



OPERATION INHERENT RESOLVE

LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS



JANUARY 1, 2021–MARCH 31, 2021

ABOUT THIS REPORT

A 2013 amendment to the Inspector General Act established the Lead Inspector General (Lead IG) framework for oversight of overseas contingency operations and requires that the Lead IG submit quarterly reports to the U.S. Congress on each active operation. The Chair of the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency designated the DoD Inspector General (IG) as the Lead IG for Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR). The DoS IG is the Associate IG for the operation. The USAID IG participates in oversight of the operation.

The Offices of Inspector General (OIG) of the DoD, the DoS, and USAID are referred to in this report as the Lead IG agencies. Other partner agencies also contribute to oversight of OIR.

The Lead IG agencies collectively carry out the Lead IG statutory responsibilities to:

- Develop a joint strategic plan to conduct comprehensive oversight of the operation.
- Ensure independent and effective oversight of programs and operations of the U.S. Government in support of the operation through either joint or individual audits, inspections, investigations, or evaluations.
- Report quarterly to Congress and the public on the operation and on activities of the Lead IG agencies.

METHODOLOGY

To produce this quarterly report, the Lead IG agencies submit requests for information to the DoD, the DoS, USAID, and other Federal agencies about OIR and related programs. The Lead IG agencies also gather data and information from other sources, including official documents, congressional testimony, policy research organizations, press conferences, think tanks, and media reports.

The sources of information contained in this report are listed in endnotes or notes to tables and figures. Except in the case of audits, inspections, investigations, or evaluations referenced in this report, the Lead IG agencies have not audited the data and information cited in this report. The DoD, the DoS, and USAID vet the reports for accuracy prior to publication. For further details on the methodology for this report, see Appendix B.

CLASSIFIED APPENDIX

A classified appendix to this report provides additional information on OIR. This quarter's classified appendix will be delivered to relevant agencies and congressional committees. Due to the coronavirus disease–2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, the DoS and USAID OIGs did not provide information for or participate in the preparation of the classified appendix this quarter.

FOREWORD

We are pleased to submit this Lead Inspector General (Lead IG) quarterly report on Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) to the U.S. Congress. This report discharges our individual and collective agency oversight responsibilities pursuant to the Inspector General Act of 1978.

The United States launched OIR in 2014 to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) while setting the conditions for follow-on activities to increase regional stability. The U.S. Government strategy to defeat ISIS includes military operations, as well as support for local security forces, diplomacy, governance, humanitarian assistance, and stabilization programs.

This quarterly report describes the activities of the U.S. Government in support of OIR, as well as the work of the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the U.S. Agency for International Development to promote the U.S. Government's policy goals in Iraq and Syria, during the period of January 1, 2021, through March 31, 2021.

This report also discusses the planned, ongoing, and completed oversight work conducted by the Lead IG agencies and our partner oversight agencies during the quarter. During the quarter, the Lead IG agencies and our oversight partners issued 16 audit, evaluation, and inspection reports related to OIR.

Working in close collaboration, we remain committed to providing comprehensive oversight and timely reporting on OIR.



Handwritten signature of Sean W. O'Donnell in black ink.

Sean W. O'Donnell
Acting Inspector General
U.S. Department of Defense



Handwritten signature of Diana Shaw in black ink.

Diana Shaw
Acting Inspector General
U.S. Department of State



Handwritten signature of Thomas J. Ullom in black ink.

Thomas J. Ullom
Acting Inspector General
U.S. Agency for International
Development



On the Cover

(Top row): U.S. Army Soldiers conduct security operations in Syria (U.S. Army photo); Syrian children participate in structured psychosocial support activities in Syria (USAID photo); Iraqi Security Forces at al-Asad Air Base (U.S. Army National Guard photo); U.S. Army Soldiers fire illumination rounds from a 120mm mortar in Syria (U.S. Army photo). (Bottom row): U.S. Marines conduct training in Kuwait (U.S. Marine Corps photo).

MESSAGE FROM THE LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL



Sean W. O'Donnell

I am pleased to present this Lead IG quarterly report on Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR).

There was little change in the progress of the OIR counter-ISIS campaign in Iraq and Syria during the quarter. Iraqi and Syrian partner forces, with Coalition support, showed incremental progress in their ability to prevent ISIS from resurging. However, ISIS conducted a complex and coordinated twin suicide bombing in Baghdad, and continued to exploit ethnic, religious, and political tensions in Iraq to recruit new fighters and extract revenue to finance its operations. In Syria, ISIS activity remained steady, particularly in the Syrian Desert, where ISIS remained focused on rebuilding its capacity. It is highly likely that ISIS was behind this quarter's increase in violence at the al-Hol humanitarian camp for displaced persons.

Iran-aligned militias and other malign actors operating in Iraq and Syria continued to threaten the success of Coalition operations during the quarter. The increase in attacks by Iran-aligned militias this quarter prompted the temporary departure of U.S. contractors supporting Iraq's F-16 program. In Syria, Iranian and Syrian regime proxies conducted harassing attacks against partner forces and exploited local grievances to garner support in the Middle Euphrates River Valley.

The economic, political, and social conditions that contributed to the rise of ISIS—and could further propel its growth—remain on a concerning trajectory. Both Iraq and Syria are experiencing an economic crisis, which has led to shortages of work, food, and opportunity. In Iraq, government corruption remained pervasive, fueling continued civil unrest. In Syria, violence and living conditions within displaced persons camps worsened, causing challenges for local security forces, disrupting efforts to address critical humanitarian needs, and increasing the susceptibility of camp residents to ISIS indoctrination and recruiting. Staffing limits at the U.S. Mission in Iraq, caused by security conditions and the COVID-19 pandemic, and funding limits for Syria stabilization aid also constrained U.S. efforts to deliver stabilization and humanitarian assistance.

We will continue to report on the counter-ISIS mission and U.S. Government efforts to address the underlying factors that influence stability in Iraq and Syria. I look forward to working with my Lead IG colleagues to continue to provide oversight of and report on OIR and related U.S. Government activity, as required by the IG Act.



Sean W. O'Donnell
Acting Inspector General
U.S. Department of Defense





U.S. Army Soldiers conduct security operations in Syria. (U.S. Army photo)

CONTENTS

January 1, 2021–March 31, 2021

2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

9 STATUS OF OIR

- 10 The Mission
- 12 Major Developments
- 14 Status of ISIS
- 20 Status of Funding
- 22 Status of Personnel

27 IRAQ

- 28 Security
- 42 Politics and Economy
- 49 Stabilization
- 51 Humanitarian Assistance

59 SYRIA

- 60 Security
- 71 Stabilization
- 78 Humanitarian Assistance

83 OVERSIGHT ACTIVITIES

- 84 Strategic Planning
- 86 Audit, Inspection, and Evaluation Activity
- 97 Investigations and Hotline Activity

103 APPENDICES

- 104 Appendix A: Classified Appendix to this Report
- 104 Appendix B: Methodology for Preparing this Lead IG Quarterly Report
- 105 Appendix C: Department of Justice Prosecutions and Activities Against Terrorism
- 106 Appendix D: Department of the Treasury and Department of State Actions Against Terrorist Financing
- 108 Appendix E: Ongoing Oversight Projects
- 110 Appendix F: Planned Oversight Projects
- 112 Acronyms
- 113 Map of Iraq
- 114 Map of Syria
- 115 Endnotes

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) mission is to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria while setting conditions for follow-on activities to improve regional stability.¹ OIR is currently in Phase IV, “Normalize,” the final phase of the OIR campaign plan. During this phase, the Coalition has transitioned from training, developing, and assisting partner forces in Iraq and Syria to advising and enabling them.²

STATUS OF OIR

Iran-aligned militias increased attacks on Coalition forces. On February 15, an Iran-aligned militia targeted Coalition forces in Erbil, killing one civilian contractor and wounding nine other people.³ The attack was one of an increasing number of attacks by Iran-aligned militias against Coalition-associated targets during the quarter.⁴ The DoS and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) assessed that the uptick in militia attacks, as well as threats of further attacks reported by pro-militia media, likely indicated the end of a unilateral pause in attacks that Iran-aligned militias announced last quarter.⁵ Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) reported that Iran-aligned militias have minimal impact on the counter-ISIS mission. However, the threat of attacks this quarter forced U.S. contractors to evacuate Balad Air Base temporarily and contributed to the continued ordered departure of U.S. Embassy staff, which has prevented some security sector reform activity from occurring.⁶ The attacks, according to press reports, also put pressure on Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi to confront Iran-aligned militias as his government resumed Strategic Dialogue discussions with the United States.⁷

NATO announced plans to expand its non-combat training mission in Iraq. In February, NATO announced a willingness to gradually increase the number of personnel deployed to NATO Mission Iraq (NMI), from 500 to 4,000, based on Iraqi requests to expand the mission.⁸ NATO said the expansion would start with the deployment of a “few hundred” personnel in 2021.⁹ The increased NATO deployment is unlikely to affect the OIR mission because NMI is focused on institution-building, while OIR provides advice and assistance to military operations against ISIS.¹⁰ The DoD Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy–International Security Affairs (OUSDP) ISA reported that OIR closely coordinates with NMI and provides some enabler support to NMI, but NMI will not assume the OIR mission.¹¹

ISIS remained territorially defeated but continued to pose a threat as an insurgency in both Iraq and Syria.¹² In Iraq, ISIS carried out a twin suicide bombing in Baghdad that killed at least 32 people and wounded 110 others.¹³ Coalition forces responded by conducting an airstrike that killed the top ISIS leader in Iraq, Jabbar Salman Ali Farhan al-Issawi, and two other ISIS leaders.¹⁴ In Syria during the quarter, ISIS carried out raids against pro-regime forces conducting clearing operations in the central Syrian Desert.¹⁵ The DIA reported that ISIS is using the Syrian Desert as a refuge, seeking to rebuild following the loss of much of its leadership in 2020.¹⁶ In both countries, ISIS continued to conduct small-scale IED and hit-and-run attacks against security forces, and assassinate military and civilian government leaders.¹⁷



Paratroopers conduct a live-fire exercise with Coalition partners near Erbil, Iraq. (DoD photo)



The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) launched a clearance operation at the al-Hol displaced persons camp following an increase in ISIS-linked violence and activity.¹⁸

According to the DoS, a minority of individuals sympathetic to ISIS live among the approximately 61,000 residents of the humanitarian camp.¹⁹ At least 47 murders occurred at the camp during the quarter, a notable increase compared to previous quarters.²⁰ While some murders were not ISIS-related, perpetrators likely targeted most victims for defecting from ISIS, violating ISIS religious doctrine, or their perceived affiliation with security forces.²¹ In late March, the SDF deployed 5,000 Asayish internal security forces to sweep the camp. The forces detained 123 people, including 20 ISIS leaders.²²

Personnel reductions limited diplomatic and aid activity in Iraq. U.S. personnel assigned to U.S. diplomatic facilities in Baghdad remained under an ordered departure that was issued in March 2020, at the start of the coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.²³ The

DoS reported that the ordered departure and an additional reduction of in-country staffing directed by DoS leadership in December 2020 had a significant impact on mission-critical emergency works projects initiated following protests against the Iraqi government in 2020.²⁴ USAID reported that it has 5 U.S. staff working in-country to manage more than \$1 billion in active programming.²⁵ USAID said that without sufficient staff in Iraq to interact fully with stakeholders, it is not possible to demonstrate U.S. Government commitment and maintain influence in the country.²⁶

IRAQ

The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) “significantly enhanced” its ability to conduct many operations with minimal Coalition support.²⁷ CJTF-OIR reported that the ISF conducted more nighttime operations, relied on its own fire support assets and reconnaissance capabilities, and demonstrated a steady ability to conduct regular search and clearance operations.²⁸ Additionally, the ISF continued to execute static security operations, helicopter assault force operations, and interdiction operations throughout northern and western Iraq.²⁹ However, Coalition forces provided a high level of air support to the ISF during a 15-day ground offensive against ISIS in March, conducting 133 airstrikes against ISIS in the Makhmur Mountains near Erbil—support that constituted the largest Coalition air operation in Iraq since 2019.³⁰

The Iraqi Air Enterprise increased its support to Iraqi ground troops. The Iraqi Air Force demonstrated an increased ability to use its assets, including Iraqi F-16 and Cessna 208 aircraft, to support ground operations.³¹ However, Iraq’s Su-25 strike aircraft did not fly during the quarter due to a lack of parts and funding.³² Iraq’s CH-4 unmanned aircraft were also not used this quarter because they are awaiting parts from China, while the Iraqi Army Aviation Command said that use of its ScanEagle unmanned aircraft was limited due to electro-magnetic interference.³³ Coalition forces provided extensive training and advising during the quarter to develop a dynamic strike capability between Iraq’s F-16s and ground controllers within the Counterterrorism Service (CTS).³⁴

The Iraqi CTS increased warrant-based detentions of ISIS suspects. CJTF-OIR reported a slight increase in the number of CTS unilateral warrant-based detention operations during the quarter. CJTF-OIR said that the increase in detentions reflects sustained improvement in CTS intelligence collection, targeting, warranting, and post-arrest judicial procedures.³⁵ Although the CTS’s forensic capabilities continued to progress, the service is not at the level required to comprehensively support unilateral operations against ISIS.³⁶

Antigovernment protests continued amid a deep economic crisis. Iraqis staged rallies across southern and central Iraq to draw attention to deteriorating public services, corruption, high unemployment, government mismanagement, and perceived impunity for security forces implicated in counter-protester violence.³⁷ Activists and protesters also continued to demand that the United Nations observe Iraq’s upcoming elections—postponed from June to October 2021—because of concerns that Iran and Iraqi security forces will influence them.³⁸ The Iraqi economy remained in a recession due to low oil prices and a recent devaluation of the Iraqi dinar, which, along with COVID-19 pandemic-related economic impacts and movement restrictions, have left a majority of Iraqi households with limited purchasing power and unable to meet basic needs.³⁹

CJTF-OIR reported that the ISF conducted more nighttime operations, relied on its own fire support assets and reconnaissance capabilities, and demonstrated a steady ability to conduct regular search and clearance operations.

Lead IG Oversight Activities

Travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic continued to constrain the Lead IG agencies' ability to conduct oversight of projects this quarter. Despite these constraints, the Lead IG agencies completed 16 reports related to OIR. These reports examined various activities that support OIR, including U.S. Central Command's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the DoS's funding of public international organizations, and the DoS's preparations to return personnel to Federal offices during the COVID-19 pandemic. As of March 31, 2021, the Lead IG agencies had 22 projects ongoing and 11 projects planned.

During this quarter, Lead IG investigations related to OIR resulted in one criminal charge, three debarments, and \$6.9 million recovered to the U.S. Government. The investigative branches of the Lead IG agencies and their partner agencies closed 26 investigations, initiated 2 investigations, and coordinated on 98 open investigations. The investigations involve grant and procurement fraud, corruption, theft, program irregularities, computer intrusions, and human trafficking allegations.

Each Lead IG agency maintains its own hotline to receive complaints specific to its agency. The hotlines provide a confidential, reliable means for individuals to report violations of law, rule, or regulation; mismanagement; gross waste of funds; and abuse of authority. The DoD OIG has an investigator to coordinate the hotline contacts among Lead IG agencies and others, as appropriate. During the quarter, the investigator referred 75 cases to Lead IG agencies or other investigative organizations.

