



MEMORANDUM

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Subject: Syria: Turkish Incursion and Conflict Status

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Overview

A series of Administration statements and moves in October 2019 appear to have significantly altered the U.S. approach to the Syria conflict. After an October 6 phone call with Turkish President Erdogan, President Trump announced an imminent Turkish operation in northern Syria and stated that U.S. forces would leave the area. The Turkish-led operation, dubbed Operation Peace Spring, was launched on October 9, triggering an escalation of conflict between Turkish and Kurdish forces, and significant civilian displacement.

On October 13, President Trump directed the full withdrawal of the approximately 1,000 remaining U.S. troops in northeast Syria (**Figure 1**).¹ In a statement posted to Twitter on October 14, he stated that U.S. troops leaving Syria would redeploy in the region to “monitor the situation.”² Defense Department officials said that most U.S. personnel currently based in Syria would move to Iraq by the end of October; roughly 125 U.S. personnel would remain at the At Tanf garrison in southeastern Syria (**Figure 2**).³ The U.S. withdrawal followed the launch of military operations against U.S. partners in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) by the Turkish military and allied Syrian militia groups under the rubric of Turkey’s Operation Peace Spring (OPS). The SDF, seeking protection from Turkish operations, invited Syrian military forces, backed by Russian personnel, to reenter SDF-held areas of northeastern Syria.

Prior to the withdrawal announcement, Administration officials described U.S. policy in Syria as seeking 1) to prevent the resurgence of the Islamic State by training local partner forces—the SDF and other vetted Syrian opposition groups, 2) a political solution to the Syria conflict based on U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254, which calls for the drafting of a new constitution and U.N.-supervised elections, and 3) the withdrawal of all Iranian-commanded forces. Unnamed U.S. officials have stated that

¹ “U.S. Military to Withdraw From Northern Syria,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 13, 2019.

² Statement from President Donald J. Trump Regarding Turkey’s Actions in Northeast Syria, October 14, 2019.

³ “U.S. Military to Withdraw From Northern Syria,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 13, 2019.

U.S. objectives remain unchanged in the wake of the President's decision. Nevertheless, the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from northeastern Syria and corresponding military moves by Turkey, the Syrian government, and Russia fundamentally change the context in which U.S. objectives are to be pursued.

Relevant issues and questions for Congress may include:

- Security conditions in northeastern Syria appear to be deteriorating in some areas and reports suggest that Islamic State supporters are attempting to exploit the fluidity on the ground. What immediate effects is the withdrawal having on security conditions in northeastern Syria? What evidence is there that the Islamic State group has benefitted from resulting developments to date? What implications does the U.S. withdrawal have for the security of U.S. partners in Jordan, Iraq, and Israel, and for U.S. relations with those partners?
 - It appears likely that the ability of U.S. military forces to conduct operations in large areas of eastern Syria will now be constrained and contested by the advance of Syrian and Russian forces into areas formerly controlled by U.S. allies. This suggests that counterterrorism and security responsibilities will shift more wholly to non-U.S. forces. State Department and USAID personnel will most likely be unable to redeploy in the area, curtailing stabilization activities. How capable are Syrian and Russian forces of extending security control over northeastern Syria and preventing the resurgence of the Islamic State group? To what extent do they prioritize the counter-Islamic State mission? What posture should the United States take with regard to counter-IS efforts and stabilization by Turkey, Syria, and Russia? What are the prospects for military confrontation between Turkey and the Syrian government, backed by Russia?
 - Political elements of the SDF forces had created a de facto autonomous political structure in northeastern Syria that is now being reconciled with and/or subsumed under the control of the Asad government in Damascus. How might any reassertion of political and security control by the Syrian government over northeastern Syria affect the overall balance of power in Syria, and prospects for a political solution to the Syrian conflict? How might the Asad government and its backers change their approach to negotiations? Why, and with what implications for the United States? What relative effect does the U.S. withdrawal have on U.S. influence over future negotiations? Why?
 - U.S. forces in northeastern Syria were not directly contesting the activities of Iran-aligned elements of the Syrian and Iraqi security forces in the area, but were in a position to monitor them. U.S. forces regularly operated along routes connecting the two countries. How might the withdrawal affect patterns of Iranian weapons shipments via Syria? How if at all does the announced U.S. withdrawal affect U.S. options for monitoring and interdicting Iranian weapons shipments? Does the U.S. withdrawal increase or decrease the likelihood of the withdrawal from Syria of Iranian forces?
 - The Administration's FY2020 requests for defense and foreign aid appropriations presumed continued counterterrorism, train and equip, and humanitarian operations in Syria. In addition, Congress has been debating proposals that would have extended and amended related authorities and made additional funding available to continue U.S. efforts. What revised defense and foreign assistance needs, if any, has the Administration identified in connection with the U.S. withdrawal? How, if at all, should Congress increase, decrease, or reallocate defense, humanitarian, and stabilization resources for FY2020 in light of the withdrawal, and the recalibration of the U.S. relationship with the SDF? What, if any, new or revised oversight mechanisms should Congress employ?
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Recent Developments

