions.

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

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

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

Some Sunni Arabs may view the conflict as a means to assert their community's dominance over Alawites and others, but others may support the Asad government as an alternative to rule by extremist forces or out of fear of retaliation for past collaboration with the regime.⁶ Some Sunni opposition leaders have sought to assuage other groups' concerns about the implications of potential Sunni dominance, whereas others have demanded that non-Sunni groups accept Sunni religious rule. Some opposition figures have pledged their commitment to seeing that orderly trials and the rule of law prevail in any post-conflict setting. Nevertheless, reports of abuses at the hands of opposition forces suggest that leaders of many armed groups at times are unable or unwilling to ensure that such standards are applied consistently to their pro-Asad adversaries.

While some Kurds view the conflict as an opportunity to achieve greater autonomy, others are wary of supporting Sunni Arab rebels who, should they come to power, may be no less hostile to Kurdish political aspirations than the Asad government. Some members of Syria's various

⁶ See Chris Zambelis, "Syria's Sunnis and the Regime's Resilience," U.S. Military Academy Combatting Terrorism Center (CTC), *CTC Sentinel*, May 28, 2015.

Christian communities have expressed fears that the uprising will lead to a sectarian civil war and that they could be subjected to violent repression, given that Muslim extremist groups have targeted Iraqi Christians in recent years. Other Christians reportedly have offered assistance to some elements of the armed opposition over time.

Conflict Synopsis

The Syrian political uprising of early 2011 evolved into an insurgency as the Syrian government met initially peaceful protests with increasing repression. Initially isolated acts of violence by opposition members against state authorities drew heavy-handed military responses, killing civilians and sparking cyclical, retaliatory clashes of increasing intensity. Extremist groups also began to emerge—between November 2011 and December 2012, Jabhat al Nusra claimed responsibility for nearly 600 attacks in Syria, ranging from more than 40 suicide attacks to small arms and improvised explosive device operations.⁷ Military defectors and armed civilians defeated state security forces in some early engagements, enabling opposition elements to seize control of territory and disrupting the government's control over Syria's territory and population.

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

By February 2014, U.S. Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper estimated the strength of the insurgency in Syria at “somewhere between 75,000 or 80,000 or up to 110,000 to 115,000 insurgents,” who were then-organized “into more than 1,500 groups of widely varying political leanings.”⁸ Among these forces are violent extremist groups such as the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al Nusra (*Support Front*, aka the Nusra Front) and the Islamic State organization. According to U.S. officials, from early 2011 through early 2015 more than 20,000 foreign fighters from as many as 90 countries, including at least 3,400 fighters from “Western countries,” may have travelled to Syria as part of a trend that is “unprecedented” relative to other conflicts involving foreign recruits.⁹

Regional and global powers, including Iran, Turkey, the Arab Gulf states, Russia, and the United States, responded to the uprising and emerging conflict in Syria in ways that prioritized their own interests and perspectives.¹⁰ Funding, weaponry, political support, and personnel offered by outside forces—both state and non-state—have contributed directly to the intensification and continuation of fighting across Syria from 2012 to the present. The logic of domestic, regional,

⁷ “Terrorist Designations of the al-Nusrah Front as an Alias for al-Qa’ida in Iraq,” Press Statement by State Department Spokesperson Victoria Nuland, December 11, 2012.

⁸ Remarks by DNI James R. Clapper to the Senate Armed Services Committee, February 11, 2014.

⁹ Statement of Nicholas J. Rasmussen, Director, U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, before the House Committee on Homeland Security, February 11, 2015.

¹⁰ For one perspective on this dynamic, see David Ignatius, “Foreign nations’ proxy war in Syria creates chaos,” *Washington Post*, October 2, 2014.

and international confrontation in Syria has favored the continuation of a conflict of attrition. Syrian government forces reversed initial setbacks with assistance from Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, but some anti-Asad forces have improved their battlefield performance since late 2014 reportedly with outside assistance.

As of mid-2015, government forces retain their total advantage in air power and remain engaged in combat operations across the country. The government faces manpower constraints, but has sought to compensate for this by deploying local and foreign militias alongside Syrian military forces. While the government has lost control over large areas in the country's northeast and some areas in the northwest and south, it retains control of most of the country's major urban centers, and all but two provincial capitals. In January 2015, one academic source estimated that two-thirds of Syria's population still resided in areas held by the Syrian government at that time.¹¹ As noted above, opposition forces have scored a series of tactical victories since early 2015, increasing the pressure on pro-Asad forces on several fronts. If current trends hold, an outright victory by pro-Asad forces this year appears highly unlikely, and some observers continue to speculate about a potential collapse of the regime's forces or a major shift in strategy to a defensive posture in limited urban areas in the western part of the country and along the coast.

On June 29, 2015, the United Nations Security Council received an official report on the status of the conflict that said "violence, which has been perpetrated by all parties to the conflict, has neither abated nor diminished in brutality," and "continues with utter impunity."¹² Acknowledging "indiscriminate attacks on Government-controlled areas" by opposition groups, the report said that "the Government's use of barrel bombs in populated areas has continued, causing hundreds of civilian deaths and widespread destruction across the country." The report further stated that "parties to the conflict continue to violate human rights and international humanitarian law with impunity by killing and torturing civilians, blocking humanitarian access and destroying and besieging communities." At the meeting, a Syrian government representative rebutted some charges against the Asad government, blamed foreign intelligence services for supporting armed opposition groups, and said Syria was "fighting terrorism on behalf of humanity as a whole."

Parties to the Conflict

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

¹¹ "The Political Geography of Syria's War: An Interview with Fabrice Balanche," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 30, 2015.

¹² Meeting of Security Council to discuss Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014) and 2191 (2014), S/PV.7476, June 29, 2015.

Figure 4. Profile of Select Pro-Asad Forces**Pro-Asad Forces****Syrian Armed Forces and National Defense Forces**

As of June 2015, U.S. defense officials describe Syria's armed forces as "much weakened." By some estimates, more than 44,000 members of the regular armed forces have been killed during the conflict. Thousands more have defected, with overall force strength having been halved by some estimates from 250,000 to 125,000 troops. Reports from Syria suggest that military conscription efforts are facing resistance in some communities, but many Sunni conscripts continue to fight for Asad. Syria's air force has maintained its monopoly on operation in Syrian air space in relation to rebel forces, although opposition groups periodically shoot down fixed and rotary-wing aircraft, and coalition air forces now operate inside of Syria. The involvement of Shia militias and Iran in the Syrian conflict has evolved since 2011 from an advisory to an operational role, with forces in some cases fighting alongside Syrian troops (see below).



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

**Lebanese Hezbollah**

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

**Iraqi and Other Shia Militias**

Analysts estimate that there are between 5,000 and 10,000 Iraqi Shiites fighting in Syria on behalf of the Syrian government, in addition to an unknown number of Afghan and other Shiites. Many hail from Iraqi Shiite political and militia groups including Liwa Abu al Fadl al Abbas and Asa'ib Ahl al Haq. Some members identify their objective as the defense of Shia holy sites such as the tomb of Sayyida Zeinab, the granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammad, in southern Damascus. Other reports describe these groups as assuming a broad operational role, noting that militias have formed sniper teams, led ambushes, established checkpoints, and provided infantry support for Syrian armored units. It is difficult to assess the motivations of individual Shiite foreign fighters in Syria or determine whether Asad's survival is their primary goal. Reports suggest that Iraqi fighters receive training in Iran before being flown in small batches into Syria, and that they work closely with Lebanese Hezbollah. However, it is unclear who ultimately exercises command and control over these militias. Territorial gains by Islamic State fighters in Iraq have prompted some Iraqi fighters in Syria to return home and join local militias.