The Iraqi government halted planned closures of camps for internally displaced persons (IDP). The U.S. Government, UN agencies, and other international humanitarian organizations expressed concerns about Iraqi government plans, announced in January, to close the two remaining IDP camps in Iraq located outside of Iraqi Kurdistan. In particular, they expressed concerns that IDPs who leave the camp will be unable or unwilling to return to their place of origin because they lack essential documents, face discrimination over perceived extremist ties, and cannot find adequate shelter and employment.⁴⁰ Many IDPs who departed camps now live in informal settlements.⁴¹ U.S. Government humanitarian partners have relocated from IDP camps to areas where IDPs have resettled.⁴²

SYRIA

Coalition forces continued to enable, advise, train, and equip SDF forces to improve the SDF's ability to plan and conduct operations.⁴³ CJTF-OIR provided instruction to training the SDF on tactical skills such as marksmanship, heavy weapons usage, and maneuver. In addition, CJTF-OIR trained the SDF on explosive ordnance disposal and "training the trainers," enabling the SDF to further advance its own development.⁴⁴ CJTF-OIR also continued to provide training and equipment to help increase the SDF's capacity to manage detention facilities holding approximately 10,000 ISIS fighters.⁴⁵

The SDF increased its pace of operations against ISIS during the quarter.⁴⁶ CJTF-OIR reported that the SDF increased daytime patrols, traffic control points, and intelligence-sharing, disrupting ISIS activity and smuggling lines in response to an increase in ISIS

U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken chairs a virtual UN Security Council briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria. (DoS photo)



activity in the Middle Euphrates River Valley.⁴⁷ However, the SDF continued to conduct most operations with Coalition support.⁴⁸

Russian and Syrian regime-affiliated forces struggled to eliminate ISIS cells in the Syrian Desert.⁴⁹ The DIA reported that ISIS conducted near-daily attacks on Syrian regime and pro-regime forces, including Russian military forces, in response to their increased counter-ISIS operations in the Syrian Desert and the Middle Euphrates River Valley.⁵⁰ Despite Syrian regime efforts to secure major highways across Syria, ISIS continued attacks on oil tankers and convoys.⁵¹

Syrian regime, Russian, Turkish-supported opposition, and Iran-affiliated forces conducted counter-ISIS operations during the quarter, but also interfered with Coalition and SDF operations.⁵² Regime forces and their Russian and Iran-aligned allies sought to restrict the movement of Coalition forces, while the activities of Turkey-aligned Syrian fighters continued to draw SDF focus away from the counter-ISIS effort.⁵³ CJTF-OIR reported that Russian forces, while largely adhering to de-confliction arrangements with Coalition forces, continued to conduct violations that did not endanger Coalition forces.⁵⁴ The SDF and Turkey-supported opposition forces clashed heavily during the quarter.⁵⁵ However, the DIA said it did not see indications that Turkey was preparing a major military action in northeastern Syria.⁵⁶ The DIA reported that Iranian and Iran-aligned forces in Syria maintained their positions, and probably retained the ability to conduct attacks against U.S. interests in Syria with little warning.⁵⁷

U.S. stabilization programs in Syria continued to face funding and security constraints. The DoS and USAID continued to operate with a limited budget due to a March 2018 freeze of stabilization assistance for Syria.⁵⁸ While the freeze was lifted during the quarter, no new funding has been allocated yet.⁵⁹ This limited funding constrained the reach of some programs during the quarter and could cause some programs to shut down by the end of the year.⁶⁰ In addition, the movement of Iranian, Russian, and Syrian regime forces, as well as COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions in northeastern Syria, impeded USAID's programming.⁶¹

The DIA reported that ISIS conducted near-daily attacks on Syrian regime and pro-regime forces, including Russian military forces, in response to their increased counter-ISIS operations in the Syrian Desert and the Middle Euphrates River Valley.







UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters, assigned to the 28th Expeditionary Combat Aviation Brigade, parked on an airfield in the Middle East. (U.S. Army photo)

STATUS OF OIR

- 10 The Mission
- 12 Major Developments
- 14 Status of ISIS
- 20 Status of Funding
- 22 Status of Personnel



A U.S. Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcon aircraft during a mission supporting CJTF-OIR over Southwest Asia. (U.S. Air Force photo)

STATUS OF OIR

THE MISSION

The Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) mission is to achieve the enduring defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria while setting the conditions for follow-on activities to improve regional stability.⁶² OIR began in 2014, after the United States and its partners in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS initiated military activity to support local partners combatting ISIS in Iraq and Syria.⁶³ Comprising former al-Qaeda in Iraq fighters and new recruits, ISIS exploited instability in Iraq and Syria and rapidly seized a number of major cities in the two countries.⁶⁴

Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) executes OIR according to a four-phase operational campaign plan, shown in Figure 1.⁶⁵ During the first three phases of the campaign, Coalition forces conducted airstrikes and limited special operations raids against ISIS. U.S. and Coalition forces also worked by, with, and through Iraqi and vetted Syrian partner forces in their actions against ISIS through enablement, training, advising, divestment of equipment, and other forms of assistance. By March 2019, Coalition and

Figure 1.

The OIR Campaign Plan



Source: CJTF-OIR, "History of CJTF-OIR," 9/2020.

partner force operations succeeded in ending ISIS territorial control in Iraq and Syria. In July 2020, CJTF-OIR transitioned to Phase IV “Normalize” of the campaign plan.⁶⁶ CJTF-OIR reported no changes to the OIR campaign design or objectives during the quarter.⁶⁷

During Phase IV, CJTF-OIR transitioned from tactical-level training and building the capacity of partner forces in Iraq and Syria to primarily advising and enabling them.⁶⁸ CJTF-OIR has not publicly articulated the end-state it seeks to achieve under Phase IV, nor has it established a timeline for the completion of OIR.

USAID, the U.S. Government lead for stabilization activities in Iraq, focuses on restoring essential infrastructure and services by working with local partners to identify priorities for recovery; improve social cohesion; and help marginalized and displaced populations return to and rebuild their places of origin.⁶⁹ The DoS seeks to help Iraq chart a security and foreign policy path separate from that of Iran or other powers; enable political and economic reform; support vulnerable minority populations; and achieve reconciliation among communities.⁷⁰

The United States and the international community also support counterterrorism and stabilization efforts in Iraq and Syria through activities that are programmatically distinct from OIR. For example, the United States provides bilateral security cooperation assistance to Iraqi security institutions through the Office of Security Cooperation-Iraq (OSC-I) of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.⁷¹ NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) provides non-combat training and advisory support to the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, the Iraqi National Security Advisor, and other national security institutions.⁷² Other nations and organizations provide support to the Iraqi government and the Syrian people under bilateral and multilateral agreements.

Further information about the status of the OIR mission is available in the classified appendix to this report.

U.S. Marines conduct training in Kuwait. (U.S. Marine Corps photo)



Aftermath of the February indirect fire attack at Erbil Air Base in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. (U.S. Army photo)



MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS

Militia Attacks on Coalition Forces in Iraq Resume

On February 15, an Iran-aligned militia targeted Erbil Air Base, where Coalition forces are based. The attack resulted in the death of one civilian contractor (a Filipino national) and wounded nine other people, including a U.S. Service member.⁷³ The incident was one of an increasing number of attacks targeting Coalition forces and diplomatic facilities during the quarter, as Iran-aligned militias attempted to pressure the Biden administration to withdraw forces from Iraq.⁷⁴ The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) assessed that the uptick in militia attacks and threats of further hostilities likely indicate the end of a unilateral pause in attacks announced last quarter by Iran-aligned militias.⁷⁵ (See pages 40-42.)

CJTF-OIR said that Iran-aligned militias have had minimal impact on OIR's counter-ISIS mission.⁷⁶ However, during the quarter, these militias focused their attacks on military facilities in Iraq, while continuing to conduct harassment-style attacks on the U.S. Embassy and other diplomatic facilities, according to the DoS.⁷⁷ In addition, U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) reported that militia threats forced U.S. contractors to temporarily evacuate Balad Air Base where they supported Iraq's F-16s, a key Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) capability in the fight against ISIS.⁷⁸ The DoS and the DIA reported that the tactics employed by the militias this quarter suggest that they may be planning more attacks.⁷⁹

Iran-aligned militias also threaten Iraq's long-term security. In March, CJTF-OIR commander Lieutenant General Paul Calvert was quoted in the media saying that the Iraqi government is concerned about the potential for an internal Shia civil war between those aligned with Iran and Iraqi nationalists opposed to Iranian influence.⁸⁰ Lieutenant General Calvert said that coupled with Iraq's poor economic situation, the collection of militias known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) present a major threat to Iraq that could "erode all the gains that have been made" if not addressed.⁸¹

In particular, Iran-aligned militias have placed increasing pressure on Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who has directed the ISF to arrest militiamen responsible for attacks

On February 25, the United States conducted an airstrike against infrastructure used by Iran-aligned militias responsible for the Erbil attack.

on Coalition personnel and sought to limit their control over Iraq’s border crossings and government ministries.⁸² The resumption of militia attacks in Iraq came as the United States and Iraq prepared to continue discussions on the bilateral relationship, including elements of the security partnership. In April, after the quarter ended, the United States and Iraq met for a third round of their Strategic Dialogue.⁸³

On February 25, the United States conducted an airstrike against infrastructure used by Iran-aligned militias responsible for the Erbil attack.⁸⁴ One analyst noted that the United States likely selected targets in Syria instead of Iraq to avoid creating political difficulties for Prime Minister al-Kadhimi.⁸⁵

NATO Announces Expansion of Iraq Mission

In February, the NATO defense ministers announced plans to gradually expand NMI’s non-combat-training mission in response to a request from the Iraqi government.⁸⁶ NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that NMI staff will increase in number from 500 to as many as 4,000 personnel, which will allow NATO to train additional Iraqi security ministry employees and conduct activities outside of Baghdad.⁸⁷ Although NATO has been in Iraq since 2004, the current training mission began in 2018.⁸⁸

NMI announced that it aims to expand the mission by a “few hundred personnel” during 2021, but did not announce a timeline for further staff increases.⁸⁹ NATO said that the expansion would be “incremental,” implemented in conjunction with the Iraqi government, and based on logistical and security conditions on the ground.⁹⁰ It will likely take several months for NATO to determine which member states will contribute additional personnel and to determine what their role will be.⁹¹

The Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy–International Security Affairs (OUSD(P) ISA) emphasized again this quarter that NMI will not assume the OIR mission,



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg joins a meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. (NATO photo)

and stressed the fact that the two entities perform distinct yet complementary missions: NMI focuses on ministerial-level institutional development, whereas OIR provides advice and assistance to military operations.⁹²

The DoS reported that Iran-aligned groups perceived the NATO announcement would lead to NMI simply assuming the role of OIR as the United States reduced its number of troops in Iraq. The DoS said the United States and NATO had undertaken messaging activities to clarify the differing roles of NMI and OIR.⁹³

Meanwhile, CJTF-OIR continued to provide support to NMI during the quarter.⁹⁴ USCENTCOM reported that CJTF-OIR provides base life support contracts, medical support and evacuation services, base operating support, and static force protection to NMI staff at Union III in Baghdad and the al-Asad Air Base in Anbar province.⁹⁵ Additionally, CJTF-OIR provides intelligence support, including screening and vetting of individuals, to NMI, and both USCENTCOM and CJTF-OIR provide the communications and information systems backbone used by NMI staff.⁹⁶

STATUS OF ISIS

This quarter marked the second anniversary of ISIS's defeat at Baghuz, Syria, in March 2019.⁹⁷ The battle culminated in the territorial defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria and the group's reversion to an insurgency. CJTF-OIR said that during the quarter, ISIS remained territorially defeated, controlled no major population centers, and had limited finances at its disposal.⁹⁸ However, ISIS remains active, continues to pose both a local and a global threat, and the international community continues to monitor the group for signs of resurgence.⁹⁹

Further information about ISIS in Iraq and Syria is available in the classified appendix to this report.

ISIS Demonstrates Ongoing “Tenacity”

The DIA reported that ISIS's goal remains to “ensure its relevance, progress its insurgencies, and reestablish the caliphate” in the region.¹⁰⁰ CJTF-OIR reported that Coalition partner forces continue to maintain “tactical overmatch” against ISIS.¹⁰¹ Meanwhile, the group has been able to continue operating as an insurgency in Iraq and Syria.¹⁰²

Activity: In January, ISIS conducted a twin suicide bombing in Baghdad that killed at least 32 people and wounded more than 110. The incident marked the first major attack in the Iraqi capital in three years.¹⁰³ Speaking to a public policy organization in February, General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., Commander of USCENTCOM, said that the attack demonstrates the group's “tenacity.”¹⁰⁴ Following the Baghdad attack, a Coalition airstrike killed the top ISIS leader in Iraq, Jabbar Salman Ali Farhan al-Issawi and the two other top ISIS leaders.¹⁰⁵ (See page 30.)

CJTF-OIR, which tracks ISIS-claimed attacks, reported that ISIS attacks in Iraq decreased compared to last quarter but increased in Syria compared to last quarter.¹⁰⁶ CJTF-OIR reported that ISIS claimed 116 attacks in Iraq during the quarter, compared to 175 last quarter and 147 during the same quarter one year ago. ISIS claimed 113 attacks in Syria

The DoS reported that Iran-aligned groups perceived the NATO announcement would lead to NMI simply assuming the role of OIR as the United States reduced its number of troops in Iraq.

The DoS estimated that there were approximately 10,000 ISIS fighters operating in Iraq and Syria this quarter, similar to estimates from previous quarters, and down from an estimated 14,000 to 18,000 in January 2020.

during the quarter, compared to 101 last quarter and 144 during the same quarter one year ago.¹⁰⁷ The DoD OIG's independent analysis of publicly available data, which includes suspected ISIS attacks for which the group did not claim responsibility, also showed a decrease in attacks in Iraq and a consistent tempo in Syria compared to the previous quarter.¹⁰⁸ Further data about ISIS attack locations and methods from the DoD OIG analysis are shown on page 19.