White House Announces Limited Troop Withdrawal

Following an October 6 call between President Donald Trump and Erdogan, the White House announced that Turkey would “soon be moving forward with its long-planned operation into Northern Syria,” and that U.S. forces would “no longer be in the immediate area.”⁴ Some Members of Congress then argued that a “precipitous withdrawal” of U.S. forces would benefit Russia, Iran, the Islamic State, and the Syrian regime.⁵ State Department and Pentagon officials subsequently emphasized that roughly 50 U.S. Special Forces personnel had been withdrawn from two outposts to “more secure areas,” and that the move did not signal a pullout of U.S. troops from Syria.⁶ On October 8, President Trump tweeted, “We may be in the process of leaving Syria, but in no way have we Abandoned the Kurds.” Trump warned that if Turkey took any unspecified steps that he considered “off-limits,” he would “totally destroy and obliterate” Turkey’s economy, while also inviting Erdogan to Washington in mid-November. Following the start of Operation Peace Spring, President Trump stated, “The United States does not endorse this attack and has made it clear to Turkey that this operation is a bad idea.”

Turkey Begins Operation Peace Spring

On October 9, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced the start of “Operation Peace Spring,” which he stated would target both Kurdish and Islamic State (IS, aka ISIL/ISIS) fighters—both of which Turkey classifies as terrorist groups—in northern Syria. Turkey then launched an air and ground assault against Kurdish forces. Turkey’s foreign minister stated that Turkish forces planned to go no further than about 19 miles into Syrian territory, a distance he said was necessary to prevent Kurdish fighters from firing into Turkey.⁷ He also stated that Turkey eventually planned to occupy a corridor along the border. The commander of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) stated that the SDF would resist, and fighting has escalated. While this is the third discrete military operation conducted by Turkey since 2016, prior Turkish incursions into Syrian territory have, according to public accounts, thus far largely avoided conflict with the specific elements of the SDF that U.S. forces have partnered with in the campaign against the Islamic State.

As of October 11, the Turkish incursion had impacted approximately 125 kilometers of the roughly 440 kilometer Syria-Turkey border, according to U.S. military officials.⁸ U.S. officials stated that the Turkish incursion involved airstrikes (fixed wing and UAV), artillery strikes, and direct fire from tanks on the Turkish side of the border. U.S. military officials described Turkish ground force elements that have crossed into northern Syria as “relatively limited,” consisting of “hundreds” of Turkish light infantry forces operating in conjunction with approximately 1,000 Syrian opposition forces (Syrian National Army, formerly known as the Free Syrian Army). Turkish officials stated that they had advanced 19-22 miles into Syria, and taken control of parts of the M4 highway, and, on Tuesday said they controlled approximately 1,000 square kilometers, or about 386 square miles.⁹ (See **Figure 1**).

⁴ White House Statement from the Press Secretary, October 6, 2019.

⁵ Press Release, “McConnell Statement on Turkey and U.S. Partners in Syria,” October 7, 2019.

⁶ “Trump Whipsaws on Turkey as Threat Follows Green Light on Syria,” Bloomberg, October 7, 2019; Department of Defense Press Release, “Statement Attributable to Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Mr. Jonathan Hoffman,” October 7, 2019.

⁷ “Turkish Forces Escalate Campaign in Syria Against Kurdish-Led Militia,” *New York Times*, October 11, 2019.