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

Figure 5. Profile of Select Anti-Asad Forces**Select Anti-Asad Forces and Extremist Groups****Southern Front Forces**

A coalition of dozens of smaller armed groups, many of which are aligned with the “Free Syrian Army” movement and reported to coordinate and receive assistance through a Military Operations Center based in Jordan. Southern Front fighters have scored a series of victories against pro-Asad forces since late 2014, seizing control of the western stretch of the Syrian-Jordanian border and threatening Asad’s control over the provincial capital of Dara’a. Several Southern Front-aligned units have posted social media footage of their fighters using U.S.-produced anti-tank weapons against pro-Asad forces. The Front’s leaders reportedly have stated their support for secular governance in Syria and eschew coordination with the Nusra Front and other extremists. The willingness of Front members to abide by these guidelines may vary considerably.

**Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant**

(Harakat Ahrar al Sham al Islamiyya, aka Ahrar al Sham, ASIM)

After suffering a near catastrophic loss of senior leaders in 2014, ASIM has reemerged as a powerful force on multiple fronts in Syria, collaborating with other Islamists and nationalists in fighting with pro-Asad and Islamic State forces. The group’s apparently close relationship with the Nusra Front, its founders’ links to Al Qaeda, and its Salafi-jihadist ideology lead many Western observers to classify the group as an extremist organization.

**Army of Islam (Jaysh al Islam)**

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

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 6. Profiles of Select Kurdish and Political Opposition Groups**Select Kurdish Forces and Political Opposition Groups****Kurdish Democratic Unity Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD)**

The PYD seeks Kurdish autonomy in Syria and is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a U.S. designated Foreign Terrorist Organization. The PYD has taken a relatively ambiguous stance toward the Arab-led uprising to date, but PYD leader Saleh Muslim Mohammed has stated in 2015 that his party and the forces they command are not cooperating with the Asad government. In June 2015, Muslim called for decentralized democracy for Syria and denied that the PYD seeks partition. The PYD and other Syrian Kurdish forces refer to Syrian populated areas of the country as one entity that they call *Rojava*.

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

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

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

Based in Turkey and considered to be close to foreign opponents of Asad, the SOC has been the focal point for most formal Western and other international engagement with Syrian political opposition members, although the group acknowledges its limitations and has initiated another effort at restructuring itself and strengthening its relationships with other political and armed groups. SOC leader Khalid Khojah is in the midst of a campaign to generate international support for a more forceful intervention to protect civilians in Syria and to build consensus around principles for a negotiated solution to the conflict. The SOC has engaged with U.N. officials seeking such a negotiated solution, but its leadership boycotted a conference held by other opposition groups in Cairo in June 2015 to develop a political road map for a political transition in Syria. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is a member of the Syrian National Council (SNC), which is the SOC’s largest constituent group.

**National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB)**

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

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

Conflict Developments in 2015

Aleppo

In the northern city of Aleppo, Syria's most populous city before the war, new coalitions of opposition forces have redoubled their efforts to capture the regime-held western areas of the city, facing continual attacks by the Syrian air force and assaults by the Islamic State in northeastern suburbs. In early 2015, coalition airstrikes and advances by Kurdish and allied forces pushed IS fighters westward across the Euphrates river toward Aleppo after the Islamic State abandoned the Kurdish town of Kobane. As a result, IS fighters have sought to solidify their hold on areas on the western bank northeast of Aleppo and to prevent the resupply of hostile opposition forces across the Turkish border. In and around Aleppo, the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al Nusra routed the reportedly U.S.-backed Hazm (Determination) Movement in January and February 2015. A powerful but now defunct coalition of opposition groups known as Jabhat Shamiya (Levantine Front) absorbed some Hazm fighters but later dissolved, and an Aleppo Victory (*Fatah*) Operations Room has emerged, modeled on similarly named coalitions of rebel fighters elsewhere in the country. Jabhat al Nusra and other Salafist groups have formed their own Ansar al Sharia (Supporters of Sharia) Operations Room, and both coalitions have launched renewed attacks on regime-held areas of western Aleppo city. Rebel offensives in Aleppo during 2015 have been met with a fierce campaign of barrel bombs and artillery strikes on rebel-held areas.

Idlib

Some opposition forces hailed the March 2015 fall of the city of Idlib as a turning point in their battle with the government, and rebels in other areas have since attempted to reproduce the pattern of cooperation that allowed rebels to take the city. After unifying their efforts under a single command known as *Jaysh al Fatah* (Army of Victory), a coalition of armed groups that includes Jabhat al Nusra forced pro-Asad forces from the city and later advanced to take the nearby towns of Al Mastumah, Jisr al Shougour, Ariha, and others, isolating remaining pro-Asad forces in small pockets of southern Idlib Province. Asad in an interview with the Swedish *Expressen* denied that the loss signified a deterioration of military capability, blaming instead external support and financing for his adversaries.¹³ However, Asad also acknowledged that the Syrian military "cannot be everywhere" and at times must create a "list of priorities based on military criteria." Jaysh al Fatah forces have pushed westward toward the border with the pro-Asad stronghold of neighboring Latakia Province, but as of July had not linked their gains in Idlib Province with opposition forces in neighboring Hama Province to the south. Defending Latakia, an Alawite stronghold, is likely to be a priority for both government and allied militia forces.

Some analysts note that while fighting in and around Idlib city, Jisr al Shughour, Mastumah, and Ariha had continued on and off for an extended period, these areas were captured by rebels in recent offensives after only short periods of fighting, suggesting a weakening of government forces and/or a strengthening of the opposition.¹⁴ In the cases of Idlib city and Jisr al Shughour,

¹³ Asad stated, "the terrorists, al Nusra Front which is part of al-Qaeda, and the Turkish government or institutions or intelligence, were like one army in that battle, so it doesn't depend on the weakening of our army. It depended more on how much support the terrorists have from Turkey." "President al Asad: Moscow talks are a breakthrough, if support to terrorism continues, al Qaeda will be the future of Europe and the region," SANA, April 18, 2015.

¹⁴ "Asad's hold on power looks shakier than ever as rebels advance in Syria," *Washington Post*, April 26, 2015.

each had a strong opposition presence and experienced ongoing clashes, particularly Jisr al Shughour, where over 100 Syrian military and security force personnel were killed in June 2011 during the initial months of unrest.

Damascus and Qalamoun

Various opposition forces have scored tactical victories against pro-Asad forces in some suburbs of Damascus, while the Syrian military and Hezbollah have worked to consolidate their control of the Lebanon-Syria border area in the Qalamoun region northwest of the capital. In early April, IS forces took control of portions of the Yarmouk refugee camp in southwestern Damascus, home to a large Palestinian refugee population and an opposition stronghold that had long been isolated and bombarded by regime forces. Palestinian Islamists based in the camp resisted the IS advance, and some IS fighters withdrew. Jabhat al Nusra and IS fighters reportedly remain in the camp, whose residents still live under a regime enforced siege.