Force Size and Recruiting: The DoS estimated that there were approximately 10,000 ISIS fighters operating in Iraq and Syria this quarter, similar to estimates from previous quarters, and down from an estimated 14,000 to 18,000 in January 2020.¹⁰⁹

The DIA said that in Iraq, ISIS sought to coerce individuals in Sunni-majority, rural areas to join the group through intimidation or financial inducement.¹¹⁰ For Sunnis unhappy with the status quo, ISIS offers a means of employment, financial security, identity, and an alternative to the Iraqi government or security forces, the DIA said.¹¹¹ In Syria, ISIS continued to exploit vulnerable populations, including in camps for displaced persons, through indoctrination and by providing them material support.¹¹²

Finances: The Department of the Treasury (Treasury) reported again this quarter that ISIS "probably has tens of millions of dollars" available in cash reserves dispersed around the region.¹¹³ Treasury reported that ISIS continued to use courier networks to smuggle cash between Iraq and Syria, and relies on money service businesses to transfer funds, often through logistical hubs in Turkey.¹¹⁴ In addition, ISIS supporters use cryptocurrencies and online fundraising platforms, Treasury said.¹¹⁵

The DIA reported that in Iraq, ISIS generated revenue from extortion, kidnapping, and smuggling, and moves resources to its safe havens and to operatives throughout Iraq.¹¹⁶ Treasury said that ISIS used similar fundraising tactics in Syria, targeting civilian businesses and populations for kidnapping or looting and for possible utilization as front companies. In eastern Syria, ISIS also obtained funds through oil smuggling networks.¹¹⁷ The DIA said that ISIS was particularly active in the al-Hol displaced persons camp, which continued to be a major hub for illicit financial transactions, including smuggling operations.¹¹⁸

Treasury reported that it continues to work with interagency and Coalition partners, including the Iraqi government, to disrupt ISIS's financial facilitation networks in Iraq; identify ISIS's financial reserves and financial leaders; and designate facilitators, front companies, and fundraisers in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and elsewhere.¹¹⁹

External Threat: The DIA assessed that ISIS in Iraq and Syria is likely seeking to develop the ability to conduct external attacks, but probably lacks the ability to direct attacks on the U.S. homeland.¹²⁰ John Godfrey, Acting Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, said in March that some ISIS fighters in Syria have the experience and external contacts to conduct such attacks.¹²¹ Meanwhile, according to the DIA, ISIS continued to encourage lone actors to conduct small-scale attacks in other parts of the world, including Europe or the United States, in order to demonstrate its operational reach.¹²² In February, authorities arrested 14 people in Denmark and Germany for plotting an attack, including several Syrian nationals who possessed bomb-making material and an ISIS flag.¹²³

In Iraq, ISIS Remains Entrenched in Rural Areas

The DIA reported that ISIS remained entrenched in rural areas throughout Iraq and retains freedom of movement, particularly in rugged mountain and desert regions and other areas where it is difficult for the ISF to maintain control.¹²⁴ ISIS continued to exploit ethnic, sectarian, and political tensions, as well as security gaps that persist between Iraq's various security forces.¹²⁵ ISIS fighters in Iraq continued to operate in small, mobile cells that primarily conduct simple hit-and-run attacks, the DIA reported.¹²⁶ During the quarter, ISIS regularly targeted infrastructure, security and military positions, and civilians in an effort to undermine the Iraqi government and increase its freedom of movement.¹²⁷

ISIS focused its activity during the quarter in Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, and Salah ad Din provinces, and in areas surrounding Baghdad and Mosul.¹²⁸ The DIA said that ISIS used the mountainous regions in northern and north-central Iraq to conduct ambushes and IED attacks against the ISF, the Peshmerga, and the PMF.¹²⁹ It also successfully exploited gaps in security coverage in disputed areas along the boundary that separates the Iraqi Kurdistan Region from the rest of Iraq.¹³⁰ The DIA said that ISIS continues to use the permeable border between Iraq and Syria to smuggle members and affiliates to safe havens it has established in rural and permissive areas, where it can conceal its operations and leaders, avoid security patrols, and intimidate the local population.¹³¹

The DIA reported that the conditions that fostered ISIS's rise in 2014 still exist and may help promote ISIS's recruiting efforts among Iraqi Sunnis. Shia militia groups belonging to the PMF continue to operate in Sunni areas against the will of the local populations, and Sunni areas often lack basic services, both of which prevent displaced Sunnis from returning home from IDP camps. The Iraqi government has been slow to implement economic reforms or give priority to reconstruction that would aid the Sunni community.¹³²

In Syria, ISIS Stages Attacks from the Syrian Desert

In Syria, ISIS faces "significant challenges" after losing much of its top leadership in 2020, the DIA reported.¹³³ Despite these challenges, ISIS retained organizational coherence and remained active in both areas of northeastern Syria where the SDF operate, and in parts of the country that are under Syrian regime control.¹³⁴

In SDF-controlled areas, ISIS maintained a significant presence in rural farming communities and generally limited its attacks to hit-and-run ambushes, assassinations, and IEDs.¹³⁵ ISIS also continues to assassinate tribal and civic leaders and other influential figures in SDF operating areas in Hasakah and Dayr az Zawr provinces, the DIA reported.¹³⁶

The DIA reported that in Syria, ISIS remains focused on rebuilding its capacity by using the central Syrian Desert for sanctuary.¹³⁷ During the quarter, ISIS continued to attack regime and pro-regime forces including those conducting clearing operations in the central Syrian Desert, the DIA reported.¹³⁸ The DIA said that the Syrian regime and the Russian military have conducted ground operations and airstrikes to stop ISIS from expanding safe havens in the region.¹³⁹ According to the DIA, the Syrian regime will remain capable of responding to ISIS threats to regime positions and roads as long as it continues to receive significant assistance from its Iranian and Russian allies.¹⁴⁰

The DIA reported that ISIS remained entrenched in rural areas throughout Iraq and retains freedom of movement, particularly in rugged mountain and desert regions and other areas where it is difficult for the ISF to maintain control.



U.S. Soldiers conduct security operations in Syria. (U.S. Army photo)

Acting Special Envoy Godfrey said in March that the Coalition is closely monitoring ISIS activity in the central Syrian Desert.¹⁴¹ He said there is concern that ISIS could resurge in areas of Syria where regime and Russian forces do not have full control.¹⁴² The Institute for the Study of War reported that ISIS is using its foothold in the desert to destabilize other parts of Syria, in part by targeting routes that connect pro-regime bases and energy and oil infrastructure in Dayr az Zawr, Raqqah, Hamah, and Homs provinces.¹⁴³

ISIS continued to move freely in regime-controlled areas of Aleppo province, and maintains a network in Idlib despite the presence of a rival Islamist organization, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. During the quarter, ISIS maintained a presence in the southern provinces of Dar'a and Suweida, according to the DIA.¹⁴⁴ In the central Hamah province, ISIS ambushes at the end of December and in early January inflicted heavy losses to regime forces and spurred clearance operations by pro-regime forces throughout the quarter, the DIA said.¹⁴⁵

ISIS-related Violence at al-Hol Camp Prompts Concern, Security Sweeps

The DIA reported that in Syria, ISIS continued to recruit at humanitarian camps for displaced persons, where it enjoys relative freedom of movement and extensive influence.¹⁴⁶ ISIS activity, including violent activity, has been a particular concern in the al-Hol displaced persons camp in Hasakah province, which is home to an estimated 61,000 residents. Most residents of al-Hol are Syrian and Iraqi, and approximately 9,000 are from other countries.¹⁴⁷ Approximately two-thirds of al-Hol residents are under the age of 18, and more than half are under the age of 12.¹⁴⁸ An unknown number of individuals sympathetic to ISIS live at the camp, some of whom have continued to actively support ISIS activities from within the camp.¹⁴⁹

ISIS-related violence at al-Hol increased during the quarter. International observers and the SDF, which responds to security incidents in the camp, reported that there were at least 47 murders at al-Hol—including one beheading.¹⁵⁰ USCENTCOM said that it was “highly likely” that the increase in violence involved ISIS members living in the camp, noting that ISIS supporters set up religious adherence (“hisbah”) units to enforce their interpretation of Islamic law and execute those caught violating its precepts.¹⁵¹ The DIA said that in addition to religious

motives, ISIS also appeared to have targeted people who defected from the group and in some cases killed people simply to “gain notoriety.”¹⁵² The DoS noted that not all murders were ISIS-related, with a number of them involving tribal rivalries or other disputes.¹⁵³ The DoS said that many of the victims were Iraqis perceived to be affiliated with the camp administration or the security services.¹⁵⁴

Al-Hol is administered by the SDF-affiliated Self-administration of North and East Syria (SNES) and managed by a humanitarian organization. The SNES refers security incidents in the camp to SDF-affiliated security and law-enforcement entities, according to the DoS.¹⁵⁵ In late March, the SDF deployed 5,000 members of its Asayish internal security forces to sweep the camp and disrupt ISIS activities.¹⁵⁶ CJTF-OIR reported that the Coalition enabled the SDF operation by conducting training and rehearsals, developing a logistical supply plan, and providing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) throughout the operation.¹⁵⁷ The SDF detained 123 people, removed hundreds of empty tents and biometrically enrolled a large portion of the camp during the 5-day operation.¹⁵⁸ Asayish officials publicly announced that 20 detainees were ISIS leaders responsible for murders in the camp.¹⁵⁹ The operation was the largest security sweep inside al-Hol since ISIS’s territorial defeat in March 2019, after which the camp’s population increased from 15,000 to more than 70,000.¹⁶⁰ The SDF also conducted smaller sweeps, reporting earlier in the quarter that it arrested 11 suspected ISIS members during an operation in the camp.¹⁶¹

This quarter’s violence disrupted ongoing efforts to address critical humanitarian needs at al-Hol. USAID’s Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) reported that the camp’s administration temporarily suspended some humanitarian activities due to the violence.¹⁶² Doctors Without Borders suspended some of its services in al-Hol after a member of its staff was killed.¹⁶³ The violence and the response by security forces complicates ongoing efforts to preserve the humanitarian nature of al-Hol.¹⁶⁴ USAID BHA noted that the SDF’s counter-ISIS operations have become more frequent over the past several months, which could present new challenges to maintaining the camp’s humanitarian nature in the future.¹⁶⁵ USAID BHA and the DoS Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) reported that their staff are in frequent contact with DoD counterparts to coordinate security activities in a manner that avoids compromising the civilian nature of the camp.¹⁶⁶

In addition to committing violent acts, ISIS continues to radicalize residents, particularly youth, at al-Hol. The DIA noted that young residents at the camp have limited access to education and regular exposure to violent extremist ideology.¹⁶⁷ During the quarter, a chorus of international organizations expressed concern about potential ISIS violence and radicalization, and called upon countries to repatriate their citizens.¹⁶⁸ In his February remarks to a public policy organization, General McKenzie said: “The longer-term risk is the systemic indoctrination of this population to ISIS’s ideology. This is an alarming development, with potentially generational implications.”¹⁶⁹ He continued: “There is no military solution to this problem. Unless the international community finds a way to repatriate, reintegrate into home communities, and support locally grown reconciliation programs, we will bear witness to the indoctrination of the next generation of ISIS as these children become radicalized.”¹⁷⁰

Additional information about humanitarian efforts at al-Hol and other camps in Syria can be found on pages 75-77 of this report.

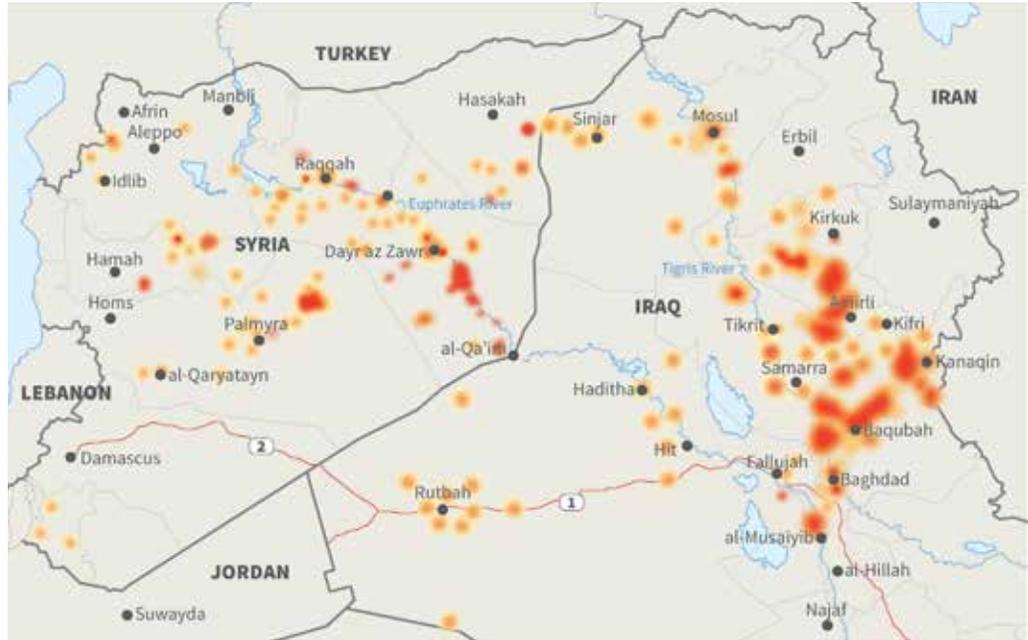
The DIA said that in addition to religious motives, ISIS also appeared to have targeted people who defected from the group and in some cases killed people simply to “gain notoriety.”

ISIS ACTIVITY IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

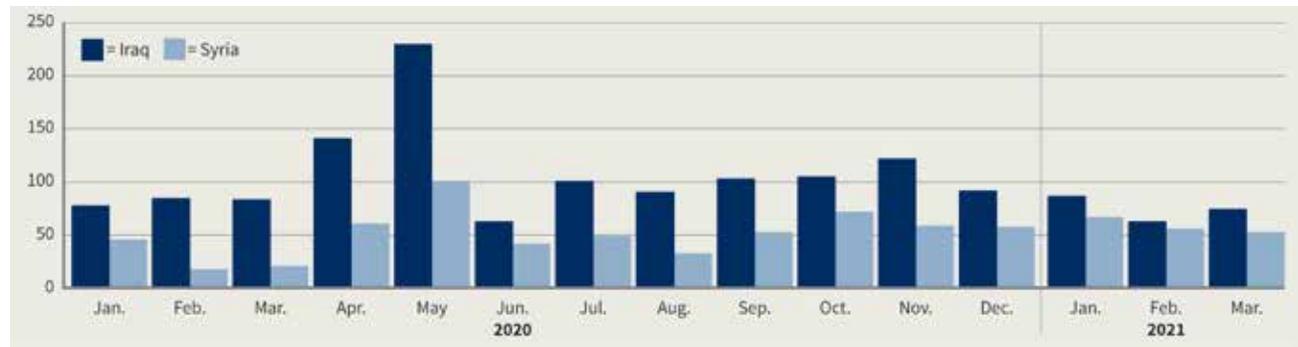
January 1, 2021–March 31, 2021

SYRIA In regime-controlled areas of central Syria, ISIS attacks continued at a consistent tempo as the group launched larger-scale assaults on remote regime outposts and vulnerable supply lines from its sanctuary in the sparsely populated desert. ISIS continued small-scale attacks against the SDF in the Middle Euphrates River Valley.

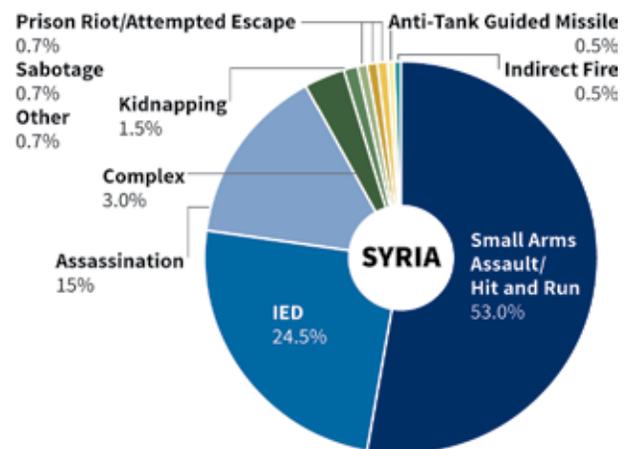
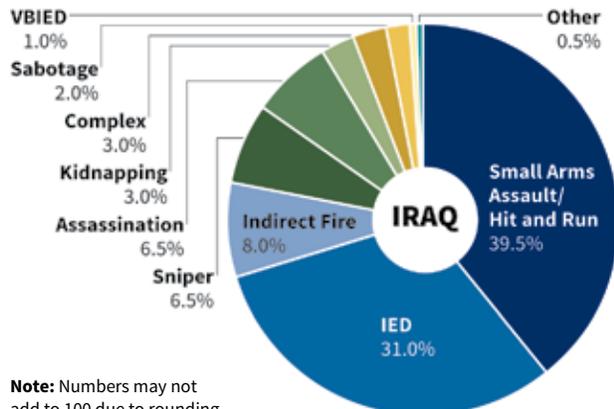
IRAQ ISIS sustained its insurgency in the countryside north of Baghdad, utilizing the wadis, river basins, and mountains of Kirkuk, Salah ad Din, Diyala, and Baghdad provinces to evade ISF clearance operations. ISIS cells in the western Anbar desert, southwest of Baghdad, and south of Mosul continued persistent small-scale attacks against PMF and Iraqi Army positions.