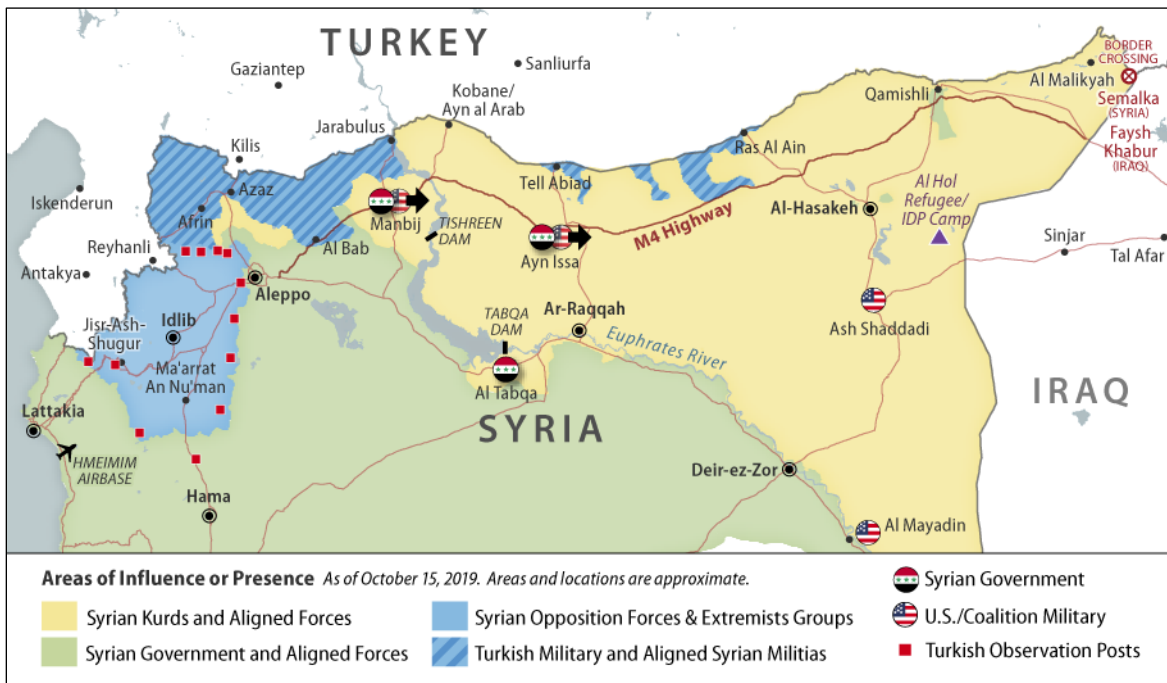
⁸ Press Briefing by Defense Secretary Esper and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Milley, October 11, 2019.

⁹ “As U.S. Pulls Out of Syria, Russian Forces Swoop In,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 15, 2019.

White House Announces Full Withdrawal from Northern Syria

On October 11, U.S. forces in the vicinity of Kobane came under Turkish artillery fire, according to U.S. military officials.¹⁰ Turkey denied targeting U.S. forces deliberately, and claimed that Turkish forces were responding to mortar fire from “terrorist positions” near the U.S. observation post. No U.S. injuries were reported. On October 13, President Trump directed the full withdrawal of the approximately 1,000 remaining U.S. troops in northeast Syria.¹¹

Figure 1. Syria-Turkey Border



Source: CRS using area of influence data from IHS Conflict Monitor, last revised October 15, 2019. All areas of influence approximate and subject to change. Other sources include U.N. OCHA, Esri, and social media reports.

Notes: This map does not depict all U.S. bases in Syria.

Islamic State Detainees

Prior to the Turkish incursion, SDF forces in Syria held approximately 10,000 IS militants in custody at several makeshift prisons in northern Syria, and provided security at the Al Hol IDP camp and other locations where additional IS family members and/or supporters are among the populations (**Figure 1**).¹² As Turkey prepared to launch operations in Syria, SDF leaders warned that forces previously tasked with securing IS detainees had been diverted to the border. Following a Turkish attack on the city of Ain Issa, several hundred women and children linked to the Islamic State escaped a camp for displaced persons. Additionally, U.S. forces reportedly were unable to execute a plan to remove about five dozen high value IS prisoners from Syria before withdrawing.¹³

¹⁰ “Turkey Attacks US Special Forces in Syria, Apparently by Mistake,” *Newsweek*, October 11, 2019.

¹¹ “U.S. Military to Withdraw From Northern Syria,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 13, 2019.

¹² Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Quarterly Report to the U.S. Congress, April 1, 2019-June 30, 2019.