Eastern suburbs of Damascus under rebel control also are besieged, and some community members have launched demonstrations protesting conditions imposed by Jaysh al Islam and its leader Zahran Alloush. Alloush has asserted control over several armed factions in the area under the auspices of a Unified Military Command, and Jaysh al Islam has released video footage of retaliatory public executions of accused Islamic State supporters.

In April, Hezbollah fighters mobilized for a large-scale offensive against Islamic State and Nusra Front forces in the Qalamoun region.¹⁵ In early July, Syrian military forces and Hezbollah launched an operation to seize the town of Zabadani from a coalition of opposition forces that includes Jabhat al Nusra.

Southern Syria

Opposition forces have advanced in several areas of southern Syria in 2015, but as of July pro-Asad forces have resisted rebel attempts to fully expel them from Dera'a Province and controlled the highway corridor from Damascus and its environs southward to the city of Dera'a. Some rebel groups have begun vocally disassociating themselves from Jabhat al Nusra, even as their forces continue to participate in parallel operations.¹⁶ A Southern Front-led offensive against Dera'a city in late June and early July was met with regime resistance and a barrel bombing campaign against rebel held areas. Opposition and IS forces have launched attacks against government forces in neighboring Suwayda Province, home to most of Syria's Druze minority. Some Druze figures have resisted their community's continued cooperation with the Asad government, with some reports suggesting that desertions, refusals to report for military service, and opposition to Asad each are increasing among Druze Syrians.¹⁷

¹⁵ "Hezbollah mobilizes for decisive Qalamoun battle," *Daily Star*, March 25, 2015.

¹⁶ On April 13, the "Free Syrian Army"-affiliated Southern Front coalition released a statement saying "[We] reject any military or [ideological] cooperation or rapprochement with the Al Nusra Front or any *takfiri* [ideology] adopted by any group among the ranks of the Syrian rebels." The statement came weeks after the Southern Front seized the Nasib-Jabir crossing on the Jordanian border in conjunction with Nusra forces. Although Nusra forces reportedly left the crossing area, Jordan has closed the border, and some sources speculate the Southern Front and other groups that reportedly receive Jordanian and U.S. assistance may be distancing themselves from Jabhat al Nusra in order to reassure their external patrons.

¹⁷ Frederick Deknatel, "Druze Face Hard Choices Picking Sides in Battle for Southern Syria," *World Politics Review*, (continued...)

In Quneitra Province adjacent to Israel, members of the Southern Front and Jabhat al Nusra have clashed with regime forces in 2015 and have fought with a group loyal to the Islamic State (Liwa Shuhada Yarmouk/Battalion of the Martyrs of Yarmouk). As in other areas, Southern Front and other opposition forces have fought alongside Jabhat al Nusra, but deny they are coordinating with the group. Fighting near the Golan Heights has been intense at times, and Israeli leaders have begun publicly speculating about what a post-Asad Syria may mean for Israeli security.¹⁸

Eastern Syria

In northeastern Hasakah Province, Islamic State forces launched an offensive against government troops in Hasakah city in late June following operations earlier this year against Kurdish PYD/YPG forces and Assyrian Christian militias in the Khabour Valley. Kurdish forces backed by coalition airstrikes seized the Turkey-Syria border crossing at Tal Abyad and advanced southward amid IS counterattacks. The area is within 40 miles of the self-declared IS “capital” at Raqqa.

In Dayr az Zawr Province adjacent to Iraq, Islamic State forces control much of the countryside and the northeastern portions of Dayr az Zawr city. IS forces have imposed a siege on government-held areas of the city, with some reports suggesting that fighting to the north in Hasakah Province may be drawing IS fighters and materiel from the area.

In May, the Islamic State advanced southwestward from Dayr az Zawr and seized the central Syrian town of Tadmor and the adjacent antiquities of Palmyra, placing the country's central desert crossroads under its control and further isolating the few remaining pro-Asad forces in eastern Syria. The group's parallel seizure of the southeastern Syria/west-central Iraq border crossing at Al Tanf took the final border crossing from Syrian government hands other than crossings with Lebanon defended by Syrian military and Lebanese Hezbollah forces. The Syrian military launched a counteroffensive to retake Tadmor in late June.

Asad Government Leadership Changes

A shuffle of security service chiefs has raised questions regarding the cohesion of Asad's inner circle. In late 2014, Asad cousin Hafiz Makhlef, head of the Damascus Branch of the General Intelligence Directorate, relocated to Belarus following a dispute with the president's brother.¹⁹ In mid-March, local press reported the replacement of two out of the four security service chiefs, Political Security Directorate (PSD) chief Rustum Ghazali and Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI) head Rafiq Shehadah. Some reports claimed that the two men had a physical altercation prompted by a disagreement over the extent of Iranian involvement in Syria.²⁰ Both men were replaced immediately, suggesting that the pace of day-to-day security operations will not be significantly

(...continued)

July 9, 2015.

¹⁸ Ian Black, “Israelis Watch Intently as Syrian Rebel Forces Approach Golan Heights Border,” *The Guardian* (UK), June 19, 2015.

¹⁹ See, for example, “Assad cousin relocates to Belorussia,” *Daily Star*, September 29, 2014. Also reported in author conversations with regional officials, 2015.

²⁰ “Assad fires security chiefs,” *NOW*, March 19, 2015.

affected. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and other news outlets have reported that Ghazali died in late April as a result of his injuries.²¹

In April, the Syrian government arrested Mundhir al Asad, a first cousin of President Asad. Reports differ on the reasons for the arrest, with some claiming it was related to his involvement in a spate of financially-motivated kidnappings in Latakia, while others claim it was tied to his alleged contact with Asad's exiled uncle Rifaat, a Paris-based oppositionist.²² Mundhir, who is not a member of Asad's inner circle, was reportedly released the next day. This is not the first time that Asad has arrested members of his extended family, some of whom are involved in smuggling and other criminal activities.

Renewed Political Outreach

In May, Syrian government representatives met in Geneva with UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura. While the Syrian government appears unlikely to make concessions that would weaken Asad's hold on power, recent government outreach to groups in eastern Syria suggest that the regime may be seeking to build or expand partnerships in order to enhance its territorial control. Syrian Minister of National Reconciliation Ali Haidar met with Kurdish, Christian, and Sunni leaders in Hasakah province to strengthen relations. The Hasakah SMI chief also met with YPG representatives to discuss Kurdish operations against IS militants. In mid-April, the Syrian government deployed hundreds of ground troops to Ras al Ayn to support YPG forces against the Islamic State.²³

U.S. Policy and Assistance

Debating U.S. Strategy and Policy

After initially calling for Bashar al Asad to step down, the Obama Administration has actively engaged since 2012 in multilateral efforts to reach a negotiated settlement between the Asad government and many of the opposition groups arrayed against it. This approach has been combined with nonlethal U.S. support to select opposition groups, reported covert assistance to some armed groups, and the often-stated assertion by Administration officials that "there is no military solution to the conflict." This assertion has appeared to reflect U.S. assessments of the balance of forces, their shifting fortunes, and the ebb and flow of the conflict over time. Some observers have viewed this assertion as an implicit indication that the U.S. government views options that could support certain military objectives (such as a limited civilian protection mission or the forcible overthrow of Asad) as unacceptable in strategic, diplomatic, material, financial, humanitarian, or moral terms. U.S. officials also may judge that various proposals for more robust U.S. or other external military intervention would do little to resolve Syria's underlying political disputes. Given the range of actors and interests at play in Syria, it is debatable whether some proposed military courses of action would deliver greater stability or

²¹ "Family member confirms Rustom Ghazaleh's death," *Daily Star*, April 25, 2015.