ISIS Attacks by Month, January 2020–March 2021



ISIS Attacks by Tactic, January 2020–March 2021



Note: Numbers may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Sources: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), data for battles, explosions, and attacks on civilians by Islamic State (Iraq and Syria), 1/1/2020–3/31/2021; Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, data for non-state armed group attacks, statements, and actions by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, 1/1/2021–3/31/2021; Enabling Peace in Iraq Center, “Iraq Security and Humanitarian Monitor,” 12/19/2019–4/1/2021.

D-ISIS Coalition Small Group Meets to Discuss the Growing Threat of ISIS

On March 30, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Belgian Foreign Minister Sophie Wilmès co-hosted a virtual meeting of foreign ministers of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Small Group to “reaffirm [their] shared determination to continue the fight” against ISIS and to discuss ways to counter the continuing ISIS threat both within Iraq and Syria and elsewhere, particularly in Africa.¹⁷¹ The Small Group—consisting of the Coalition’s 32 top contributing members—also discussed the Coalition’s military effort, stabilization funding goals for Iraq and Syria, foreign terrorist fighters, counter-ISIS financing, and counter-ISIS messaging.¹⁷²

The Ministers called for coordinated action that includes allocating adequate military and civilian resources to sustain Coalition and “legitimate partner forces’ efforts” against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.¹⁷³ These resources include stabilization support to liberated areas in Iraq and Syria to safeguard the Coalition’s “collective security interests.”¹⁷⁴ The Ministers highlighted the 2021 Pledge Drive for Stabilization, reiterating the importance of collective stabilization efforts to the long-term defeat of ISIS and the “elimination of the conditions conducive to its rise.”¹⁷⁵

Acting Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS John Godfrey said that ISIS has “intensified its focus” on its branches and networks, including recent attacks in Mozambique.¹⁷⁶ These types of attacks, he said, are “clear indicators” that ISIS intends to spread its “malign activity to new fronts.”¹⁷⁷ Mr. Godfrey said that ISIS continues to be a “significant security threat” in the Middle East and “further afield to Europe and potentially North America.”¹⁷⁸ He also warned that ISIS continues to regroup and conduct attacks in non-SDF controlled areas of Syria, particularly the Syrian Desert, and that it seeks to exploit the tensions between Erbil and Baghdad regarding the disputed territory of Kirkuk province.¹⁷⁹

STATUS OF FUNDING

DOD

More than \$49.4 billion in DoD funds have been obligated in support of OIR since the contingency operation began in 2014.¹⁸⁰ For FY 2021, Congress appropriated \$68 billion in Overseas Contingency Operation (OCO) funding to the DoD, slightly less than the \$69 billion it requested.¹⁸¹ In its FY 2021 budget request, the DoD said that it would allocate \$6.9 billion of OCO funds for OIR, though the exact FY 2021 allocation has not been announced.¹⁸²

In FY 2021, Congress also appropriated \$710 million for the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF), through which the United States provides assistance to vetted foreign security forces, irregular forces, groups, and individuals participating, or preparing to participate, in activities to counter ISIS. This assistance includes training supplies, services, stipends, infrastructure repair, and construction of detainee facilities.¹⁸³ The annual CTEF appropriation has decreased by more than 50 percent since FY 2018. OUSD(P) ISA said that this reduction was due, in part, to “changes in operational requirements” following the territorial defeat of ISIS.¹⁸⁴ In Phase IV, CTEF funds are increasingly used for activities other than training and equipping.¹⁸⁵ In Syria, for example,

CTEF is primarily used for stipends for vetted partner forces; logistics support and sustainment; and construction and infrastructure repair to ensure the humane and secure detention of ISIS fighters.¹⁸⁶ OUSD(P) ISA said that this shift reflects the “flexibility and continued relevance” of CTEF.¹⁸⁷

DOS AND USAID

The DoS and USAID fund their activities in Iraq and Syria through several funding streams. For FY 2021, Congress approved an appropriation of \$8.25 billion in OCO funds to the DoS for use worldwide, down from a peak of \$20.8 billion in FY 2017.¹⁸⁸ However, the DoS has not provided the allocation of OCO funds that will be used to support programs in Iraq and Syria in FY 2021.¹⁸⁹

Table 1.

U.S. Government Funding Available for the Iraq and Syria Humanitarian Response, as of March 2021

IRAQ FY 2020–2021			
	USAID BHA	DoS PRM	TOTAL
Humanitarian Response	\$3,030,300	N/A	\$3,030,300
Complex Emergency	\$77,228,219	\$209,950,124	\$298,178,353
COVID-19 Response	\$32,500,000	14,505,000	\$47,005,000
TOTAL			\$348,213,653

SYRIA REGIONAL RESPONSE FY 2021			
	USAID BHA	DoS PRM	TOTAL
Crisis Response	\$205,984,385	\$57,913,703	\$263,898,088
Humanitarian Funding for Countries that Host Syrian Refugees			
Egypt	\$15,000,000	\$6,836,939	\$21,836,939
Iraq	N/A	\$10,590,000	\$10,590,000
Jordan	\$51,000,000	\$42,673,703	\$93,673,703
Lebanon	\$70,020,000	\$82,539,543	\$152,559,543
Turkey	\$9,000,000	\$45,350,000	\$50,350,000
Regional	N/A	\$3,300,000	\$3,300,000
TOTAL FOR SYRIA REGIONAL RESPONSE			\$596,208,273

Notes: Year of funding indicates the date of commitment or obligation, not appropriation, of funds. Funding figures reflect publicly announced funding as of March 11, 2021. COVID-19 response figures represent supplemental FY 2020 International Disaster Assistance and Migration and Refugee Assistance funding committed for COVID-19 preparedness and response activities as of September 30, 2020. Syria Regional Response funding represents humanitarian assistance for Syrians inside Syria and the region.

Sources: USAID, “Iraq-Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #2,” 3/11/2021; USAID, “Syria-Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #5,” 3/30/2021.

A protection caseworker provides individual counseling to an IDP beneficiary in Syria. (USAID photo)



In Iraq, DoS PRM and USAID BHA have announced nearly \$350 million in humanitarian assistance to support crisis response, and coronavirus disease–2019 (COVID-19) pandemic response activities in Iraq and the region through March 11.¹⁹⁰ (See Table 1.) This funding supports hygiene, health, and food security programming, as well as programs for IDPs, refugees, and other vulnerable populations.¹⁹¹

In Syria, DoS PRM and USAID BHA have announced nearly \$264 million in humanitarian assistance funding to support similar humanitarian and crisis response activities in Syria in FY 2021. In addition, the two agencies have announced more than \$596 million to support people in need in Syria and Syrian refugees throughout the region.¹⁹²

In March, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield announced more than \$596 million in additional U.S. humanitarian assistance funding to respond to the Syrian crisis.¹⁹³ The increased funding brings the total U. S. Government humanitarian assistance to Syria to nearly \$13 billion since the start of the 10-year-old crisis, including nearly \$141 million to support the COVID-19 pandemic response in Syria and the region.¹⁹⁴ The DoS reported that new funding includes U.S. Government support for UN agencies and nongovernmental organization (NGO) partners to provide education, health, shelter, emergency food, and other assistance to Syrians both inside and outside the country.¹⁹⁵

STATUS OF PERSONNEL

U.S. Military Personnel Reductions in Place; Global Posture Review Ongoing Amid COVID-19

In January, the DoD announced that in the preceding months, it had reduced the number of U.S. military personnel in Iraq from approximately 3,000 to approximately 2,500, in response to a November 2020 order by then-President Donald Trump to reduce the number of troops in the country.¹⁹⁶ Since then, the number of forces in Iraq and Syria remained largely unchanged, as shown in Table 2. The DoD is currently evaluating its force posture in Iraq and Syria as part of the Biden Administration’s Global Force Posture Review.¹⁹⁷

Table 2.
U.S. Military Personnel in Iraq and Syria, as of March 31, 2021

	Iraq	Syria
U.S. Military	Approximately 2,500	Approximately 900
DoD Contractors	4,689	

Source: DoD OUSD(P) ISA, response to DoD OIG request for information, 21.2 OIR 001, 3/16/2021; DoD OSD(AS), “Contractor Support of U.S. Operations in the USCENCOM Area of Responsibility,” 4/2021.



A U.S. Sailor receives the COVID-19 vaccine at Erbil Air Base, Iraq. (U.S. Army National Guard photo)

Reductions in Diplomatic Personnel Limit Activity in Iraq

The U.S. Mission in Iraq—which includes the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, the Baghdad Diplomatic Support Center (BDSC), and the U.S. Consulate General in Erbil—is the primary platform for the U.S. partnership with the Iraqi government.¹⁹⁸

The U.S. Mission in Iraq went on ordered departure in March 2020 at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The order is currently in place at the Embassy and BDSC until May 18.¹⁹⁹ The DoS reported that it continues to assess the security and health environment in Iraq and will revert to higher in-country staffing levels as soon as circumstances permit. The DoS constantly adjusts the number of in-country personnel according to threat levels and mission priorities.²⁰⁰ The DoS terminated the ordered departure for the Consulate General in Erbil on July 22, 2020.²⁰¹ Before the ordered departure, Mission Iraq had approximately 5,300 personnel among the three locations.²⁰²

The ordered departure from Baghdad included the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations' direct-hire staff, who manage all construction projects at the embassy and the BDSC. Their departure led the DoS to stop projects and scale back contracts. The DoS reported that the ordered departure and a DoS decision to withdraw temporarily additional personnel from the Embassy in December 2020 have significantly hindered completion of mission-critical emergency works projects resulting from the protests during the previous year. Several projects in Baghdad had to be scaled back because the contractor was unable to supervise them. These contracts now must be re-bid, which will cause a delay.²⁰³

In addition, COVID-19 mitigation measures remained in effect across U.S. Mission in Iraq locations.²⁰⁴ The restrictions included limited activities for embassy personnel on the compound, reduced access to the compound for non-embassy personnel, and restricted movement of staff between compounds.²⁰⁵ The embassy continued to postpone some critical work functions until local staff can return to work.²⁰⁶ All personnel were subject to a mandatory quarantine when arriving from abroad.²⁰⁷ Following global Consular Affairs guidance, most visa services are closed, and only emergency American citizen services were available.²⁰⁸ As of March 31, 36 percent of staff at the U.S. Mission in Iraq had received a COVID-19 vaccination, exceeding the goal of vaccinating 35 percent of the staff by that time.²⁰⁹

Meanwhile, construction on the Erbil New Consulate Compound project continued during the quarter, and substantial completion is expected in January 2023. While there have been no work stoppages due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been extended periods of workforce reductions due to staff quarantines resulting from exposed workers and from contact tracing and travel. As of January 23, 2021, all of the more than 200 local workers had returned to the site.²¹⁰

Staffing Levels Limit Management of USAID Stabilization Activities in Iraq

The USAID mission in Iraq is responsible for managing a portfolio of 21 activities that represent more than \$1 billion in active programming.²¹¹ The awards in USAID's Iraq portfolio address the key national security issues of preventing ISIS resurgence, countering Iranian influence, and helping local communities recover from genocide.²¹²

During the quarter, USAID and Embassy in-country staff levels were reduced below already low levels due to security concerns related to the first anniversary of the death of the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—Qods Force commander, General Qassem Soleimani, in January 2020.²¹³ During the quarter, there were five USAID expatriate staff in country—two in Baghdad and three in Erbil.²¹⁴ USAID said that due to the staff reduction, its mission in Iraq faces high operational risks that will warrant closeout of activities if not addressed.²¹⁵ Successful management of USAID's Iraq portfolio requires constant engagement with implementers, international partners, and Iraqi government counterparts.²¹⁶ With the limited staffing in-country, USAID said that its staff could not sufficiently coordinate with these stakeholders to determine burden sharing and leveraging of funding.²¹⁷

Since June 2020, the DoS has authorized USAID to maintain 13 expatriate staff in Iraq, including U.S. direct hires, personal service contractors, and third country nationals.²¹⁸ The approved staffing level is a 50 percent cut from the level approved 2 years ago when USAID was at the same budget level.²¹⁹ USAID staffing in Iraq remains below the authorized level because the timing of the DoS staffing authorization prevented USAID from advertising positions before the fall 2020 recruitment cycle, delaying the positions from being filled.²²⁰ USAID reported that it is dependent on management actions from the DoS to lift the current staffing limit on the number of U.S. direct hires in country.²²¹

USAID said that staff displaced by the ordered departure continued to telework from places outside the country.²²² However, during the quarter, staff experienced challenges with communications technology and the time difference between staff in Iraq and those teleworking from abroad.²²³ USAID reported that the staffing challenges over the past 18 months have taken a cumulative toll on expatriate staff as well, noting that a contract specialist resigned because of the uncertainty of the staffing situation.²²⁴

USAID said that without sufficient staff on the ground to interact with stakeholders at the national, provincial, and community levels, it will not be able to support U.S. Government policy objectives.²²⁵

During the quarter, USAID and Embassy in-country staff levels were reduced below already low levels due to security concerns related to the first anniversary of the death of the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—Qods Force commander, General Qassem Soleimani, in January 2020.





A U.S. Soldier conducts specialized weapons training on a shooting range outside of al-Asad Air Base, Iraq. (U.S Army Reserve photo)

IRAQ

- 28 Security
- 42 Politics and Economy
- 49 Stabilization
- 51 Humanitarian Assistance

IRAQ

U.S. strategic priorities in Iraq include reforming and strengthening the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), supporting the development of a capable and responsive Iraqi government, building a strong Iraqi Kurdistan Region, encouraging economic reform, and providing support to vulnerable communities as they transition from stabilization to recovery.²²⁶

During the quarter, the U.S. and Iraqi governments made incremental progress towards achieving these goals. Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) continued to report that the ISF’s ability to conduct independent operations against ISIS is gradually improving, but critical weaknesses in fire support and intelligence collection capabilities remain.²²⁷ Additionally, the Iraqi government faced challenges stemming from anti-government protests, persistent corruption, economic crisis, and the coronavirus disease–2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.²²⁸ While the Iraqi government took steps to address these challenges during the quarter, ordinary Iraqis continue to experience significant hardship, which creates conditions that could threaten long-term security and stability.²²⁹

SECURITY

During Phase IV, CJTF-OIR has shifted from tactical-level advising and furnishing support during ground operations to providing limited training and advising. However, Coalition advisers continue to provide intelligence and air support to ISF ground operations targeting ISIS.