¹³ “U.S. Moves to Take ‘High Value’ ISIS Detainees, Including Britons Who Abused Hostages,” *New York Times*, October 9, 2019; “Abandoned by U.S. in Syria, Kurds Find New Ally in American Foe,” *New York Times*, October 14, 2019.

Former U.S. Kurdish Allies Join Forces with Assad Government

The SDF, a key U.S. ally in the counter IS-campaign, said it had reached an interim agreement with the Assad government to defend against the Turkish advance. In a statement, the SDF announced that, “An agreement has been reached with the Syrian government — whose duty it is to protect the country’s borders and preserve Syrian sovereignty — for the Syrian Army to enter and deploy along the Syrian-Turkish border to help the SDF stop this aggression.” Local officials in Manbij and Kobane, areas where U.S. forces previously had been based, confirmed that they had been asked to allow Syrian troops to deploy.¹⁴ On October 14, Syrian military forces entered the towns of Tabqa and Ain Issa.¹⁵ It is unclear whether the Syrian government will directly challenge Turkish military forces, or will aim primarily to deter Turkish expansion. It is also unclear how the agreement will impact the former U.S. ally. SDF leaders have said the agreement allows them to retain their military structure and control of local governing councils. However, the Syrian government has said the SDF must disband and merge with pro-regime military units.¹⁶ On October 15, Russia announced that its units were patrolling between Turkish and Syrian military forces near Manbij.

U.S. Sanctions Turkish Officials

On October 14, President Trump issued an executive order authorizing sanctions against current and former Turkish officials, government agencies, sectors of the Turkish economy to be determined by the Secretary of the Treasury, and any person found to be responsible for or engaged in the ongoing military operations in northeastern Syria, intimidation of displaced persons in the region, or interference in democratic processes, along with financial institutions or other parties deemed to be assisting any designated individuals.¹⁷ According to the President, the order authorizes

[Sanctions on] those who may be involved in serious human rights abuses, obstructing a ceasefire, preventing displaced persons from returning home, forcibly repatriating refugees, or threatening the peace, security, or stability in Syria. The Order will authorize a broad range of consequences, including financial sanctions, the blocking of property, and barring entry into the United States.¹⁸

The Treasury Department designated for sanctions Turkey’s defense and energy ministries and their ministers, as well as Turkey’s interior minister.¹⁹ The President also raised steel tariffs on Turkey and announced an immediate stop to U.S. negotiations with Turkey on a \$100 billion trade deal.²⁰ That same day, Vice President Mike Pence said that the President had called on Turkish President Erdogan to cease fire in Syria, and that Pence and National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien would travel to Turkey in an attempt to broker a stop to hostilities involving Turkey and the SDF.²¹

¹⁴ “U. S.-allied Kurds strike deal to bring Assad’s Syrian troops back into Kurdish areas,” *Washington Post*, October 13, 2019 .

¹⁵ “Syrian troops enter key towns in northeast under deal with Kurds,” *Washington Post*, October 14, 2019.

¹⁶ “4 big questions about Syria’s future,” *New York Times*, October 15, 2019.

¹⁷ White House, Executive Order on Blocking Property and Suspending Entry of Certain Persons Contributing to the Situation in Syria, October 14, 2019.

¹⁸ White House, Statement from President Donald J. Trump Regarding Turkey’s Actions in Northeast Syria, October 14, 2019.

¹⁹ Department of the Treasury, Executive Order on Syria-related Sanctions; Syria-related Designations; Issuance of Syria-related General Licenses, October 14, 2019.

²⁰ White House, Statement from President Donald J. Trump op. cit. footnote 18.

²¹ Keith Johnson and Elias Groll, “Trump’s Weak Sanctions May Only Help Erdogan,” *foreignpolicy.com*, October 14, 2019.