²² "Mystery swirls over Assad cousin's arrest," *NOW*, April 16, 2015.

²³ Syria Situation Report: April 14-21, 2015, Institute for the Study of War.

whether they would set the stage for further conflict, particularly if instability in neighboring Iraq persists.

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

At present, leading U.S. policy makers describe an overall approach that remains engaged in the “political track,” but their statements tend to be more circumspect about the prospects for political arrangements to bring about a durable settlement of the conflict.²⁴ In this regard, U.S. defense officials have described both desirable and likely scenarios for near-term evolution in the conflict. Secretary of Defense Carter has described the “best” scenario for the Syrian people as one that would entail an agreed or managed removal of Asad and the coalescence of opposition forces with elements of the remaining Syrian state apparatus as U.S. partners in opposition to the Islamic State and other extremists.²⁵ On July 7, Secretary Carter told the Senate Armed Services Committee that

the outcome that we are aiming for is one in which Bashar al Assad and those who have been associated with his atrocities in Syria are removed and -- but the structures of government in Damascus and in Iraq [sic] that remain continue on our -- in an inclusively governed way that is multisectarian to get -- to include Alawites and others and that can then turn to the task of regaining its sovereign territory from ISIL to the east in a project that would look like what we are working with Baghdad to accomplish to its west in Iraq. That is the post-Asad transition that will be the best for the Syrian people and the best for our counter-ISIL strategy.²⁶

Secretary Carter also warned that “further conflict, further civil war, and ethnic cleansing” could follow in a scenario in which the Asad regime collapsed, making a political transition “much to be preferred.”²⁷

²⁴ On June 16, 2015, Secretary of State Kerry said, “we are engaged in a number of efforts right now diplomatically and otherwise to see whether or not there might be some life in the political track, and it’s too early to answer that question, but we are not simply sitting there and allowing this to happen without any efforts to see if there’s a way to stop it.” Secretary of State John Kerry, Press Availability, June 16, 2015.

²⁵ On June 18, Secretary of Defense Carter said, “...the best way for the Syrian people for this to go would be for him to remove himself from the scene and there to be created, difficult as that will be, a new government of Syria based on the moderate opposition that we have been trying to build and support and then helping them strengthen themselves and to retake all of Syrian territory. That would be a desirable path if he did remove -- was removed from the scene or removed himself from the scene.” Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, June 17, 2015.

²⁶ Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, July 7, 2015.

²⁷ Ibid.

In spite of recent U.S. assessments that pro-Asad forces have suffered significant losses and are “much weakened,”²⁸ an agreed or managed transition in Syria does not appear to be imminent. Russian and Iranian officials have reiterated their support for the Asad government in basic terms. In July 2015, Iran extended \$1 billion in additional financial credit to Asad, and Russian leaders have rejected the option of forced regime change while acknowledging the need for unspecified political change in Damascus.²⁹ Citing the views of regional partners, U.S. defense officials have portrayed a shift by pro-Asad forces to a defensive posture in select areas and the continuation of wider conflict as the most likely scenario in the near term.³⁰

Whether or not the scenario described as desirable by U.S. officials is feasible in the longer term is debatable. While U.S. officials and their counterparts in other governments may wish for some element of Syria’s state apparatus and security services to be salvageable as a hedge against total state collapse, the durability of Syria’s state institutions is unknown. The willingness of Syrian officials and leaders of key communities to accept outcomes that would involve ceding power to opposition forces is also unknown and likely highly variable. Many armed and unarmed opposition groups have called for the removal of all officials with “blood on their hands” and some have made hostile sectarian statements about the collective culpability of Syrian Alawites for the Asad government’s atrocities.

A transitional Syrian state acceptable to a sufficient segment of armed opposition forces may not prove to be capable of administering state services, dedicated to impartially providing justice according to the rule of law, or willing to partner with the United States and others against extremist groups. It is furthermore unclear whether the balance of power, in such a scenario, would lie with non-extremist opposition forces and the remnants of the Syrian state, even if somehow they were induced to work together. The prospect of Syria’s dissolution into smaller de facto jurisdictions might allow for deeper U.S. partnership with individual groups or regions but might also provoke strong, self-interested, and disparate reactions from Syria’s neighbors. A more likely scenario than either a formal division of the country or reunification under moderate opposition forces may be one in which the United States and its partners must manage the negative consequences of an ambiguous, lasting conflict that is beyond their ability to resolve.

To date, Members of Congress have not reached a degree of consensus on the Syrian conflict that would allow Congress to offer its own detailed plan for bringing the crisis to a close, supporting a political transition and reconstruction, or combatting the Islamic State and other extremists in Syria. Congress has acted to provide the Administration with new authorities and contingency funds to address the Syrian conflict, but has placed limits on newly authorized efforts and requires the Administration to use contingency authorities and funds to provide nonlethal support to armed opposition groups outside of the specially authorized train and equip program. Congress

²⁸ Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, June 17, 2015.

²⁹ On June 19, 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin said Russia was “ready to work with Asad so that he engages in a process of political change,” and said, “We are ready to work with the president [Asad] to ensure a path towards political transition so as to ...move away from an armed confrontation.” Putin underscored his view that efforts to bring about such a transition, “should not be done with the use of force from the outside,” and reiterated Russian fears that state collapse in Syria would benefit extremists as it has in Libya and Iraq.

³⁰ On June 17, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey said, “it’s generally the consensus [in the region] that in the near term, it’s probably more likely that the regime would limit its -- would go over to the defensive and limit its protection of the Alawite Shia and some of the minority groups, leaving the rest of -- of Syria essentially ungoverned, or governed in ways that wouldn’t be -- wouldn’t be positive for the region in the near term.” Gen. Dempsey, Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, June 17, 2015.

debated but did not grant President Obama authority to use military force in response to the Asad government's alleged use of chemical weapons in August 2013. Congress has yet to grant specific authorization for the use of military force against the Islamic State. Some voices in Congress have since called for different forms of U.S. military intervention to protect civilians in select areas of the country or to weaken extremist groups. Some also favor an expansion of the training and equipping of moderate opposition groups. Others in Congress have warned against the possible unintended consequences of deeper U.S. involvement. However, Congress also has not reached consensus on whether or how a reduction in involvement by the United States and its allies might better manage the negative consequences of ongoing, unmitigated conflict.

FY2016 Budget Requests for Syria

The FY2016 foreign assistance request for Syria reflects the two main elements of the Obama Administration's policy response: (1) humanitarian assistance to meet the needs of internally displaced Syrians and refugees in neighboring countries, and (2) continued political, economic, and nonlethal military support for national and local opposition groups. In addition, the Administration has requested funding to continue the train and equip program for vetted Syrian authorized by Congress in 2014.