The Coalition supports many elements within the ISF—including the Iraqi Army and Air Force, the Counterterrorism Service (CTS), and the Kurdish Peshmerga—and the Iraqi Ministry of Defense. CJTF-OIR primarily advises and enables the ISF and the Kurdish Peshmerga at two centralized command centers: the Joint Operations Command–Iraq (JOC-I) in Baghdad and the Kurdish Coordination Center in Erbil. CJTF-OIR supports partner forces from four locations in Iraq: Union III and the Baghdad Diplomatic Support



SELECTED KEY EVENTS, JANUARY 1, 2021–MARCH 31, 2021

JANUARY 21

Two suicide bombers detonate explosives at an open-air market in central Baghdad, killing at least 32 people and injuring 110

FEBRUARY 15

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announces plans to expand the NATO mission in Iraq from 500 personnel to approximately 4,000

Iran-aligned militias launch 14 rockets targeting Coalition forces based in Erbil, killing one contractor and wounding nine others; several other rockets land in residential areas of the city

JAN

JANUARY 29

U.S. airstrikes kill Jabbar Salman Ali Farhan al-Issawi, a top ISIS commander, during a joint operation with the ISF in the northern province of Kirkuk

FEB

FEBRUARY 25

The United States conducts airstrikes against the Iran-aligned militia that was responsible for the Erbil Air Base attack



Iraqi Security Forces at Ayn al-Asad Air Base, Iraq. (U.S. Army National Guard photo)

MARCH 3

An Iran-aligned militia fire 10 rockets at al-Asad Air Base in Anbar province, where Coalition forces are based

MARCH 9

The ISF launches a 15-day counter-ISIS operation in the Makhmur Mountains, destroying caves and killing at least 27 ISIS fighters; the Coalition supports with airstrikes

MAR

MARCH 5-8

Pope Francis makes the first-ever papal visit to Iraq; the visit included a meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraqi's senior Shia religious leader, in Najaf

MARCH 31

Iraq's parliament approves a 2021 budget amid a devastating financial crisis, low oil prices, and the COVID-19 pandemic

Center in Baghdad, the al-Asad Air Base in Anbar province, and Erbil Air Base in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region.²³⁰ Advisement efforts are designed to enhance the skills that the ISF requires to build an independent military and execute independent operations against ISIS.²³¹

Further information about Coalition activities to train, advise, and enable Iraqi partner forces is available in the classified appendix to this report.

COALITION ACTIVITY

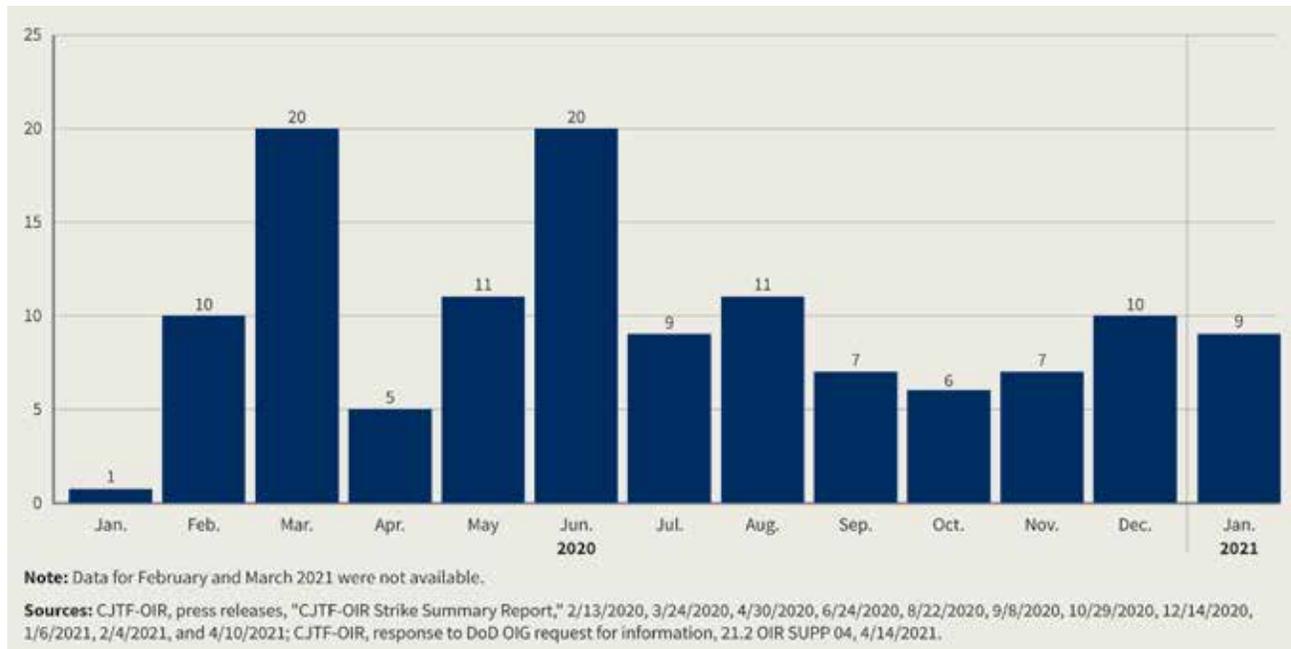
Coalition Supports Major ISF Operation Against ISIS

In March, Coalition forces supported an ISF operation, called Ready Lion, with airstrikes against ISIS targets in Iraq’s Makhmur Mountains.²³² While CJTF-OIR has not yet released full airstrike data for the quarter, it reported that it conducted 133 airstrikes in support of Operation Ready Lion. This represented the highest level of Coalition air support to an ISF operation since 2019.²³³ (See Figure 2.) The March airstrikes, carried out over 15 days, destroyed 127 ISIS refugees, according to CJTF-OIR.²³⁴

CJTF-OIR reported that a Coalition airstrike in January killed the top ISIS leader in Iraq, Jabbar Salman Ali Farhan al-Issawi.²³⁵ Other airstrikes during the quarter killed Abu Hassan al-Gharibawi, who led ISIS’s network in southern Iraq, and Ghanem Sabah Jawad, who was responsible for transporting suicide bombers. Both men were believed to be involved in the twin suicide bombing in Baghdad in January, according to a statement released on Twitter by Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi.²³⁶

Figure 2.

Coalition Airstrikes Targeting ISIS in Iraq, January 2020–January 2021





An Iraqi Air Force pilot performs preflight checks on an F-16. (U.S. Army Reserve photo)

PARTNER FORCES CAPABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

MAG Provides Operational-Level Advising

The Military Advisor Group (MAG), a directorate of CJTF-OIR, provides centralized advising to nine regionally located ISF Operations Commands and the primary ISF staff of the JOC-I in Baghdad.²³⁷ CJTF-OIR said that the JOC-I has liaison officers from each component of the Iraqi Army, the Iraqi Army Aviation Command, the Iraqi Air Force, Federal Police, and the Border Guard Forces. However, the JOC-I does not maintain liaison officers from the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and the Tribal Mobilization Forces, since the Coalition is prohibited from working with those elements.²³⁸ The MAG is responsible for providing operational-level advising to the ISF in Baghdad and to elements of the Kurdish Peshmerga that the Coalition partners within the Kurdistan Coordination Center in Erbil.²³⁹

CJTF-OIR said that, as in previous quarters, the MAG did not provide training to tactical ISF units or accompany them on operations against ISIS this quarter.²⁴⁰ Instead, the MAG continued to provide daily on-site advice to the ISF, including seminars on subjects requested by the ISF such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), strikes, and marketing, which is taught to enable information operations personnel to “control the narrative,” CJTF-OIR said.²⁴¹ Coalition subject-matter experts based in the JOC-I advised the ISF on using Iraqi capabilities, prioritizing resources, and developing plans to execute operations to defeat ISIS.²⁴²

ISF Increasingly Conducts Independent Operations

CJTF-OIR reported that the ISF continued to execute frequent operations throughout northern and western Iraq that resulted in the deaths of ISIS fighters.²⁴³ One operation lasted more than 30 days, which CJTF-OIR said displayed the ISF’s ability to sustain

forces during a longer operation.²⁴⁴ Most ISF operations included a fire support plan, from artillery and air assets.²⁴⁵ For example, during Operation Ready Lion, the ISF employed its own strike aircraft, but with significant support from Coalition aircraft.²⁴⁶ CJTF-OIR said the ISF’s capability to conduct regular search and clearance operations remained steady this quarter.²⁴⁷

CJTF-OIR reported that the ISF had “significantly enhanced” its ability to conduct operations with minimal Coalition influence and input.²⁴⁸ The ISF demonstrated the ability to conduct multiple types of operations, including single-command operations and periodic multi-command operations, and routinely incorporated Iraqi Army Aviation Command attack helicopters into their operations.²⁴⁹

Although most of the operations occurred during daylight hours and independent of Coalition ground support, CJTF-OIR noted that the JOC-I Deputy Commander increasingly emphasized night operations throughout the quarter.²⁵⁰ In addition, CJTF-OIR reported that the ISF conducted multiple operations that utilized Iraqi-derived intelligence and Iraqi operational planning.²⁵¹

The ISF also used its own fire support assets and reconnaissance capabilities during operations that were smaller in scale, more focused, and correlated with the JOC-I 2021 Campaign Plan.²⁵² CJTF-OIR said that the operations frequently demonstrated coordinated operations across two or three operations commands.²⁵³

However, CJTF-OIR reported that gaps continued to exist in the ISF’s ability to carry out surface-to-surface fire support operations.²⁵⁴ The most evident gap this quarter was a lack of an ISF artillery liaison officer in the JOC-I, which impeded the Coalition’s ability to dispense advice to Iraqi artillery and mortar units.²⁵⁵ CJTF-OIR said that the ISF does not view artillery as a counterterrorism asset and instead employs its artillery assets at the tactical level under each operational command.²⁵⁶

Improvement in Iraqi Air Enterprise’s Ability to Support Ground Operations

The Iraqi Air Enterprise, consisting of the Iraqi Air Force and the Iraqi Army Aviation Command, continued to receive support from CJTF-OIR and the Office of Security Cooperation–Iraq (OSC-I) during the quarter. Much of this effort was aimed at expanding Iraq’s aerial capabilities to independently support ISF counter-ISIS operations and ensure long-term sustainability of Iraq’s fleet of fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft. This includes maturing the Iraqi Air Force’s ability to use its multirole F-16 fighters for airstrikes and enhancing the Iraqi Air Force and Iraqi Army Aviation Command’s ISR capabilities to minimize and eventually replace the need for Coalition aircraft.

CJTF-OIR reported that while the ISF continue to request Coalition support with ISR and aerial strikes, the Iraqi Air Force demonstrated their own capability to conduct ISR and airstrikes using Iraqi F-16 and Cessna 208 aircraft this quarter.²⁵⁷ CJTF-OIR also reported that there were no changes to the Iraqi Air Enterprise’s aerial strike capabilities from the previous quarter, but did say that Iraqi air support to ground operations increased.²⁵⁸

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The Iraqi Air Force showcases its F-16s at Balad Air Base, Iraq. (U.S. Army Reserve photo)

According to CJTF-OIR, Iraq's F-16s conducted 299 sorties this quarter, of which 295 were training sorties.²⁵⁹ This was a slight increase over the 271 sorties (267 dedicated to training) performed last quarter.²⁶⁰ CJTF-OIR reported that the F-16s conducted a limited number of operational sorties using primarily GBU-12 guided bombs and occasionally Mk-82 unguided bombs.²⁶¹ Iraqi F-16s continued to average four training sorties per day.²⁶² CJTF-OIR stated last quarter that with continued U.S. contractor support, Iraq's F-16 program aims to reach eight training sorties per day.²⁶³

In particular, CJTF-OIR noted an improvement during the quarter in the Iraqi Air Force and Iraqi Army Aviation Command's ability to conduct dynamic targeting in urgent and unplanned situations.²⁶⁴ According to CJTF-OIR, there is a concerted effort to develop a dynamic strike capability within the ISF by bringing together Iraqi F-16s from the 9th Fighter Squadron and Special Mission Controllers from the CTS. According to CJTF-OIR, the CTS participated in initial planning meetings and "dry" close air support training with Coalition advisors, which culminated in a live fire exercise in mid-March.²⁶⁵ CJTF-OIR added that they hope to expand the training to include Iraqi AC-208s from the 3rd Squadron and L-159s from the 115th Fighter Squadron.²⁶⁶

CJTF-OIR said that during the quarter there were several examples of Iraqi F-16s and attack helicopters processing dynamic strikes against high value targets while also responding to support ISF units in combat. Iraqi aircraft supported multiple ISF offensive ground operations and were ready to respond to dynamic targets.²⁶⁷ In contrast, CJTF-OIR reported last quarter that dynamic targeting in urgent or unplanned situations seemed to be the situations where Coalition forces were most often needed.²⁶⁸

U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) reported that U.S. contractors from Lockheed Martin that support the Iraqi F-16 program departed Balad Air Base in early March due to security threats.²⁶⁹ The Office of the Undersecretary for Policy of Defense–International Security Affairs (OUSDP) ISA reported that some contractors returned before the quarter concluded and that a complete departure of Lockheed Martin contractors was averted.²⁷⁰

CJTF-OIR reported there is no longer a permanent Coalition air adviser presence at Balad Air Base, but that air advisors from U.S. Air Force Central conduct regular visits to support the Iraqi Air Force’s 9th Fighter Squadron, which operates Iraq’s F-16s.²⁷¹ Last quarter, USCENTCOM acknowledged that a lack of dedicated Coalition air advisor support and secure communications at Balad Air Base prevented Iraq’s F-16s from being placed on the Coalition’s aerial tasking plan (known as the air tasking order), though at least two Iraqi F-16 strike sorties did occur during that quarter.²⁷²

CJTF-OIR stated that its focus is now on developing the Iraqi Air Force’s nascent planning and tasking processes, which had previously been incompatible with air tasking order integration. The goal for the next quarter, CJTF-OIR said, is for the Iraqi Air Force to provide a 3-day outlook for their operational sortie plans and alert aircraft that could be incorporated into the air tasking order. The JOC-I now possesses the ability to communicate air tasking updates to Iraqi squadrons via a secure Iraqi IT network, CJTF-OIR reported.²⁷³

The Iraqi Air Force fleet includes other fixed-wing strike aircraft that did not participate in counter-ISIS operations this quarter. For example, CJTF-OIR reported the Iraqi Air Force’s Russian-made Su-25 ground attack fighters did not fly during the quarter, due to a lack of available parts and funds.²⁷⁴ Additionally, some Czech-made L-159 aircraft have returned to flying status but are not operational, pending strike weapon re-qualification training that is scheduled for next quarter.²⁷⁵

New ISR Cell to Maximize Limited Assets Amid Equipment Shortfalls

During the quarter, the ISF successfully executed operations that only involved Iraqi ISR, strikes, and ground forces.²⁷⁶ However, CJTF-OIR confirmed that Iraq’s ISR capability remained significantly degraded due to technical issues with equipment and ongoing procurement delays.²⁷⁷ USCENTCOM said that the United States did not provide any new unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) to the ISF through the Foreign Military Financing program this quarter.²⁷⁸

Meanwhile, CJTF-OIR reported that Iraq has been unable to use its Chinese-produced CH-4 UAVs, with the last aircraft flown in September 2019.²⁷⁹ CJTF-OIR added that Iraq initially had a fleet of 20 CH-4s, but that 8 crashed. Iraqi sources informed CJTF-OIR that the reason the remaining 12 have not flown is because they are awaiting parts from China.²⁸⁰

The Iraqis’ U.S.-produced ScanEagle tactical UAVs only flew twice, with no flights since January 9.²⁸¹ CJTF-OIR explained that the Iraqi Army Aviation Command is under internal pressure to recommence ScanEagle operations, but the Iraqi operators blamed electromagnetic interference for preventing safe operations. The Iraqi Army requested Coalition assistance to resolve the electromagnetic interference, including the procurement of an anti-

CJTF-OIR stated that their focus is now on developing the Iraqi Air Force’s nascent planning and tasking processes, which had previously been incompatible with air tasking order integration.

