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Syria and U.S. Policy

Since 2011, conflict between the government of Syrian President Bashar al Asad and opposition forces seeking his removal has displaced roughly half of the country's population and killed over half a million people. Five countries operate in or maintain military forces in Syria: Russia, Turkey (Türkiye), Iran, Israel, and the United States. The United States seeks a negotiated political settlement to the Syria conflict and the enduring defeat of the Islamic State (IS, aka ISIS/ISIL). Issues facing U.S. policymakers include responding to threats posed by IS remnants and detainees, countering Al Qaeda, facilitating humanitarian access, and managing Russian and Iranian challenges to U.S. operations. The February 2023 earthquakes created additional humanitarian needs in northwest Syria; U.S. response efforts seek to assist earthquake victims without bolstering the Asad regime.

Areas of Control

Rival administrations hold territory in Syria, including:

The Asad Government

The Asad government—backed by Russia, Iran, and aligned militia forces—controls about two thirds of Syria's territory, including most major cities. In 2021, President Asad won a fourth seven-year term; U.S. officials described the election as “an insult to democracy.” Pockets of armed resistance to Asad rule remain, particularly in the south.

Kurdish-Arab Military and Civilian Authorities

Following the defeat of the Islamic State by the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Kurdish authorities and their Arab partners in northeast Syria established the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), also known as the Self Administration of Northeast Syria (SANES). The SDF and its political wing (the Syrian Democratic Council, SDC) play a leading role in the AANES, whose leaders have stated that it is not aligned with either the Asad government or with opposition forces. Turkey has clashed with the main Kurdish group within the SDF because of its links with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO).

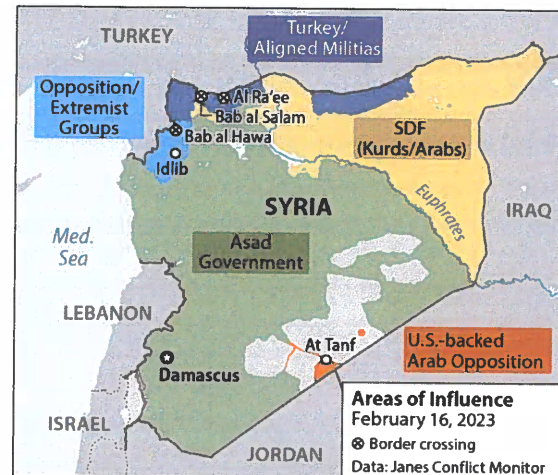
Opposition and Extremist Forces

Opposition-held areas of northwest Syria are administered by the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG). The SSG was established in 2017 and is affiliated with Hayat Tahrir al Sham, which is an FTO due to its links to Al Qaeda. Many residents of this area have been displaced from areas of Syria now under Asad control, and an estimated 75% depend on U.N. assistance to meet their basic needs.

Turkish Forces and Aligned Militias

Turkish-held areas of northern Syria include territories occupied by Turkish forces in cooperation with Syrian Arab proxy forces. In these areas, Turkey has established local councils subordinate to the Turkish provinces they border, with Turkish provincial governments overseeing the provision of some basic services.

Figure 1. Syria: Areas of Influence



Source: CRS, using ESRI and U.S. State Department data.

2023 Earthquakes

On February 6, 2023, successive 7.8 and 7.5 magnitude earthquakes struck southern Turkey near the Syrian border, resulting in over 47,000 fatalities across both countries. Within Syria, the northwest—including areas controlled by opposition and extremist groups, and by Turkish-backed Syrian militia forces—was most impacted.

Following international pressure, President Asad on February 13 authorized the United Nations to use the Bab al Salam and Al Ra'ee border crossings to reach opposition held areas of northwest Syria for a period of three months. Prior to this, U.N. agencies were limited to the Bab al Hawa crossing, which remains the only border crossing authorized by the U.N. Security Council (UNSC) for the delivery of cross border aid into Syria (see below).

U.S. Response. On February 9, U.S. officials announced \$85 million in humanitarian assistance to earthquake-affected populations in Turkey and Syria. On February 19, U.S. officials announced an additional \$100 million in Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance (ERMA) funds and humanitarian assistance to support the earthquake response. While stating that “U.S. sanctions programs already contain robust exemptions for humanitarian efforts,” on February 9, the U.S. Department of the Treasury issued Syria General License 23, “Authorizing Transactions Related to Earthquake Relief Efforts in Syria,” which authorizes for 180 days all transactions related to earthquake relief that would otherwise be prohibited by the Syria Sanctions Regulations.

The Islamic State

U.S. military officials assess that the Islamic State remains entrenched as a cohesive, low-level insurgency, focusing its activities against Asad government forces in southwest

Syria and the central Syrian desert, and against the SDF in northern and eastern Syria.