Table 1. Select U.S. Foreign Assistance for Syria, FY2013-FY2016 Request

(In thousands of current dollars; fiscal year denotes the year funds were appropriated or requested)

Account	FY2013 (Actual)	FY2014 (Actual)	FY2015 (Request)	FY2016 (Request)
ESF	20,780 (OCO)	8,250 (OCO)	125,000 (OCO)	160,000 (OCO)
INCLE	0	n.a.	10,000 (OCO)	10,000 (OCO)
NADR	0	n.a.	20,000	20,000
PKO	38,620 (OCO)	n.a.	0	65,000 (OCO)
FFP	18,338	n.a.	0	n.a.
Total⁰	77,738	8,250	155,000	255,000

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

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

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

\$600 million in defense funding.³¹ The \$255 million requested also includes \$160 million in ESF-OCO funding to provide nonlethal assistance to other opposition groups and \$10 million in INCLE-OCO funding for justice sector support in opposition-held areas. Twenty million from the base budget request in the Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining, and Related Program (NADR) account would support law enforcement training for opposition members, border security training, and weapons abatement initiatives.

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

Combatting the Islamic State in Syria

President Obama said in September 2014 that U.S. engagement in Syria would remain focused "narrowly" on assisting Syrians in combatting the Islamic State, while continuing "to look for opportunities" to support a political resolution to Syria's conflict.³² As discussed above, U.S. and coalition airstrikes continue to target IS forces in some areas of Syria. These strikes have succeeded in assisting anti-IS forces in retaking some territory, but IS forces have advanced in other areas.

In parallel, U.S. diplomatic officials have sought in recent months to more closely link the campaign against the Islamic State and other extremist groups to efforts to find a solution to the broader conflict. After a May 2015 visit to Moscow, U.S. Special Envoy for Syria Daniel Rubenstein said "the Syrian regime's brutal actions have contributed to the growth of extremism" and said defeating extremists in Syria "would require both military steps and a comprehensive political solution that addresses the legitimate grievances of the Syrian people."³³ Rubinstein also "stressed" that Asad's "continued presence atop the Syrian regime is exacerbating sectarianism and extremism not only in Syria, but in the region." U.S. defense officials also have identified Asad's presence as an aggravating factor and a contributor to the appeal of extremist groups.

³¹ The State Department is requesting this \$65 million in Peacekeeping Operations-OCO (PKO-OCO) funding to provide nonlethal support to vetted, moderate armed opposition groups "to bolster their capacity, cohesion, and credibility" and "to strengthen linkages between armed and civilian actors." The Department of Defense is requesting \$715 million and \$600 million for train and equip programs for Iraqis and Syrians respectively. These requests would fund continuation of programs initiated under authorities and funds first provided in FY2015 Defense authorization and appropriations bills.

³² The President said, "our attitude towards Asad continues to be that you know, through his actions, through using chemical weapons on his own people, dropping barrel bombs that killed innocent children that he—he has foregone legitimacy. But when it comes to our policy and the coalition that we're putting together, our focus specifically is on ISIL. It's narrowly on ISIL." President Obama interview with NBC News Meet the Press, September 6, 2014.

³³ Readout of Special Envoy Rubenstein's Travel to Moscow, State Department Media Note, May 18, 2015.

Some Syrian political and military opposition forces appear to resent what they see as the United States' narrow focus on fighting Sunni extremists in Syria and some have indicated that they may insist on broader support for their anti-Asad goals as a condition of working with the U.S.-backed coalition against the Islamic State.³⁴ These parties also question why the United States and coalition partners are willing to act militarily to halt Islamic State atrocities but not to protect Syrian civilians from attacks by government forces or opposition groups.

In this context, U.S. strikes against Islamic State targets and other terrorist groups in Syria are illuminating several dilemmas faced by the Administration. On one hand, Syrian opposition forces who have been fighting the Islamic State welcome U.S. and coalition assistance in their campaign, but question why the United States does not take military action against the Asad government or take more robust action to degrade IS capabilities in Syria. The Administration's policy initiatives reflect its intention to pressure the Asad government into negotiating with opposition groups and fulfilling its pledges with regard to chemical weapons. At the same time, U.S. officials appear to be balancing these goals with concerns that a full scale degradation of Islamic State forces or of pro-Asad forces could have unintended consequences. Specifically, U.S. officials may be concerned that a more aggressive campaign against the Islamic State may take military pressure off the Asad regime or create opportunities for other extremist groups such as the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al Nusra to advance. Similarly, U.S. officials have stated their fears that a precipitous collapse of the Asad government could allow extremists to advance and potentially to carry out atrocities.

Some U.S. critics of the Obama Administration's approach to the conflict and terrorism threats in Syria argue that current U.S. strategy lacks effective Syrian partners willing or able to advance against Islamic State and/or Al Qaeda-affiliate-held territory on the ground.³⁵ These critics suggest the United States should either abandon its efforts to support a vetted partner force in Syria or drastically expand the size and scope of those efforts to create a more formidable partner force. Others critics argue that U.S. strategy toward the Islamic State is built on faulty assumptions or priorities. Some of these critics argue that Asad's departure or demise is the key to resolving the underlying conflict that has created opportunity for extremists to thrive. Whether or how Asad's departure would immediately change the fortunes of the Islamic State in Syria is uncertain. Still other critics assert that achieving stated Administration objectives will likely require U.S. or other ground combat troops or an expansion of the "train and equip" program for vetted Syrians to focus more aggressively on pressuring Asad to accept a negotiated solution.

Opponents of deeper U.S. engagement with or support for Syrian combatants have argued that the United States cannot guarantee that provided material assistance will not fall in to the hands of extremist groups or the Asad government. Others fear that by arming and training Syrian opposition members overtly or by supporting such forces in the field, the United States may be making itself a combatant in Syria's civil war. Still others argue that the wider international precedents set by U.S. assistance for or intervention on behalf of trained opposition members risk undermining broader U.S. support for principles of nonintervention and sovereignty or policy goals in specific conflicts.

³⁴ For one discussion of this issue, see Michael Weiss, "Exclusive: Syrian Rebels Backing Out of U.S. Fight Vs. ISIS," *The Daily Beast*, May 31, 2015.

³⁵ For a selection of critical perspectives see, Michael Eisenstadt, "The War Against ISIL: In Search of a Viable Strategy," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 15, 2015; Frederic Hof, *Trouble in Train-and-Equip Land*, the *Atlantic Council*, July 9, 2015; Michael Rubin, "U.S. Policy towards the Islamic State after its Seizure of Ramadi and Palmyra," *American Enterprise Institute*, June 3, 2015.

For the moment, the Administration does not appear to be prioritizing efforts to resolve the underlying conflict in Syria. Rather, it is taking steps in Syria designed to mitigate terrorism threats and advance U.S. goals for stabilizing Iraq. This approach could weaken the Islamic State to the extent that it forces the group to abandon strategic, lucrative territory that it controls in Iraq, but its potential effects on Syria are less certain. Coalition strikes and U.S.-backed partner forces may also deprive the group of some important Iraq-based leaders and fighters and some of the powerful military equipment it has captured there. However, the “Iraq first” and “ISIL first” approach could so alienate potential Syrian partners that if the United States later decides to give priority to the stabilization of Syria it will find itself facing a more skeptical populace. Anti-IS actions in Syria also may create opportunities for other Syria-based Islamist groups and/or empower the Syrian government at the expense of other elements of the Syrian opposition.