Table 3.

Training Courses Provided by Coalition Forces to the ISF, January 2021–March 2021

Courses	Students	Course Objective
7 Targeting Seminars	68 fire support and intel officers from battalion-level to JOC-I staff	Describe the targeting process including intelligence development, operational design, asset allocation, reporting results, developing follow-on intelligence
4 Civil Affairs Seminars	12 students from the JOC-I Staff	Describe Civil Affairs background and missions, local support to Civil Affairs missions, and roles of the Commander and Civil Affairs liaison officers
2 ISR Collection Plans	12 students from the JOC-I Staff	Describe the role of ISR operations in the JOC-I for addressing intelligence gaps, asset prioritization, collection management, and collection assessment
2 Information Operations Seminars	22 students from the JOC-I Staff and Security Media Cell	Describe introduction to psychological operations and techniques for successful narratives and messaging
1 Artillery Seminar	9 artillery personnel from operational commands to JOC-I Staff	Describe integration of artillery into operational missions and how to write an artillery annex to an operations order

Source: CJTF-OIR, response to DoD OIG request for information, 21.2 OIR 039, 3/25/2021.

jamming system.²⁸² CJTF-OIR also said that the ScanEagles would require new contracts to re-initiate operations and that interference experienced is caused by the software version used on the aircraft and an analog ground control station.²⁸³ CJTF-OIR later reported that the ISF's ScanEagles have been moved to Balad Air Base to assist in the protection of Lockheed Martin contractors returning to support the Iraqi F-16 program. CJTF-OIR added that the ISF is hoping to mitigate the interference using a line-of-sight signal.²⁸⁴

Despite the equipment shortfalls, CJTF-OIR reported that the JOC-I created an ISR cell this quarter that schedules daily Iraqi ISR missions using Iraqi intelligence.²⁸⁵ CJTF-OIR said Coalition advisors remain engaged to coach the ISF through their operations and that the ISF continues to routinely use its fairly capable King Air 350 and A/RC-208 Cessna ISR aircraft for operations.²⁸⁶

CJTF-OIR explained that MAG air advisors encourage the Iraqi Air Force to conduct ISR sorties with Iraqi aircraft to gain experience and confidence using their own equipment and capabilities. CJTF-OIR said the MAG and advisors from U.S. Air Forces Central are working to establish an Intel Fusion Cell within the JOC-I to improve utilization of Iraqi ISR assets and production of appropriate targeting packages for F-16 strike sorties. Coalition forces supported the effort with targeting seminars to improve understanding of the appropriate targeting process among general officers and staff within the JOC-I.²⁸⁷

In addition, CJTF-OIR said that ISF commanders expressed interest in renewing specific training opportunities for intelligence officers. In response, CJTF-OIR provided centrally located ISR collection management, joint targeting, artillery integration, and information operations seminars.²⁸⁸ (See Table 3.)

Increase in CTS Warrant-Based Detentions

CJTF-OIR reported that Iraq's CTS made steady progress in the total number of unilateral counter-ISIS operations conducted during the quarter. Additionally, CTS "held steady" the total number of unilateral warrant-based deliberate detention operations it conducted, CJTF-OIR said. The weekly average of ISIS-associated warranted detentions increased, from 5.5 detentions per week last quarter to 7.5 detentions per week this quarter. CJTF-OIR said that the increase in detentions reflects sustained improvement in CTS's intelligence collection, targeting, warranting, and post-arrest judicial procedures.²⁸⁹

CJTF-OIR assessed that CTS operations continue to have a "significant effect" on ISIS by denying them safe havens and freedom of movement throughout areas of Iraq that the Coalition operates in. CJTF-OIR said U.S. training and advising efforts increased CTS's ability to conduct unilateral operations, with a 50 percent reduction in partnered operations observed during the quarter.²⁹⁰

While the CTS remains almost exclusively focused on their counter-ISIS mission, CJTF-OIR acknowledged that the CTS also has static security responsibilities in the Baghdad International Zone. CJTF-OIR added that these responsibilities have not impacted CTS's operational tempo nor its ability to conduct effective counter terrorism operations. Additionally, CJTF-OIR said that CTS forces in southern Iraq, currently assigned to the 3rd Iraqi Special Operations Force Command, have a lower operational tempo than those in the central, western, and northern sectors.²⁹¹

Coalition training of CTS continued during the quarter with dedicated advisor support from the Coalition's Special Operation Advisor Group, who provided advice, training, and enabling to the CTS school. CJTF-OIR highlighted the CTS Special Mission Controller program, which trains and certifies CTS soldiers to serve as ground controllers for Iraqi Air Force close air support sorties. CJTF-OIR said that Coalition special operations personnel provided extensive training and advising to the CTS as they developed their own air-to-ground attack course with Iraq's F-16s.²⁹²

CJTF-OIR said that one area of focus during the quarter was the development of a comprehensive unit-level combat training and evaluation exercise for the CTS. CTS instructors, with assistance from Coalition advisors, developed a 10-day exercise similar to those conducted at Combined Training Centers in the United States. CJTF-OIR explained that the exercise serves as the foundational framework for individual, collective, and unit-level basic soldier tasks directly enhancing the CTS counter terrorism capability.²⁹³

CJTF-OIR said that CTS forensic capabilities continue to progress, but acknowledged they are still not at the level required to comprehensively support unilateral operations against ISIS. CJTF-OIR said that while the CTS currently possess adequate facilities to support a multitude of forensic disciplines, it still requires additional equipment and training. CJTF-OIR explained that forensic experts contracted through the U.S. Foreign Military Sales program provided training in latent print examination and comparisons, as well as digital exploitation. CJTF-OIR anticipated that the CTS would be able to support both these capabilities unilaterally within 6 months.²⁹⁴

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CJTF-OIR reported that the Coalition’s Operations Advisory Group saw a significant increase in the procurement and delivery of combat equipment, medical equipment, and ammunition to the CTS this quarter.

CJTF-OIR reported that the Coalition’s Operations Advisory Group saw a significant increase in the procurement and delivery of combat equipment, medical equipment, and ammunition to the CTS this quarter. CJTF-OIR said this equipment was identified after Coalition and partner force capability analysis and procured to enhance CTS counter-ISIS operations.²⁹⁵

The CTS also received dedicated Coalition logistics and sustainment advisor support at the operational, institutional, and ministerial levels. According to CJTF-OIR, logistics and sustainment advisors focused their efforts on encouraging the CTS to develop and implement prolonged sustainment and maintenance of their combat equipment and improving their logistics independence.²⁹⁶

Meanwhile, CJTF-OIR reported that it no longer partners with the ISF’s newest special operations unit, the Ministry of Defense’s Special Forces Command (or “al-Qwat Khasah” in Arabic), and therefore does not have insight into their operations and capabilities.²⁹⁷ However, USCENTCOM said it continues to provide support through Title 22 Security Cooperation funding.²⁹⁸ A year ago, USCENTCOM said that this command, a specialized light infantry unit modeled on the U.S. Army Rangers, demonstrated little initiative to fill tactical training courses or ability to train its own forces.²⁹⁹

Coalition and Kurdish Peshmerga Forces Conduct Partnered Operations Against ISIS

CJTF-OIR reported that Coalition forces carried out eight counter-ISIS ground operations with elements of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces belonging to the semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan Region. These operations occurred primarily in the Kurdish-controlled province of Sulaymaniyah and in the Makhmur Mountains south of Erbil.³⁰⁰ All of the operations involved intelligence collection and reconnaissance designed to gather information on ISIS members and their places of refuge.³⁰¹ CJTF-OIR said that the intelligence collected from these operations, along with other sources of intelligence, led the Coalition to carry out strikes against ISIS.³⁰²

The partnered operations were conducted with elements of the Peshmerga whom CJTF-OIR described as “motivated and enthusiastic” to receive advice from Coalition forces. CJTF-OIR said the Peshmerga forces possessed “good internal organization and the ability to coordinate across different brigades.”³⁰³ At least one operation was conducted with these Peshmerga elements to gather intelligence in the Makhmur District that was used to target ISIS members during Operation Ready Lion.³⁰⁴

Lack of Cooperation between Baghdad, Erbil Fostered Security Gap

The Coalition and Peshmerga conducted joint operations amid continuing efforts by the Coalition to increase cooperation between Peshmerga forces and the ISF, which operate on their respective sides of an area known as the “Kurdish Coordination Line.” The line, which extends across several provinces of northern Iraq, separates the semi-autonomous Iraqi

Kurdistan Region from the rest of Iraq, and much of the area along either side of the line is claimed by both sides.

Joint ISF-Peshmerga coordination centers in Baghdad and Erbil were established to foster cooperation between the security organizations.³⁰⁵ To facilitate cooperation, the Peshmerga have placed three officers in the JOC-I in Baghdad, and the ISF have embedded six officers in the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) Joint Coalition Coordination Center in Erbil.³⁰⁶

CJTF-OIR reported that ISF and Peshmerga units on both sides of the Kurdish Coordination Line have regular military-to-military meetings to discuss operations.³⁰⁷ This quarter, the Iraqi government and the KRG continued to explore the possibility of opening four additional joint coordination centers.³⁰⁸

However, the ISF and the Peshmerga did not conduct joint operations this quarter.³⁰⁹ The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) reported that this lack of coordination “almost certainly” is a product of what the DIA called “historic distrust and competition between Erbil and Baghdad.”³¹⁰ The DIA said that while the Peshmerga and the ISF share the goal of defeating ISIS, the two sides also want to bring disputed areas that run along the coordination line “under their exclusive control.”³¹¹

The lack of cooperation has created a security gap that ISIS has been able to exploit. Citing open sources, the DIA reported that Iraqi Kurdish leaders consider the ISIS threat “the most dangerous” along the line due to the lack of coordination between the Peshmerga and the ISF.³¹² This quarter, Iran-aligned militias appeared to have exploited the lack of coordination as well.³¹³ In February, a militia smuggled rockets across the line into the Kurdistan region and attacked U.S. forces located in Erbil.³¹⁴

A military delegation from CJTF-OIR meets with ISF and Peshmerga Forces in Erbil, Iraq. (DoD photo)



government and the KRG. However, the DIA reported that it is “unlikely this investigation will translate into broader coordination and effective security cooperation between the Peshmerga and the ISF.”³¹⁵

Adding to the tensions, payments to the unified Peshmerga Regional Guards Brigades have been late since June 2020.³¹⁶ This quarter, the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs began allowing the U.S. Government to resume providing monthly stipends to the Regional Guards without requiring the stipends to include the ministry’s portion of the salaries.³¹⁷

OSC-I Supports ISF Human Resource Reforms Despite Staffing Challenges

The OSC-I manages and administers the bilateral military relationship with Iraq, including a more than \$19 billion U.S. security cooperation portfolio.³¹⁸ While separate from OIR and under the authority of the Chief of Mission and USCENTCOM, OSC-I coordinates with CJTF-OIR and its activities often align with and support the OIR mission.³¹⁹

USCENTCOM reported that in December 2020, the vast majority of OSC-I personnel were relocated outside of Iraq due to the DoS’s ordered departure of U.S. personnel from the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. As a result, OSC-I’s Security Sector Reform Group paused most assessment efforts this quarter.³²⁰

USCENTCOM said that the ISF’s inadequate human resource management and an institutional reluctance to change were key corruption challenges facing Iraqi security institutions. USCENTCOM explained that in Iraq, human resource management issues allowed soldiers to receive pay without working. In addition, some in Iraq’s security sector fear that changing existing processes could lead to cutting off the sources of graft that military leadership and organizational processes rely upon.³²¹

During the quarter, the OSC-I continued to work with the ISF to develop an automated human resource management system for the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, and the CTS through a multi-year, multi-phased program that is expected to be complete in FY 2022. USCENTCOM said that the OSC-I is also coordinating with the European Union Assistance Mission in their efforts to work on similar efforts with the Ministry of the Interior’s Border Guard Forces Command. USCENTCOM explained that the human resource management system will address corruption by moving ISF administrative functions from a localized, paper-based system to a national, web-based system that will allow the ISF to track promotions, retirements, legal actions, recruitment, skills development, and personnel transfers.³²²

In addition, in February, the OSC-I facilitated a Defense Institute of International Legal Studies anti-corruption virtual table top exercise attended by representatives from the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of the Interior, and the CTS. USCENTCOM said the exercise provided participants an understanding of public procurement concepts and addressed related fraud and corruption issues.³²³

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Role of Third Parties in Iraq

IRAN-ALIGNED MILITIAS RESUME ATTACKS ON COALITION AND U.S. TARGETS

The DIA reported that Iran-aligned Shia militias in Iraq continued to pose a threat to U.S. personnel operating in Iraq despite an order by Iran last October to halt attacks. The DIA assessed that Iran sought to avoid escalation with the United States before the U.S. presidential election and during the presidential transition period.³²⁴

USCENTCOM reported that between January 1 and March 17, there were six indirect fire attacks on facilities housing U.S. personnel or contractors in Iraq as well as 37 IED attacks against Coalition-associated logistical convoys.³²⁵ USCENTCOM and the DIA assessed that Iran-aligned militias almost certainly conducted these attacks.³²⁶ USCENTCOM said the attacks this quarter demonstrate an increase from the previous quarter (October 1 to December 31, 2020), when 3 indirect fire attacks and 9 convoy IED attacks occurred, but are lower in number than the quarter before that (July 1 to September 30, 2020), when 24 indirect fire attacks and 47 IED attacks occurred.³²⁷ (See Figure 3.)