Islamic State Detainees. The SDF continues to hold about 10,000 IS fighters in detention facilities across northern Syria. In January 2022, U.S. air and ground forces in Syria joined SDF partner forces in a lengthy battle to retake a prison seized by IS fighters. It was the largest U.S. military engagement with the group since 2019. The SDF also retains custody of about 57,000 people linked to the Islamic State (mostly women and children) at the Al Hol IDP camp.

U.S. Policy

The Biden Administration has identified four policy priorities to meet the U.S. objective for a political settlement to the conflict as envisioned in UNSC Resolution 2254: (1) sustaining the U.S. and coalition campaign against the Islamic State; (2) supporting local ceasefires; (3) expanding humanitarian access; and (4) pressing for accountability and respect for international law while promoting human rights and nonproliferation, including through the imposition of targeted sanctions.

U.S. Military Presence: Operation Inherent Resolve

U.S. forces have operated inside Syria since 2015 pursuant to the 2001 and 2002 Authorizations for Use of Military Force (AUMF), amid ongoing debate in Congress about the authorization for U.S. operations in Syria. U.S. operations focus on countering the Islamic State as part of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR). According to Lead Inspector General reporting to Congress in late 2022, the OIR mission is “to advise, assist, and enable partner forces until they can independently defeat ISIS in designated areas of Iraq and Syria.” About 900 U.S. troops are based in Syria to support counter-IS operations. Most U.S. forces are deployed in what military officials term the Eastern Syria Security Area, in support of the SDF. About 100 U.S. troops support the Syrian Free Army (formerly known as *Jaysh Mughawir ath Thawra*), an Arab force, at the At Tanf garrison. At Tanf is located along a transit route between Iraq and Syria used by both IS fighters and by Iran-backed militias.

Since 2015, CENTCOM has conducted periodic military strikes in Syria outside the framework of OIR, including on targets linked to Al Qaeda, the Syrian government, and Iran-backed militias—some of which have used Syria-based facilities to monitor and target U.S. forces in Iraq.

U.S. Policy Tools

Syria Train and Equip Program

The Syria Train and Equip program, authorized by Congress in 2014 and funded via the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF), seeks to make partner forces in Syria capable of defeating the Islamic State. U.S. military officials in late 2022 assessed that the SDF is “moderately capable” of conducting conventional and counter-terrorism operations, but remains dependent on Coalition forces to conduct complex counter-ISIS operations and for materiel.

FY2023 Funding. The FY2023 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 117-328 and accompanying explanatory statement) makes \$475 million available for CTEF, including \$160 million for Syria. It also directs the rescission of \$65 million in prior year CTEF funds.

Sanctions

The United States maintains sanctions on Syria relating to its support for terrorism, interference in Lebanon, use of chemical weapons, and human rights violations. The Biden Administration has expressed support for a regional deal to export natural gas and electricity from Egypt and Jordan to Lebanon via Syria, describing it as a humanitarian effort that would be funded by the World Bank and thus not require a sanctions waiver. In a February 2022 letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the ranking Members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee argued that the deal would “undoubtedly enrich the Assad regime and trigger U.S. sanctions under the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act.”

Humanitarian Assistance

The United States is the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to the Syria crisis, allocating more than \$15.8 billion since FY2012 for humanitarian efforts in Syria and in neighboring states that host Syrian refugees.

Cross-Border Assistance. Due to the Asad government’s obstruction of humanitarian assistance to opposition-held areas, in 2014 the UNSC authorized U.N. agencies to deliver humanitarian assistance cross-border via four international crossing points with notification to the Asad government. In 2020, the UNSC authorization was reduced to a single crossing point from Turkey (Bab al Hawa) due to pressure from Russia and China, who argued that cross-border aid violated Syrian sovereignty and that aid distribution should be coordinated with Syrian authorities from government-held to rebel-held areas (termed “cross-line” assistance). Humanitarian actors state that cross-line assistance cannot replace the scale of U.N. cross-border assistance. The current authorization for cross border aid (UNSC Resolution 2672) expires on July 10, 2023.

Stabilization Assistance

The United States has provided more than \$1.3 billion in stabilization assistance for non-regime-held areas of Syria since 2011. The State Department describes such assistance as “a critical element in the OIR mission because it mitigates the economic and social cleavages previously exploited by ISIS, closes gaps in local authority capacity, and supports civil society to advocate for citizen needs.” The Department also has described stabilization assistance as a counterweight to the influence of Iran, Russia, and the Syrian government.

Issues for Congress

Congress may consider whether and to what extent earthquake relief efforts could shape existing debates regarding early recovery projects in Syria. Members also may consider whether stabilization assistance for Syria—previously used in areas liberated from Islamic State control—could be used in earthquake-affected areas. As in prior years, the FY2023 Consolidated Appropriations Act states that, “Funds appropriated by this Act under titles III and IV may be made available, notwithstanding any other provision of law, for non-lethal stabilization assistance for Syria, including for emergency medical and rescue response and chemical weapons investigations.”

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