Conflict Status

Idlib Province Remains Safe Haven for Al Qaeda in Syria

Administration officials continue to describe Syria's northwestern province of Idlib, which has been under opposition control since 2015, as "a major terrorist concern."²² While a range of opposition groups operate in the province, U.S. officials in 2017 described Idlib as "the largest Al Qaeda safe haven since 9/11."²³ U.S. initiatives in Idlib aimed at countering violent extremism (CVE) were halted in May 2018 as part of a broader withdrawal of U.S. assistance to northwest Syria.²⁴ In January 2019, the Al Qaeda-linked group Haya't Tahrir al Sham (HTS) seized large areas of Idlib province from rival armed groups. In early 2019, the U.S. intelligence community also highlighted another Al Qaeda-linked group in Syria known as Hurras al Din ("Guardians of Religion", HD). While HTS and HD have occasionally clashed in Idlib, some analysts have assessed that the two groups "serve different functions that equally serve al-Qa`ida's established objectives: one [HD] appeals to hardened jihadis with an uncompromising doctrine focused on jihad beyond Syria and one [HTS] appeals to those focused on the Syrian war."²⁵

In February 2019, the two groups signed an accord pledging broader cooperation.²⁶ In June and August of 2019, CENTCOM announced two U.S. strikes against "al-Qaida in Syria (AQ-S) leadership" in Aleppo and Idlib provinces, respectively.²⁷ The second strike

targeted AQ-S leaders responsible for attacks threatening U.S. citizens, our partners, and innocent civilians. [...] Northwest Syria remains a safe haven where AQ-S leaders actively coordinate terrorist activities throughout the region and in the West.²⁸

In September 2019, the U.S. government named HD as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity pursuant to Executive Order 13224, as amended by Executive Order 13886.

Asad Government Reasserts Control; Limited Progress on Political Settlement

The U.S. intelligence community's 2018 Worldwide Threat Assessment stated, "The conflict has decisively shifted in the Syrian regime's favor, enabling Russia and Iran to further entrench themselves inside the country."²⁹ The Trump Administration continues to state its intent to refrain from supporting reconstruction efforts in Syria until a political solution to the conflict is reached in accordance with U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254, which calls for constitutional reform and U.N.-supervised elections.³⁰ In 2019 the U.S. intelligence community assessed that Asad has "little incentive" to make "anything more than token concessions to the opposition or to adhere to UN resolutions on constitutional changes that

²² Briefing by Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Ambassador James F. Jeffrey and Counterterrorism Coordinator Ambassador Nathan A. Sales, August 1, 2019.

²³ Brett McGurk, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, at the Middle East Institute, July 27, 2017.

²⁴ "Trump administration ends aid for northwestern Syria," CBS, May 18, 2018.

²⁵ Hassan Hassan, "Two Houses Divided: How Conflict in Syria Shaped the Future of Jihadism," *CTC Sentinel*, October 2018.

²⁶ Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Hurras al-Din reach a new accord," *Long War Journal*, February 15, 2019.

²⁷ Statement from U.S. Central Command on strike against al-Qaida in Syria, June 30, 2019.

²⁸ Statement from U.S. Central Command on U.S. Forces strike against al-Qaida in Syria leadership in Idlib, Syria, Aug. 31, 2019.

²⁹ Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, February 13, 2018.

³⁰ New York Foreign Press Center Briefing by James Jeffrey, Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, "Readout and way forward from the U.N. General Assembly," September 27, 2019.

Asad perceives would hurt his regime.”³¹ In September 2019, the U.N. Special Envoy to Syria, Geir Pedersen, announced the formation of a 150-member Syrian committee that will be tasked with drafting a new constitution, per UNSCR 2254. The committee, whose formation took almost two years, consists of 50 opposition members, 50 representing the Asad government, and 50 representing Syrian civil society.

*Humanitarian Conditions Deteriorate*³²

As of October 2019, 11.7 million Syrians (59 percent of Syria’s current estimated internal population) were in need of humanitarian assistance, 5.6 million Syrians were registered as refugees in neighboring countries, and 6.2 million were internally displaced.³³ Areas of particular concern include:

Northeast Syria. U.N. agencies stated that at least 160,000 people are reported to have been displaced since the start of Operation Peace Spring on October 9.³⁴ At the same time, shelling and road closures have forced humanitarian organizations to suspend or scale back their operations in the area. As of mid-October, all international aid groups had withdrawn their personnel, according to the Kurdish Red Crescent.³⁵ Iraqi authorities reported that several hundred people have crossed the border into northwestern Iraq.