The DIA reported that pro-militia media broadcast the militias' intentions to expand attacks against U.S. interests in Iraq. The DIA assessed these broadcasts indicate that the operational pause initiated last quarter is probably over and that Iran permitted new attacks. The DIA also noted that a rocket attack against al-Asad Air Base in March, which resulted in the death of one U.S. person from cardiac arrest, occurred during daylight hours, potentially indicating the use of more escalatory tactics that were not observed last quarter.³²⁸

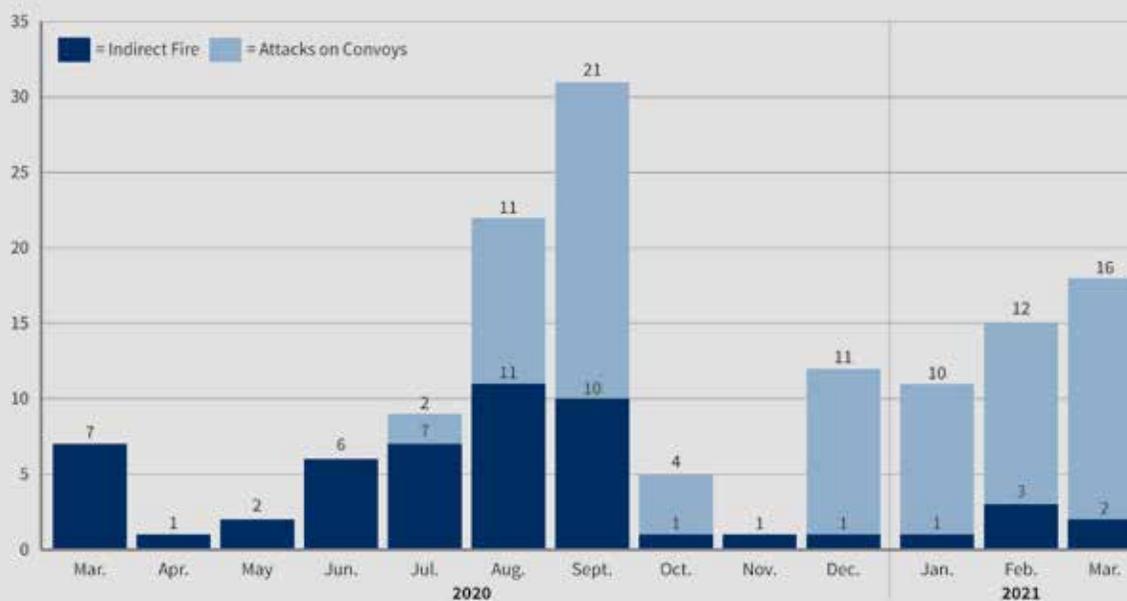
CJTF-OIR stated that while the PMF and Iran-aligned actors did not directly obstruct counter-ISIS activity by Coalition forces this quarter, their actions did draw attention away from counter-ISIS missions at times.³²⁹ Still, CJTF-OIR said the indirect fire and IED attacks by Iran-aligned militias "interfered in counter-ISIS operations," but that the impact to the OIR mission was minimal.³³⁰

According to CJTF-OIR and USCENTCOM, the threat from Iran-aligned militias continued to divert ISR assets away from counter-ISIS activity to support force protection efforts.³³¹ CJTF-OIR said that sometimes, the ISF request ISR support and at other times CJTF-OIR will pull assets from intelligence gathering to mitigate credible or imminent threats to Coalition forces.³³² Additionally, CJTF-OIR said that the militias target Iraqi civilians supporting the Coalition, primarily by conducting IED attacks against contracted truck drivers. CJTF-OIR said that attacks on Iraqi civilians working for the Coalition had a minimal impact on the OIR mission.³³³

Nevertheless, USCENTCOM reported that the OSC-I worked with the ISF to enhance the security of Baghdad's International Zone, home to several key offices and ministries of the Iraqi government, foreign diplomatic missions, and the MAG based at Union III. According to USCENTCOM, the OSC-I supported the ISF through a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers-sponsored assessment, funded through the Foreign Military Financing program, that helped refine the International Zone's security requirements in October and November 2020. USCENTCOM stated that CTEF support was also provided for International Zone security through the divestment of 20 armored Humvees and 10 Land Cruisers to the ISF in December 2020. USCENTCOM said OSC-I is working with the ISF to develop additional projects that will enhance International Zone security and expects these projects to be completed in 2022.³³⁴

Iran-aligned militias in Iraq also demonstrated their ability to threaten other regional states this quarter. The DIA reported that on January 23, a probable Iran-backed Iraqi militia conducted a fixed-wing,

Figure 3.

Suspected Militia Attacks on U.S. and Coalition Targets, March 2020–March 2021

Sources: DoD OIG analysis of public sources, including the Enabling Peace in Iraq Center, Security Media Cell (@SecMedCell), and press reporting.

explosive-laden UAV attack against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The DIA said the attack was claimed by al-Wad al-Haq, which it assessed is probably a front group for an Iran-aligned militia, and praised by Kata'ib Hezbollah, a well-known Iran-aligned militia in Iraq that the U.S. Government designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization and as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. The DIA also said that a militia official claimed the UAVs were shipped disassembled from Iran and then assembled and launched from Iraq.³³⁵ According to open source analysts, Iran-aligned militias in Iraq are believed to have conducted a previous UAV attack that targeted a pipeline in Saudi Arabia in May 2019.³³⁶ The DIA noted that the recent attack came as the Iraqi government seeks to deepen economic ties with Saudi Arabia—Iran's regional rival—to pursue a variety of investment projects.³³⁷

IRAQ'S PRIME MINISTER CONTINUES INCREMENTAL APPROACH TO RESTRAIN MILITIAS, BUT DIRECT CONTROL REMAINS ELUSIVE

According to the DIA, most of the Iran-aligned militias in Iraq still operate outside the Iraqi government's direct control. Despite this, the DIA stated that the militias operating under the Popular Mobilization Committee (PMC), the governing body of the PMF, almost certainly continued to receive Iraqi state resources and salaries. PMC militias include U.S.-designated foreign terrorist groups Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, which staff six PMF brigades.³³⁸

The DIA reported that Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi continues to take an incremental approach in asserting authority over the PMC and has acted against individual militants or associates. However, he has stopped short of implementing widespread reforms.³³⁹ The DIA and the DoS pointed to the removal of at least two security officials in January by al-Kadhimi who are suspected of having ties

(continued on next page)

Role of Third Parties in Iraq *(continued from previous page)*

to the PMC and Iran-aligned militias.³⁴⁰ The following month, he ordered the arrest of at least four men with ties to the PMC for their alleged role in attacking protesters in Basrah, according to the DIA.³⁴¹

The DIA reported that the ISF, when directed by the prime minister or senior Iraqi government officials, continues to arrest militia members violating Iraqi law. In addition to the arrests made in February, the DIA said ISF units detained several militia personnel in December, after an indirect fire attack on the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. The DIA said that beginning last quarter, Iran-aligned militias have attempted to monitor Iraqis working with the ISF and U.S. forces. As of November, Iraqis whose personal information was leaked by an Iranian-affiliated news source feared Iran-aligned militia groups were targeting them, according to the DIA.³⁴²

However, the DIA assessed that without a political bloc in Iraq's Council of Representatives, Prime Minister al-Kadhimi lacks sufficient backing to pursue a more aggressive approach toward the militias and continues to face political pressure from Shia elements to support the organizations. An early draft of the 2021 Iraq budget indicated that the PMC's budget was slated to increase.³⁴³ According to the DoS, the PMF received salary increases for personnel on their official roster in the final budget that passed on March 31.³⁴⁴ The DIA said that as of March, the PMC and its associated militias maintain positions on the Iraq-Syria border, despite Prime Minister al-Kadhimi's efforts in 2020 to reduce their presence.³⁴⁵ The DoS said there were indirect signs that the Iraqi government successfully displaced the militias from borders in northwestern Iraq, but said that due to the ordered departure of U.S. Embassy staff, it lacks the on-the-ground ability to assess.³⁴⁶

The DIA also reported that Iran-aligned militias exploited and intimidated local Sunni populations during the counter-ISIS campaign, which probably helps ISIS gain sympathy and enables it to operate in Sunni areas controlled by the militias. More broadly, the DIA said that Iran-aligned militias and associated political fronts are accused of human rights abuses, assassinations, and ongoing sectarian crimes, resulting in increasing distrust within the Iraqi populace.³⁴⁷ In January, the U.S. Government announced sanction designations on PMC chairman Falih al-Fayyadh for serious human rights abuses and PMC acting deputy chairman Abd-al-Aziz al-Muhammadawi, commonly known as Abu Fadak, for terrorism.³⁴⁸

POLITICS AND ECONOMY

The DoS said that its principal national security objective in Iraq is to bolster the country as a sovereign, stable, and democratic partner capable of fending off internal and external threats—including from Iran—with a viable KRG. The U.S. Mission in Iraq engages with the Iraqi government, international organizations, neighboring countries, economic partners, and the Iraqi people to counter Iran's malign influence and ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS. In addition, Mission Iraq seeks to promote good governance and combat corruption; protect members of Iraq's persecuted minority communities; improve Iraq's ties to the six Middle Eastern countries that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Jordan; foster economic growth and improve Iraq's business climate; and support Iraq's energy independence.³⁴⁹

Antigovernment Sentiment and Unrest Persist

During the quarter, Iraqis continued to stage rallies across southern and central Iraq to draw attention to deteriorating public services, corruption, high unemployment,

The DoS said that while Prime Minister al-Kadhimi has made some “positive” moves to improve his standing with the Iraqi people, most Iraqis have seen no tangible results from these actions.

government mismanagement, and perceived impunity for security forces implicated in counter-protester violence. In some cases, protest organizers demanded resignations of governors or chiefs of police.³⁵⁰ Rallies during the quarter took place in several provinces, with significant demonstrations in Dhi Qar, Najaf, and Baghdad, and smaller gatherings in Basrah, Wasit, Karbala, Muthanna, and Babil.³⁵¹

The protests were the latest in a series of antigovernment demonstrations that started in October 2019 in Baghdad and Iraq’s southern provinces. The earlier protests led to the resignation of Prime Minister Adil Abd al-Mahdi and the announcement of national elections in 2021, earlier than the originally scheduled date in June 2022.³⁵²

On February 15, Prime Minister al-Kadhimi announced the arrests of “death squad” members allegedly responsible for the assassinations of protesters in Basrah.³⁵³ On February 27, following violent demonstrations in Nasiriyah and the subsequent resignation of Dhi Qar’s governor, the Prime Minister announced the start of a “major campaign to rebuild the province.”³⁵⁴ As part of the campaign, the Prime Minister appointed a new governor in Dhi Qar, formed an advisory council, and launched an investigation into protester deaths.³⁵⁵

The DoS said that while Prime Minister al-Kadhimi has made some “positive” moves to improve his standing with the Iraqi people, most Iraqis have seen no tangible results from these actions. The DoS noted that Iraqis have been affected by low oil prices, a weak economy, unemployment, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Most Iraqis do not believe the Prime Minister will be able to overcome these challenges, the DoS said, and they question whether anyone can successfully lead Iraq given Iran’s influence throughout the country.³⁵⁶

Iraq Reschedules Elections for October

On January 19, the Iraqi government announced that parliamentary elections were rescheduled from June 6 to October 10.³⁵⁷ The DoS had earlier raised concerns about whether the elections could be held in June given resource limitations and limited time to prepare.³⁵⁸ On March 31, the Iraqi parliament voted to dissolve itself on October 7, a step necessary to conduct the early elections.³⁵⁹ After the quarter ended, on April 12, Iraqi President Barham Salih signed a decree to hold the early elections on October 10.³⁶⁰ A media report quoted Iraqi President Barham Salih saying: “[The elections are] a promise we have made as it is a public demand and political agreement.”³⁶¹ President Salih said that the current political system in Iraq is broken and fails to meet the needs of Iraqi citizens.³⁶²

The DoS reported that activists and protesters continued to demand a UN observation mission for the 2021 elections.³⁶³ The protesters expressed concerns that the established political parties would collaborate behind the scenes with the Iraqi government, security forces, and militias to rig the elections if the UN is not on the ground throughout Iraq during the voting.³⁶⁴

During the last quarter, the Iraqi parliament reached an agreement on electoral boundary delimitation and the numbers of seats per province.³⁶⁵ However, drawing of boundary delimitation maps will likely not be completed in time for elections held in October and would be finalized after.³⁶⁶ On March 23, the Independent High Electoral Commission

(IHEC) announced that it was suspending out-of-country voting. The DoS said that both the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) and U.S. Government implementers supported the suspension because, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the foreign ministry is unable to help the IHEC open overseas centers for biometric voter ID registration and polling stations. During the 2018 elections, overseas voting totaled 156,282 votes out of 10.9 million votes cast.³⁶⁷ During the quarter, the Iraqi parliament also approved a law to fill vacancies on the Federal Supreme Court (the certifying authority for elections) and new members of the court were sworn in before President Barham Salih on April 11.³⁶⁸

U.S. Government Commits \$9.7 Million to Electoral Support Activities in Iraq

On February 2, USAID announced a commitment of \$9.7 million combined DoS and USAID funding to provide electoral support activities through the UNAMI Office of Electoral Assistance.³⁶⁹ UNAMI's Office of Electoral Assistance is an internationally

Table 4.

USAID-funded Elections Support Activities in Iraq

Project Name/Duration/Budget	
<p><i>Iraq Governance Performance and Accountability</i> June 2017–June 2023 \$172 million</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Works to integrate governance functions within the provinces, promote cooperation between the central and provincial governments, and integrate civil society into this process to ensure accountability, transparency, and citizen buy-in. • Helps the Iraqi government at the national and provincial levels improve the delivery of essential services and public financial management by supporting Iraqi-led reform initiatives. • Works with government and civil society to improve service delivery in provinces through technical assistance and supporting implementation of decentralization laws.
<p><i>Iraq Provincial Elections Activity</i> September 2018–December 2023 \$25.4 million</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Builds on the assistance provided to Iraq's IHEC and civil society organizations to improve the management and administration of Iraq's election systems and processes. • Provides civil society organizations with funding and training to conduct activities aimed at encouraging citizens to register to vote in the period leading up to the provincial elections and to vote on Election Day. • Will continue supporting IHEC and Iraqi civil society after Election Day to ensure that democratic gains are consolidated and that Iraqi stakeholders are better prepared to administer future elections.
<p><i>UNAMI Elections Support Program</i> February 2021–February 2023 \$9.7 million</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides additional assistance to the IHEC and will contribute to the recruitment and deployment of seven electoral experts and two information technology advisors to provide assistance on electoral preparations at the national and provincial levels. • Builds the capacity of the Governorate Electoral Offices of the IHEC, including advising and supporting electoral planning and coordination efforts and the preparation and management of a Results Management System. • Funding will also develop a code of conduct for political advisors participating in the electoral process.

Source: USAID ME Bureau, response to USAID OIG request for information, 3/26/2021.