Senior Administration officials have told Congress and the press that the Administration is actively considering whether or how to provide military protection to U.S.-trained Syrians participating in the train and equip program.³⁶ The prospect that Islamic State forces or pro-Asad forces may attack U.S.-trained Syrians exists, and it remains to be determined whether, how, under what circumstances, and on what authority the U.S. military may provide armed protection for trainees. House and Senate versions of the FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act would require Administration reporting on this issue. In the case of potential attack by Syrian government forces for example, such protection could entail attacks against Syrian military targets. Such attacks would have uncertain implications for the conflict in Syria and for anti-Islamic State operations in Iraq, where Asad’s principal foreign support—Iran—is working in parallel with the coalition to combat the Islamic State.

Significant political and strategic questions may be raised by proposals that would further benefit certain non-state actors relative to national governments (such as Kurdish groups) or that might unpredictably alter prevailing dynamics among adversaries in Syria. As noted above, the prospect of potential international cooperation or coordination with the Asad government has already become controversial. The timing and duration of anti-Islamic State military operations may also be influenced by calculations of the likely relative benefit of such operations for opposition and government forces in Syria. Operations that seriously degrade Islamic State capabilities prior to improvements in the organization and capabilities of U.S.-preferred armed groups could result in substantial military gains for pro-Asad forces or extremist groups.

U.S. Assistance to the Syrian Opposition

A broad set of bilateral U.S. sanctions on Syria existed prior to the outbreak of conflict, and some, such as those triggered by Syria’s designation as a state sponsor of terrorism, have had a limiting effect on the delivery of U.S. assistance in the country since 2011. The FY2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act (Section 7041(i) of Division K of P.L. 113-76) significantly expanded the Administration’s authority to provide nonlethal assistance in Syria for certain purposes using the Economic Support Fund (ESF) account. Such assistance had been restricted by a series of preexisting provisions of law (including some terrorism-related sanctions provisions) that required the President to assert emergency and contingency authorities (i.e. Section 451 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended) to provide such assistance to the unarmed Syrian

³⁶ Testimony of Secretary of State John Kerry, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, March 11, 2015; and Briefing by Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter and CJCS General Martin E. Dempsey, May 7, 2015.

opposition and communities in Syria. Such assistance has been provided to select unarmed opposition groups on a periodic basis since May 2012, although the Administration has not publicly released a detailed accounting or list of recipients.

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

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

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

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

Foreign operations legislation under consideration in Congress as of mid-2015 would extend these authorities to some FY2016 funds. The House version of the FY2016 foreign operations appropriations bill (H.R. 2772) would make not less than \$175 million in FY2016 ESF, PKO, or INCLE funds available for authorized purposes in Syria. The Senate version would make an identical amount available and add authority to assist vulnerable populations in Syria and in neighboring countries.

Nonlethal Assistance to Armed Syrian Opposition Elements

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

In March 2013, the Administration notified Congress of its intent to use these special authorities to provide food rations and medical supplies to the National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC) and the Turkey-based Syrian Military Council (SMC). In late September 2013, the Administration notified Congress of its intent to use contingency authorities available to the President under the Foreign Assistance Act to provide additional “nonlethal commodities and services” to the SMC. In January 2014, the State Department referred to completed deliveries of food, medical equipment, and vehicles and “planned deliveries of satellite access equipment, laptops, radio communication equipment, and medical kits to moderate SMC elements” in a summary of its nonlethal support efforts as of that date.³⁷

From a practical perspective, as with humanitarian assistance, some U.S. efforts to deliver and monitor security assistance and other aid inside Syria have been hindered by a lack of regular access to areas in need. According to Administration officials, border closures, ongoing fighting, and risks from extremist groups have presented unique challenges. Some nonlethal assistance provided by the United States to armed opposition groups has fallen into the hands of unintended recipients and has led to changes in delivery and oversight mechanisms.³⁸ Infighting among some opposition forces and the empowerment of the Islamic State in Syria have created further complications. Although the Islamic State has lost control of some border crossings, access issues may continue to hinder efforts to expand support to anti-IS forces, including new U.S. trainees.

Syria Train and Equip Program³⁹

The establishment of the Syria Train and Equip program by Congress in 2014 represents a further evolution of the involvement of the United States in supporting Syrian opposition groups. Several hundred U.S. military training personnel and a similar number of support personnel have deployed in support of a program authorized by Congress in 2014 to train and equip vetted Syrians to fight the Islamic State and promote a negotiated solution to Syria’s civil war. According to Administration officials, the program was designed to field a force of 5,400 vetted Syrians a year for each of three-years. Congress authorized such training and assistance in the FY2015 NDAA (H.R. 3979, P.L. 113-291) and FY2015 appropriations act (H.R. 83, P.L. 113-235). Initial funding for the program was approved by congressional defense committees in

³⁷ Office of the State Department Spokesperson, “The Syrian Crisis: U.S. Assistance and Support for the Transition,” January 17, 2014.

³⁸ Opposition infighting in late 2013 led to the capture of some nonlethal U.S. assistance by Islamist groups. U.S. officials subsequently revisited some delivery and monitoring mechanisms and worked to improve the reliability and security of delivery channels. Dasha Afanasieva and Humeysa Pamuk, “U.S., Britain suspend aid to north Syria after Islamists seize weapons store,” Reuters, December 11, 2013.

³⁹ For more on this program and related legislation, see CRS Report R43727, *Train and Equip Program for Syria: Authorities, Funding, and Issues for Congress*, by Christopher M. Blanchard and Amy Belasco.

December 2014 under authority originally provided by Congress in the FY2015 continuing appropriations resolution of September 2014 (H.J.Res. 124, P.L. 113-164).

In early 2015, U.S. officials began engaging with different Syrian groups in order to identify potential recruits for the program and working with partner governments for assistance in vetting participants. Press reports citing unnamed U.S. officials suggested that fighting in Syria and uncertainties among Syrian opposition members and their regional backers about the program's purpose and about the general level of U.S. support for anti-Asad efforts delayed the program to some extent.⁴⁰ Some Syrian opposition members and their U.S. supporters have criticized the Administration's training plans as insufficient in size and speed. Others disagree strategically with President Obama and argue that U.S.-backed forces should be trained for offensive operations against the Syrian government.

Nevertheless, as of July, U.S. officials reportedly had identified more than 7,000 planned participants and had trained 60 of them.⁴¹ U.S. officials have declined to publicly identify locations where training is taking place, but various press reports claim that Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have agreed to host program activities. In late March, the United Kingdom announced it would support the U.S. training program by sending 75 training personnel to participate.

The Administration's FY2016 Defense appropriations request seeks \$600 million in additional U.S. funding for the program with the goal of training a further 5,400 personnel to add to the roughly 3000 planned to be trained using FY2015 funding. House version of the FY2016 defense appropriations acts under consideration as of July 2015 (H.R. 2685) would appropriate that amount, and the Senate version (S. 1558) would realign some of the requested funds to other operations and maintenance accounts, providing \$531 million for the Syria train and equip account. The House and Senate versions of the FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act (H.R. 1735) would authorize the appropriation of funding for the program, and would create new reporting and certification requirements relative to the provision of U.S. support to U.S.-trained fighters in the event of their attack by pro-Asad or Islamic State forces. U.S. defense officials said in June and July that the Obama Administration was still considering what levels and types of support and defense assistance to supply to the trained personnel if they come under attack by pro-Asad forces.⁴²

Other Reported U.S. Assistance

Then-Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel said in a September 2013 hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Administration was taking steps to provide arms to some Syrian rebels under covert action authorities.⁴³ Several press accounts citing unnamed U.S.