Idlib. The province is home to an estimated three million people, half of whom are children according to U.N. reporting.³⁶ U.N. officials have described Idlib as a “dumping ground” for fighters and civilians evacuated or displaced from formerly opposition-held areas in other parts of the country. Syrian military forces have escalated operations in Idlib in 2019, displacing more than 400,000 people—including 150,000 children—since May, according to U.N. estimates.³⁷ A report issued by the U.N. Secretary General in August stated, “The escalation of hostilities in the north-west, combined with high levels of need and vulnerability, has had catastrophic humanitarian consequences for the estimated 3 million people living in the Idlib area.”³⁸

Al Hol camp. Located in Al Hasakeh province, the camp hosts nearly 70,000 displaced persons, many of whom fled the Islamic State’s final outpost in eastern Syria. An estimated 94% of residents are women and children.³⁹ The International Rescue Committee reported in September that deaths of children at Al Hol had tripled since March, mostly due to treatable conditions such as severe malnutrition, diarrhea, and pneumonia.⁴⁰ Media reports from Al Hol in September 2019 suggested that IS sympathizers dominate parts of the camp, threatening the safety of other residents.⁴¹ U.S. military estimates in June 2019 stated that 45,000 “ISIS supporters” were living in Al Hol.⁴² As mentioned above, SDF leaders have warned that they may not have the resources to continue guarding detention facilities in light of ongoing Turkish operations in northeast Syria.

³¹ Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, January 29, 2019.

³² Prepared with assistance from Rhoda Margesson, Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy.

³³ USAID Syria Humanitarian Dashboard, September 13, 2019.

³⁴ UNOCHA Syria, Flash Update #5, October 14, 2019.

³⁵ “Syrian troops enter key towns in northeast under deal with Kurds,” *Washington Post*, October 14, 2019.

³⁶ U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), Syrian Arab Republic: Recent Developments in Northwestern Syria Situation Report No. 8 - as of 26 July 2019.

³⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwestern Syria, Situation Report No. 13, October 8, 2019.

³⁸ U.N. Security Council, Report of the Secretary General, S/2019/674, August 21, 2019.

³⁹ UNHCR, North East Syria: Al Hol camp service mapping snapshot, August 1, 2019.

⁴⁰ “Guns, Filth, and ISIS: Syrian Camp is ‘Disaster in the Making,’” *New York Times*, September 3, 2019.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*: “At a sprawling tent camp in Syria, ISIS women impose a brutal rule,” *Washington Post*, September 3, 2019.

⁴² Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Quarterly Report to the U.S. Congress, April 1, 2019–June 30, 2019.

Rukban camp abuts the Jordanian border in remote southeastern Syria near a U.S. military garrison at At Tanf. As of late July, approximately 25,000 people remained internally displaced at Rukban.⁴³ Occupants of Rukban are primarily women and children, and the United Nations in August reported that humanitarian conditions in the camp remain “dire,” due in part to a lack of access to food and basic health services.⁴⁴ Over the past two years, only two humanitarian convoys have been able to deliver aid to Rukban, due to Syrian government restrictions.⁴⁵ Some observers have argued that the United States should take on a greater humanitarian role at Rukban, given the proximity of U.S. military personnel at the nearby At Tanf garrison.⁴⁶ In an October 2019 statement, President Trump confirmed that some U.S. personnel will remain at At Tanf, despite the withdrawal of other U.S. military forces from Syria’s northeast.

U.S. Syria Policy Pre-withdrawal

Military Operations

The withdrawal from northeastern Syria would leave a small contingent of U.S. forces at the At Tanf garrison in the tri-border area between Syria, Iraq, and Jordan “to continue to disrupt remnants of ISIS.”⁴⁷ First deployed in 2015, U.S. military forces have operated in Syria pursuant to the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) and the 2002 Authorization for Use of Force against Iraq,⁴⁸ but without the authorization of the Syrian government. The At Tanf garrison is geographically remote from former U.S. areas of operation north of the Euphrates River. While IS forces are known to be active in the areas of central Syria north of At Tanf, this area is under the military influence of the Syrian government and its Russian and Iranian partners. U.S. operations in these areas thus may be contested and limited. The Administration has not said whether or not it will continue to use train and equip program funds to support U.S. partner forces operating from At Tanf.

Building Partner Capacity

To date, U.S. policy has focused on working “by, with, and through” local partners to address the threat to the United States posed by IS militants operating in Syria. The Syria Train and Equip (T&E) program is the primary programmatic mechanism for counter-IS operations in Syria, and has relied on the United States’ ability to partner with vetted Syrian opposition groups. In 2019, Congress has considered defense authorization legislation that would expand both the goals of the T&E program and its intended recipients. In a possible recognition of the shifting course of the conflict, language proposed in the House and Senate versions of the FY2020 NDAA (H.R. 2500, S. 1790) would allow the program to continue beyond the defeat of both the Islamic State and the Syrian opposition. (See “Pending Legislation,” below.) Prior to the withdrawal, U.S. Syrian partner forces numbered approximately 100,000 and included three primary components: 1) the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which was the largest combat force and consists primarily of the Syrian Arab Coalition (SAC) and the PKK-linked Kurdish People’s Protection

⁴³ UNICEF Whole of Syria Crisis Situation Report - July 2019 Humanitarian Results, July 31, 2019.

⁴⁴ U.N. Security Council, Report of the Secretary General, S/2019/674, August 21, 2019.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “The United States won’t feed 30,000 starving Syrians living under its protection,” *Washington Post*, July 24, 2019.

⁴⁷ Statement from President Donald J. Trump Regarding Turkey’s Actions in Northeast Syria, October 14, 2019.

⁴⁸ President Obama asserted that the campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria was authorized by both the Authorization for Use of Military Force (2001 AUMF; P.L. 107-40; claiming that the Islamic State was a successor organization of Al Qaeda and that elements of Al Qaeda were present in Syria) and Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002 (2002 AUMF; P.L. 107-243; claiming authority to defend Iraq from the Islamic State threat).

Units (YPG); 2) Provincial Internal Security Forces (PRISF), composed of fighters recruited from the provinces in northeast Syria where they were based; and 3) the Internal Security Forces (InSF), which operated as a wide-area security force in IS-liberated areas and was composed of units such as the Raqqah Internal Security Force and the Manbij Internal Security Force.⁴⁹ The Syrian government does not recognize any of these forces as legitimate security actors and may be seeking to coopt or demobilize them as Syrian government forces move into the northeast.

Stabilization Programming

U.S. officials previously stated that stabilization programs in IS-liberated areas are key to preventing the resurgence of the Islamic State. The Trump Administration ended U.S. funding for stabilization assistance to Syria in 2018, but had sought the continuation of some programs using non-U.S. coalition funding. The future of existing interagency assistance coordination platforms—the Syria Transition Assistance Response Team (START) and the Southern Syria Assistance Platform (SSAP) based in Turkey and Jordan, respectively—along with the START Forward team that had planned to resume in-country operations is uncertain.⁵⁰ To date, stabilization programming for areas of northeast Syria liberated from IS control has comprised four primary lines of effort: (1) demining, (2) promotion of local governance and civil society, (3) rehabilitation of basic infrastructure, and (4) promotion of economic growth and development. The ability of the United States and U.S. partners to pursue these efforts in areas under SDF and/or Syrian government control may now be limited.

Economic Sanctions

The United States has maintained bilateral economic sanctions on Syria since 2004 pursuant to the Syria Accountability Act (P.L. 108-175), and has imposed additional sanctions since the beginning of the conflict in 2011.⁵¹ U.S. officials have described sanctions as both a tool for changing Syrian government behavior, and a punitive measure designed to isolate Syria in response to ongoing human rights abuses by the Asad government. In November 2018 and March 2019, the Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued advisories warning of the risk of U.S. sanctions for parties involved in petroleum shipments to the government of Syria. OFAC stated that the United States aimed to “disrupt support for the Assad regime by preventing the normalization of economic and diplomatic relations [...] The United States is committed to isolating the Assad regime and its supporters from the global financial and trade system in response to the continued atrocities committed by the regime against the Syrian people.”⁵²

Humanitarian Aid

The United States is the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to Syria, which is exempt from the restrictions imposed by sanctions and other legal restrictions on aid to the Syrian government. From FY2012 through October 11, 2019, the United States allocated more than \$9.6 billion to meet humanitarian needs using existing funding from global humanitarian accounts and some reprogrammed funding.⁵³ As of October, the U.N. appeal for the 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Syria was 36% funded. The 2019 Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) sought \$5.5 billion and was 27% funded. At a pledging conference for the Syria crisis held in Brussels, Belgium, from March 12 to

⁴⁹ Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Quarterly Report to the U.S. Congress, April 1, 2019-June 30, 2019.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ “U.S. Relations with Syria,” State Department Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, July 23, 2018.

⁵² Department of the Treasury, “OFAC Advisory to the Maritime Petroleum Shipping Community,” March 25, 2019.