⁴⁰ Dasha Afanasieva, Warren Strobel and Phil Stewart, "Set to begin, U.S. plan for Syrian rebels already mired in doubt," Reuters, April 27, 2015; and, W.J. Hennigan and Patrick J. McDonnell, "\$500-million program to train anti-Islamic State fighters appears stalled," Los Angeles Times, May 4, 2015.

⁴¹ Testimony of Secretary of Defense Carter before Senate Armed Services Committee, July 7, 2015.

⁴² Ibid; and, Testimony of Secretary Carter and Gen. Dempsey before House Armed Services Committee, June 17, 2015.

⁴³ Secretary Hagel said, "it was June of this year that the president made the decision to support lethal assistance to the opposition. As you all know, we have been very supportive with hundreds of millions of dollars of nonlethal assistance. The vetting process that Secretary Kerry noted has been significant, but—I'll ask General Dempsey if he wants to add anything—but we, the Department of Defense, have not been directly involved in this. This is, as you know, a covert (continued...)"

government sources have described reported U.S. and partner nation efforts to that effect.⁴⁴ To date, other U.S. officials have not publicly acknowledged any such efforts or publicly described which elements of the Syrian opposition may have received U.S. training or support via any such channels, what any training may have entailed, what types of weaponry may have been provided, or what safeguards may be in place to monitor the disposition of equipment and the actions of any U.S.-trained or equipped personnel. One June 2015 article discussed differences of opinion among Members of Congress about future funding for the reported program.⁴⁵

U.S.-Origin Weaponry and the Syria Conflict

Since April 2014, various anti-Asad forces have released videos of their operatives loading and firing what appears to be U.S.-origin anti-tank weaponry in Syria.⁴⁶ In April 2014, an official affiliated with the now-defunct opposition group Harakat Hazm told the *New York Times* that “friendly states” had provided “modest numbers” of the weapons.⁴⁷ The commander of the group told the *Washington Post* that those who supplied the missiles had U.S. government approval and said the shipment suggested “a change in the U.S. attitude toward allowing Syria’s friends to support the Syrian people.”⁴⁸

Asked in April 2014 about the reported shipments and use of U.S. origin weaponry by Syrian rebels, U.S. National Security Council spokeswoman Bernadette Meehan said, “The United States is committed to building the capacity of the moderate opposition, including through the provision of assistance to vetted members of the moderate armed opposition. As we have consistently said, we are not going to detail every single type of our assistance.”⁴⁹ In May 2014, an unnamed senior Administration official reiterated that formulation to members of the press in a background briefing, while stating that “asymmetry which exists on the ground militarily, unfortunately, between the regime and the moderate opposition is problematic for the emergence of the kinds of political conditions necessary for a serious political process. And we and others are focused on that.”⁵⁰

Specific public information is lacking about the sources of U.S.-origin weaponry and which units or personnel may have continuing access to U.S.-origin weaponry.⁵¹ As of mid-2015, a range of opposition groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army movement continue to publish videos that purport to depict their personnel firing U.S.-origin anti-tank weapons. Islamist groups also have posted similar videos and images of captured U.S.-origin anti-tank weapon stocks, including the Ansar al Islam Front,⁵² Jabhat al Nusra,⁵³ and the Islamic State.⁵⁴

(...continued)

action. And, as Secretary Kerry noted, probably to [go] into much more detail would—would require a closed or classified hearing.”

⁴⁴ Adam Entous, Julian E. Barnes and Siobhan Gorman, “U.S. Begins Shipping Arms for Syrian Rebels,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 2013; Greg Miller, “CIA ramping up covert training program for moderate Syrian rebels,” *Washington Post*, October 2, 2013; Greg Miller and Karen DeYoung, “Secret CIA effort in Syria faces large funding cut,” *Washington Post*, June 12, 2015.

⁴⁵ Miller and DeYoung, “Secret CIA effort in Syria faces large funding cut,” *Washington Post*, June 12, 2015.

⁴⁶ See Harakat Hazm YouTube Channel, April 15, 2014, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5x5Q4aTGvu0>.

⁴⁷ Ben Hubbard, “Syrian Election Announced; Rebels Report New Weapons,” *New York Times*, April 21, 2014.

⁴⁸ Liz Sly, “Syrian rebels who received first U.S. missiles of war see shipment as ‘an important first step,’” *Washington Post*, April 27, 2014.

⁴⁹ Tom Bowman and Alice Fordham, “CIA Is Quietly Ramping Up Aid To Syrian Rebels, Sources Say,” National Public Radio (Online), April 23, 2014

⁵⁰ Transcript of Background Briefing on Syria by Senior Administration Official, U.S. State Department, May 5, 2014.

⁵¹ Section 3(a)(2) of the Arms Export Control Act (22 U.S.C. 2753 (a)(2)) applies obligations, restrictions, and possible penalties for misuse of U.S.-origin equipment to any retransfer by foreign recipients of U.S.-supplied defense articles, defense services, and related technical data to another nation. If such a retransfer occurred in the absence of prior U.S. approval, then the nation making such a transfer could be determined to be in violation of its agreement with the United States not to take such an action without prior consent from the U.S. government.

⁵² See Ansar al Islam Front YouTube Channel, August 10, 2014, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9pxIFUKEZg> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QcIDMPQkPw>.

⁵³ Umberto Bacchi, “Syria: al-Qaeda Nusra Front shows off huge cache of US weapons seized from moderate Harakat (continued...) ”

Chemical Weapons and Disarmament⁵⁵

A major policy concern of the United States has been the use or loss of control of chemical weapons stocks in Syria during the ongoing civil war. The United States, the United Nations⁵⁶ and other countries have assessed that the Syrian government has used chemical weapons repeatedly against opposition forces and civilians in the country. At the start of the war, Syria had more than 1,000 metric tons of chemical warfare agents and precursor chemicals, including several hundred metric tons of the nerve agent sarin, several hundred metric tons of mustard agent in ready-to-use form and several metric tons of the nerve agent VX. The international community oversaw the removal and destruction of these chemical weapons agents from Syria after it joined the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). UN Security Council Resolution 2118 (2013) mandated that Syria give up all its chemical weapons under Chapter VII provisions of the UN Charter.⁵⁷

The largest-scale use of chemical weapons to date was reportedly an August 21, 2013 nerve gas attack, which the U.S. government estimated killed over 1,400 people.⁵⁸ In August 2013, the Obama Administration had threatened military action against Syria in response to alleged nerve gas attacks by Syrian government forces. As part of a diplomatic solution to the crisis based on a U.S.-Russian joint proposal, the Administration withdrew the threat of military force and Syria agreed to give up its chemical weapons and join the international Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which bans the use of any toxic chemicals in warfare and requires Syria to destroy all of its chemical weapons stocks and production facilities under international supervision. By mid-August 2014, the international community had removed all of Syria's declared chemical weapons stocks, including nerve agents. All declared chemical weapons agents had been removed from the country as of June 23, 2014. More than ninety-eight percent of the declared stocks have been destroyed, including one hundred percent of the most dangerous chemical weapons.⁵⁹ One hundred percent of the most dangerous "priority" chemical weapons agents (Category 1) declared by Syria had been destroyed by August 8, 2014.⁶⁰ As of June 22, 2015, 93.7% of all other (Category 2) declared chemicals had been destroyed.⁶¹ Destruction of chemical weapons facilities

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Hazm rebels," *International Business Times*, March 4, 2015; Michael Smallwood, "Captured TOW 2A missiles employed in Syria," *Armament Research Services*, 2015

⁵⁴ OSC Report TRR2015062676424947, "ISIL Deploys Apparent TOW Missile System Against Regime Forces in Al Hasakah," June 26, 2015.