⁵³ USAID, “Syria – Complex Emergency,” Fact Sheet #8, Fiscal Year (FY) 2019, August 9, 2019.

14, 2019, a record \$7 billion was pledged, some of which, if and when realized, is to be applied to the appeals mentioned above.

Policy Implications of Withdrawal Announcement

Potential Islamic State Resurgence

In an interview on October 13, Former Defense Secretary James Mattis stated that “ISIS will resurge” in Syria absent U.S. military pressure.⁵⁴ Similarly, retired Gen. Michael Nagata—who formerly served as commander of U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Middle East—on October 14 described the U.S. withdrawal decision as “an unintended, but strategic gift to the Islamic State.”⁵⁵ Nagata previously had stated that the Islamic State, even following the defeat of its physical caliphate, retains more fighters than Al Qaeda in Iraq did during its peak.⁵⁶ (U.S. officials in August estimated the number of IS fighters to be 15,000, split between Syria and Iraq.⁵⁷) Al Qaeda in Iraq, which became the Islamic State of Iraq, was weakened, but not eliminated, by the time of the U.S. withdrawal in 2011. The group re-emerged as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS) in 2014, and seized large swaths of territory across Syria and Iraq. As of mid-October, media reports suggest that the Islamic State has moved to exploit the security vacuum generated by the withdrawal of Kurdish and U.S. forces. IS militants set off two car bombs in Kurdish-held areas of Syria, including one outside a prison. Gen. Nagata stated that ongoing unrest and instability in neighboring Iraq “compounds the opportunity for ISIS to be a very effective insurgent actor in this part of the region.”⁵⁸

New Hurdles to Counter-IS Operations

The latest withdrawal announcement will likely challenge the ability of the United States to pursue counter-IS operations in Syria. On October 11, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley stated that U.S. policy was “to continue with our counter-ISIS campaign, and we are continuing those operations, except in that one area of the [Turkish] incursion.”⁵⁹ It was not immediately clear whether this remained U.S. policy following the October 13 withdrawal announcement. Turkish forces now control Syria’s M4 highway, the primary east-west artery in northern Syria, and the main supply line to U.S. forces from Iraq. Most critically, the SDF, formerly the United States’ key local partner in counter-IS operations, is now formally allied with the Asad government—restricting the ability of U.S. military forces to partner with the group moving forward.

Uncertain Future for Stabilization Programs

While U.S. officials have described stabilization programs in IS-liberated areas as key to preventing the Islamic State’s resurgence, it is unlikely that U.S. programs in these areas will be able to continue as the region falls under Syrian government control. It is uncertain whether stabilization programs funded by

⁵⁴ “Mattis: ISIS will surge back after Trump’s Syria withdrawal,” *Politico*, October 13, 2019.

⁵⁵ LTG. Nagata (Ret.) Explains the Consequences of a U.S. Withdrawal from Syria, Institute for the Study of War, October 14, 2019.

⁵⁶ “ISIS Will Benefit from US Withdrawal, Says Retired 3-Star Who Helped Train Syrian Rebels,” *Defense One*, October 7, 2019.

⁵⁷ Briefing by Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Ambassador James F. Jeffrey and Counterterrorism Coordinator Ambassador Nathan A. Sales, August 1, 2019.

⁵⁸ “ISIS Will Benefit from US Withdrawal, Says Retired 3-Star Who Helped Train Syrian Rebels,” *Defense One*, October 7, 2019.

⁵⁹ Press Briefing by Defense Secretary Esper and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Milley, October 11, 2019.

U.S. coalition partners will continue in these areas. The absence of stabilization programming in northeast Syria—where critical infrastructure was badly damaged as part of the U.S.-led campaign against the Islamic State—could leave local residents vulnerable and/or susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups. On October 12, the Administration announced that it was releasing \$50 million “to protect persecuted ethnic and religious minorities, and advance human rights” in Syria and expressed its “hope that regional and international partners will continue their contributions as well.”⁶⁰

Figure 2. Syria



Source: CRS using area of influence data from IHS Conflict Monitor, last revised October 15, 2019. All areas of influence approximate and subject to change. Other sources include U.N. OCHA, Esri, and social media reports.

Notes: This map does not depict all U.S. bases in Syria.

⁶⁰ Statement from the White House Press Secretary, October 12, 2019.