⁵⁵ Prepared by Mary Beth Nikitin, Specialist in Nonproliferation.

⁵⁶ The U.N. Mission to investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic released its report on September 16, 2013, concluding that surface-to-surface rockets containing the chemical weapons nerve agent sarin were used in the Ghouta area of Damascus against civilians on a "relatively large scale." The U.N. investigative mission was not tasked with assigning culpability for the attacks.

⁵⁷ Chapter VII of the UN Charter authorizes the use of punitive measures such as sanctions or military force.

⁵⁸ Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013, White House Office of the Press Secretary, August 30, 2013.

⁵⁹ Syria Chemical Weapons Destruction Data, OPCW website, February 9, 2015.

⁶⁰ "Ninety-six percent of Syria's declared chemical weapons destroyed – UN-OPCW mission chief," UN-OPCW Joint Mission Press Release, September 4, 2014.

⁶¹ Note by the Director-General of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Progress in the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme, June 22, 2015 in Letter dated June 26, 2015 from the United Nations Secretary-General to the President of the Security Council, S/2015/485.

is still underway,⁶² and the United States has raised questions over whether Syria has declared all of its chemical weapons stocks.

There have been repeated reports of chlorine gas attacks in Syria since mid-April 2014. Chlorine itself is not banned by the CWC, although its use in warfare is still prohibited under the Convention. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) established a Fact-Finding Mission to investigate these allegations. In their September 2014 report, the investigators concluded they have “compelling confirmation” that a toxic chemical was used “systematically and repeatedly” as a weapon against villages in northern Syria.⁶³ The Fact-Finding Mission concluded that “chlorine, either pure or in mixture” was used in attacks, based on interviews and other evidence. The Fact-Finding Mission continues to work on collecting evidence about more recent attacks.

On March 6, 2015, the UN Security Council passed resolution 2209 (2015) condemned the use of chlorine as a weapon and said that “in the event of future non-compliance” by Syria, it would impose measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. The United States and others have said that is the Asad government that has used chlorine gas since the gas was delivered by helicopter, and the Syrian government is the only party to the conflict with helicopters.⁶⁴ On July 9, the United States proposed a new United Nations Security Council resolution that would call on the Secretary General to make recommendations to establish a “OPCW-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism” tasked with identifying “entities, groups or governments who were perpetrators, organizers, sponsors or otherwise involved in use of chemical weapons” as a weapon of war in Syria.⁶⁵

Outlook

In broad terms, the Administration argues that pressure must be brought to bear on the government of Bashar al Asad in order to convince its leaders to negotiate a settlement to the conflict that would result in their departure from office and the preservation of Syrian state institutions. Administration officials have not publicly described the precise nature of such intended pressure, the specific terms of its application, or potential measures of its success in achieving its related strategic ends.

Absent a change in conditions that forcefully compels Asad’s departure or empowers opposition groups to depose Asad, current U.S. objectives would appear to require the leaders of the current

⁶² As of June 22, 2015, the OPCW reported that “With respect to the 12 chemical weapons production facilities (CWPFs) (seven aircraft hangars and five underground structures) in the Syrian Arab Republic, since the last report, brief periods of stable security conditions have allowed the completion of drilling operations at one hangar site and the near completion of destruction activities at one underground structure. As such, six hangars are now ready to accommodate explosives, and the Secretariat has verified the destruction of four underground structures, as previously reported. Explosives are now expected to arrive before the end of June 2015. Severe security conditions continue to preclude safe access to one hangar.” Ibid.

⁶³ “OPCW Fact Finding Mission: ‘Compelling Confirmation’ that Chlorine Gas Used as Weapon in Syria,” OPCW Press Release, September 10, 2014.

⁶⁴ U.S. Permanent Representative Samantha Power, “Explanation of Vote at the Adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2209,” March 6, 2015; Secretary of State John Kerry, “Allegations of Chemical Weapons Use in Sarmin, Syria,” Press Statement, March 19, 2015.

⁶⁵ Edith M. Lederer, “US seeks UN action on chemical weapon attacks in Syria,” Associated Press, July 9, 2015.

government to agree to leave power voluntarily, which they may continue to resist doing with or without guarantees of their safety and/or immunity. Opposition members may be unable or unwilling to make such guarantees or to preserve and administer state institutions in a manner desired by U.S. officials. In the past, some U.S. officials have raised the prospect of international peacekeeping arrangements to guarantee elements of a negotiated settlement, but such arrangements could require an international mandate, military forces, and financial contributions that may prove difficult to procure. Meanwhile, powerful armed Islamist opposition forces reject negotiation, seek the creation of an Islamist government, and have vowed to continue fighting until the entire Syrian government is toppled.

Moreover, Syria's diversity and the interplay of its conflict and regional sectarian rivalries raise the prospect of continued violence even in the wake of a managed transition. President Obama said in February 2015 that, in his view, "The Syrian civil war will only end when there is an inclusive political transition and a government that serves Syrians of all ethnicities and religions."⁶⁶ The presence and power in Syria of armed groups directly opposed to this formulation suggests that the current conflict could persist or evolve in response to any negotiated settlement seeking to replace the current Asad-led government with a government of national unity or other inclusive formulation.

Attempts at brokering a general ceasefire or negotiated settlement have yet to bear fruit. Many armed opposition groups categorically reject negotiation with the Asad government, and Asad continues to assert his legitimacy and describe his adversaries as terrorists and foreign agents. Political opposition coalitions appear to lack both grass-roots support and, because of their lack of material control over the most powerful armed groups, they appear to lack the ability to guarantee security commitments that might presumably be part of a negotiated settlement. Some local opposition groups have agreed to ceasefires and reconciliation arrangements under duress, even as a series of mounting losses for pro-Asad forces raises new questions about the regime's potential willingness to seek compromise before further setbacks accumulate.

Looking ahead, U.S. policy makers face a series of difficult choices as they pursue new initiatives to defeat the Islamic State while maintaining their demands that Asad implement his chemical weapons-related commitments, facilitate humanitarian access, negotiate with the opposition, and ultimately leave power. By seeking a managed political solution, U.S. policy makers have sought to bring the conflict to a close without losing the security benefits associated with the preservation of some Syrian state institutions. Some opposition groups have improved their coordination and capabilities, but it remains to be seen whether and to what extent they might be willing to collaborate with the United States and others in efforts against the Islamic State or other extremists in a post-Asad scenario.

In the meantime, it remains to be seen whether or how the United States can convince or compel parties in Syria and in the region to abandon policies that are driving the conflict. Observers, officials, and Members of Congress continue to differ over which incentives and disincentives may prove most effective in influencing combatants and their supporters. Still less defined are the commitments that the United States and others may be willing to make to achieve an inclusive political transition acceptable to Syrians; protect civilians; defend a transitional government; promote post-conflict accountability and reconciliation; or contribute to the rebuilding of a country destroyed by years of brutal war.

⁶⁶ President Obama, Remarks at the Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, Washington, DC, February 19, 2015.

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