Since November 2020, the United States and its European partners have raised \$30 million to support free and fair early elections in Iraq.

recognized electoral mission that has worked closely with the IHEC to strengthen its understanding of electoral processes and management.³⁷⁰ The U.S. Government has been a longstanding supporter of UNAMI and IHEC, USAID said.³⁷¹ Since November 2020, the United States and its European partners have raised \$30 million to support free and fair early elections in Iraq.³⁷²

USAID stated that it will continue to fund UNAMI's electoral support activities until December 2023.³⁷³ The funding will be implemented in two phases. The first phase seeks to develop the technical and organizational skills of the IHEC to prepare for October 2021 elections.³⁷⁴ The funds will support the recruitment of eight electoral experts to assist electoral preparations at the national and provincial levels.³⁷⁵ The second phase will focus on building the capacity of the Governorate Electoral Office of the IHEC, including advising and supporting electoral planning and coordination efforts, and the development of a system to manage the tabulation, transmission, and announcement of the election results.³⁷⁶ USAID said that during both phases, the funding will support communication and outreach efforts aimed at increasing awareness of and public confidence in the electoral process.³⁷⁷

In addition to the new grant for UNAMI, USAID continued to provide support through the Iraq Governance Performance Accountability project and the Iraq Provincial Election Activity, described in Table 4.³⁷⁸ USAID reported that implementers of all three projects have adjusted plans and activities to meet the new election date in October.³⁷⁹

Iraq Strives to Strengthen Relations with Regional Neighbors

During the quarter, Prime Minister al-Kadhimi continued diplomatic efforts to strengthen Iraq's ties with its moderate neighbors and broaden its influence in the region, the DoS said.³⁸⁰ The Prime Minister held a virtual meeting with Saudi King Salman on March 25 and visited Riyadh on March 31 to meet with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. In a joint statement, the leaders agreed to the creation of a \$3 billion Saudi-Iraqi investment fund and to complete electrical interconnectivity between the GCC and Iraq. The Prime Minister also visited the United Arab Emirates on April 4 and met Crown Prince Mohammed bin-Zayed and Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid. The United Arab Emirates announced a \$3 billion fund to strengthen investment ties with Iraq to spur economic growth.³⁸¹

In late March, the Prime Minister planned to host a triple summit with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Jordanian King Abdullah II, according to media reports. This meeting, under the framework of the trilateral Iraq-Egypt-Jordan partnership, would have been the third summit among the three leaders.³⁸² However, the summit was canceled at the last minute following a deadly train collision and the blockage of the Suez Canal in Egypt. The summit had not been rescheduled as of the end of the quarter.³⁸³

Earlier in the quarter, also under the trilateral framework, the Iraqi government hosted ministerial-level engagements with Egyptian and Jordanian officials to advance projects related to energy, health, transportation, and industrial cooperation. Jordanian Prime Minister Bisher al-Khasawneh visited Baghdad on January 28 for discussions focused on economic integration.³⁸⁴

On February 1, GCC Secretary-General Nayef al-Hajref visited Baghdad to continue discussions on developing GCC-Iraq trade ties and electricity interconnection, the DoS reported. On February 8, when Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein met with his Jordanian, Egyptian, and Gulf counterparts during the Arab League ministerial in Cairo. Additionally, Iraq and Saudi Arabia continued to implement projects announced in December, including the successful reopening of the Arar border crossing.³⁸⁵

Lastly, ahead of Turkey's launching of counter terrorism and hostage rescue operations in Dohuk in mid-February, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar visited Baghdad on January 18 reportedly to improve coordination with the Iraqi government against the U.S.-designated terrorist group the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).³⁸⁶ The PKK executed 13 Turkish hostages, 12 of whom were Turkish citizens the PKK kidnapped inside Turkey in 2015-2016, during the February Turkish military rescue attempt near the Gara Mountains region of northern Iraq.³⁸⁷

In January, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Iraq 20th from the bottom of 180 countries worldwide.

Endemic Corruption Plagues Iraq In Spite of Government's Investigations and Arrests

The DoS stated that corruption continues to be a serious problem in Iraq that impedes the Iraqi government's efforts to attract foreign investment.³⁸⁸ Corruption in Iraq also threatens the federal government's stability, denies Iraqis needed public services, and contributes to increased poverty and unemployment.³⁸⁹ In January, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Iraq 20th from the bottom of 180 countries worldwide.³⁹⁰

In March, a media organization reported on the results of its 6-month investigation into corruption at Iraq's official border crossings along the borders with Iran and Turkey and at the port of Umm Qasr in southern Basrah province.³⁹¹ According to the report, Iraq imported \$21 billion worth of non-oil goods in 2019, including food, electronic items, and natural gas. Customs duties on these imports were intended to supplement the Iraqi government's oil revenues.³⁹² However, political parties and militias controlled land and sea ports of entry and redirect many of these funds to their coffers. The report found that Iran-linked militias that intimidate Iraqi government officials are the prime beneficiaries of corruption at the border ports.³⁹³

In spite of these challenges, the Iraqi government reported some success in fighting corruption. On February 11, Iraq's Commission of Integrity issued its 2020 annual report stating it investigated more than 13,482 corruption cases in 2020 and recovered approximately \$482 million according to a media report.³⁹⁴ The report also stated that since 2012, \$1 billion has been recovered from outside Iraq along with 14 properties, 5 vehicles, and shares of several companies, according to a media report.³⁹⁵ The Commission reported that since February, 74 senior Iraqi officials have been accused of corruption, and 4 have been convicted.³⁹⁶ The DoS said that the KRG Commission on Integrity's 2019 report, which was released this quarter, cited 376 government employees indicted for corruption that year, of which 78 cases were investigated and 29 prosecuted.³⁹⁷

In February, the International Monetary Fund reported that Iraq's real GDP growth contracted by an estimated 11 percent in 2020 and projected the GDP would not return to pre-pandemic levels until 2024.

In mid-February, Iraq's Supreme Judicial Council announced the sentencing of a former Minister of Construction, Housing, Municipalities, and Public Works and an associate to two years in prison for corruption. They were convicted of corruption connected with Baghdad construction contracts in 2007 valued at \$25 million.³⁹⁸

The DoS said that it encourages Iraq's anticorruption activities. The DoS said that it sees e-government initiatives, such as an online portal for business registration, as one avenue to deter corruption. In addition, the DoS reported that the Department of Justice is assessing whether to provide technical assistance to Iraqi anticorruption efforts through its International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program.³⁹⁹

Iraqi Government Approves a 2021 Budget

The International Monetary Fund determined in October 2020 that Iraq's economy was in a recession, due in part to falling oil prices caused by pandemic-related decreases in travel and a lower demand for fuel.⁴⁰⁰ In February, the International Monetary Fund reported that Iraq's real GDP growth contracted by an estimated 11 percent in 2020 and projected the GDP would not return to pre-pandemic levels until 2024. According to the International Monetary Fund, Iraq's economy will likely recover gradually; however, the near-term outlook remains dim.⁴⁰¹

Despite increases in the price of oil since December, which have bolstered Iraqi government revenues, economic conditions for ordinary Iraqis remain poor. The price of Common Basket goods—a group of 13 commonly purchased food and nonfood items—increased by 13 percent compared with pre-pandemic baseline prices. COVID-19-related economic impacts and movement restrictions left a majority of Iraqi households with limited purchasing power and unable to meet basic needs, as did the devaluation of the Iraqi dinar in December.⁴⁰²

The Iraqi parliament approved a 2021 budget on March 31, after months of debate, overcoming major challenges and longstanding political disagreements.⁴⁰³ Until the budget was passed, Iraq's ministries operated with funds set at the levels of the 2019 budget.⁴⁰⁴ The 2021 budget totals \$89.7 billion with a projected deficit of \$19.8 billion.⁴⁰⁵ It anticipates \$60 billion in annual revenues, based on an expected oil price of \$45 per barrel and daily exports of 3.25 million barrels.⁴⁰⁶ The new budget retained the December 2020 dinar devaluation.⁴⁰⁷

Under the budget agreement, the KRG will receive 12.67 percent of the federal budget. In exchange, the KRG committed to produce 460,000 barrels per day, of which 250,000 barrels per day will be turned over to Iraq's state oil marketer for export.⁴⁰⁸

Kurdish leaders expressed cautious optimism about the new budget. KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani issued a statement thanking Prime Minister al-Kadhimi for his support. In the statement, Prime Minister Barzani urged his Iraqi government counterpart to abide by the obligations in the budget and restore payments from the federal government to the KRG as soon as possible. Prime Minister Barzani said the 2021 budget “restored a sliver of hope about the relationship [between the KRG] and the federal government.”⁴⁰⁹

In another positive indicator for the Iraqi economy, Fitch Ratings raised its outlook for Iraq from “Negative” (issued in April 2020) to “Stable” in March. Fitch made the change because

it upgraded its opinion of Iraq's ability to meet its debt obligations while providing potential investors with insight into the level of risk associated with investing in Iraq. Fitch said the December 2020 devaluation of the Iraqi dinar and the Iraqi government's October 2020 approval of a White Paper for Economic Reforms put Iraq on a potential route to stronger economic footing.⁴¹⁰ The White Paper provides a 3- to 5-year plan to achieve structural, financial, and administrative reform.⁴¹¹ Fitch predicted a lower deficit in relation to GDP, shrinking from 16.5 percent of GDP in 2020 to 5 percent in 2021, because of higher oil prices and the currency devaluation.⁴¹²

On February 13, Prime Minister al-Kadhimi and Minister of Finance Ali Allawi briefed to the Iraq Economic Contact Group, the DoS said.⁴¹³ Prime Minister al-Kadhimi established the group last October with the support of other ministers. It meets every 3 months to monitor economic progress.⁴¹⁴ The group includes representatives of the G-7 countries, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Iraqi Ministry of Finance, the Central Bank of Iraq, and the Iraqi parliament's Finance Committee.⁴¹⁵

During the February 13 briefing, Minister Allawi identified three key lines of effort that support Iraq's financial and economic reform: reform of the banking sector; reduction of the \$15 billion annual subsidies to provide electricity to Iraqi citizens; and civil service reform addressing salaries, pensions, and allowances. Minister Allawi reported that the Council of Ministers had approved the section of the White Paper defining executive oversight of the reform process.⁴¹⁶ In an effort to provide the Iraq Economic Contact Group members with better insight into Iraq's reform activities, the DoS reported that Minister Allawi reached out to the contact group to provide personnel to serve on Iraq's executive oversight directorate to support the economic and fiscal reform process.⁴¹⁷

Pope Francis Visits Iraq Amid Tight Security

In March, Pope Francis made a 4-day visit to Iraq, the first ever by a pontiff.⁴¹⁸ In advance of the visit, amid fears for Pope Francis' safety, Iraq deployed thousands of security forces trained to confront potential threats from street violence to bombings, according to media sources. During the months leading up to the visit, Iraq had experienced an increase in rocket and suicide attacks, including the first suicide bombing in Baghdad in 3 years.⁴¹⁹ Media sources reported that Iraq's Ministry of Interior created a security cordon to protect the Pope wherever he visited, including UAV coverage of his planned routes.⁴²⁰ The papal visit concluded without a serious security incident.⁴²¹

The Pope's visit included a historic meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, visits with Iraqi government officials, an interfaith meeting at the ancient city of Ur, trips to Mosul and Qaraqosh to meet with Christians in those cities, and a 10,000-person mass in Erbil.⁴²² Ninewa Governor Najim al-Jabouri told Iraqi media that the Pope's visit to Mosul was an "historic opportunity" to highlight the size and scope of the city's destruction during the ISIS occupation to the rest of the world.⁴²³

STABILIZATION

Since the territorial defeat of ISIS in Iraq in 2017, the U.S. Government has sought to accelerate restoration of essential services in liberated areas of Iraq that suffered devastation during ISIS occupation. In addition, the DoS said, the United States assists ethnic and religious minority communities and supports programs that help IDPs return safely and voluntarily to their homes of origin or settle in other destinations of their choosing. The U.S. Government seeks to establish stability in Iraq so that the Iraqi government can suppress future insurgencies and violent extremist organizations at the local government and law enforcement level.⁴²⁴ (See Table 5.)

Table 5.

DoS and USAID-funded Stabilization Activities in Iraq

Project Name/Duration/Budget	
<p><i>Funding Facility for Stabilization (FFS) and the Iraq Crisis Response and Resiliency Program (ICRRP)</i> July 2015–December 2023 \$419.5 million</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FFS: Restores essential services damaged or destroyed by ISIS to create the conditions for IDPs to return home. In 2020, USAID redirected funding through the FFS to support the COVID-19 response. • ICRRP: USAID-approved activities to respond to the water crisis in Basrah in 2019, which allocated \$5 million to rehabilitate seven water treatment plants.
<p><i>Shared Future</i> June 2018–September 2023 \$17.7 million</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotes the durable return for IDPs from the Ninewa Plain. • Works with youth, community, and religious leaders to increase mutual understanding, tolerance, and trust; improve vocational and leadership skills; and improve youth livelihood opportunities through targeted vocational training aimed at sustainable income generation.
<p><i>Iraq Community Resilience Initiative</i> Duration: June 2018–February 2022 \$92.2 million</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeks to improve conditions that allow for durable returns in areas liberated from ISIS, and to mitigate discrete, emergent challenges that threaten overall stability. • Increases stability through quick impact activities and strategic interventions in the Ninewa Plain, Mosul, Sinjar, and western Anbar.
<p><i>Safe Return</i> August 2018–September 2021 \$7.2 million</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aims to reintegrate IDPs from minority communities in the Ninewa Plain and Sinjar who are survivors of severe human-rights abuses. • Established three Safe Return Centers in Bashiqa, Qaraqosh, and Sinjar districts through local Iraqi partners. Safe Return Centers provide survivors with comprehensive medical, mental health, and psychosocial services, as well as assistance with livelihood recovery and legal support. USAID funding also supports the Smile of Hope torture treatment center in Mosul.
<p><i>Supporting the Return of Displaced Populations in Ninewa Plain and Western Ninewa</i> September 2018–September 2022 \$27.5 million</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports the reintegration of displaced populations of ethnic and religious minorities from Ninewa Plain and western Ninewa province through comprehensive packages of livelihood, community peacebuilding, education, and psychosocial activities. • Supports the rehabilitation of destroyed or damaged homes for displaced persons in Hamdaniya, Tel Kayf, and Bashiqa districts in the Ninewa Plain and provides support for small- to medium-sized enterprises in Bashiqa, Qaraqosh, and Sinjar districts. • Additional focus on creating long-term job opportunities through individual livelihood support, vocational training, job placement, internships, and business support packages.

Project Name/Duration/Budget	
<p><i>Building Community Resilience in Ninewa Post-ISIS</i> October 2018–September 2021 \$5 million</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enables the safe, voluntary, and sustained return for internally displaced communities from Ninewa Plain and western Ninewa province by addressing identified drivers of social and political discord and barriers to return in the communities of Bartella, Tal Afar, and Sinjar. • Seeks to forge intercommunal agreements and promote community reconciliation and resilience through research, identification of key stakeholders and ideological positions, and intra- and inter-community dialogues.
<p><i>Durable Communities and Economic Opportunities</i> September 2019–September 2024 \$125 million</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeks to build resilient, adaptive communities to advance economic wellbeing in target communities in Iraq. • Addresses underlying drivers of conflict, increases community leadership of inclusive local development, improves private sector networks, and increases micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprise development.
<p><i>Transitional Assistance to Internally Displaced Populations in Erbil, Iraq</i> October 2019–March 2022 \$6.8 million</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides cash assistance to support IDPs from Ninewa province in protracted displacement in Erbil and provides IDPs with targeted information and planning sessions to assist in the preparation for durable solutions for their families. • Additional focus on building the organizational capacity of local Iraqi organizations implementing program activities under the project.
<p><i>Strengthening the Ankawa Humanitarian Committee to Respond</i> October 2020–September 2022 \$2.5 million</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Builds the capacity of the Ankawa Humanitarian Committee while responding to the needs of IDPs in Iraq through institutional capacity-building and organizational development. • Implemented in partnership with the Transitional Assistance to Internally Displaced Populations in Erbil, Iraq activity.

Source: USAID ME Bureau, response to USAID OIG request for information, 12/11/2020; DoS, response to DoS OIG request for information, 3/24/2021.

USAID Obligates \$5 Million to Assist Yazidi Community and Kocho Survivors

On January 20, USAID reported that the agency obligated \$5 million to increase an International Organization for Migration (IOM) grant to assist the Yazidis, a religious and ethnic minority group in Iraq.⁴²⁵ The purpose of the grant is to memorialize the town of Kocho in Sinjar District by converting select sites into memorials and taking measures to protect a cemetery where the remains of individuals exhumed from Kocho’s mass graves are now being reburied.⁴²⁶ Additionally, the grant will support the identification of mass gravesites and the construction of 150 new housing units for Kocho survivors in a location nearby.⁴²⁷

Kocho was the site of one of the worst massacres during the ISIS occupation. ISIS killed more than 600 residents, enlisted boys as child soldiers, and sold women and girls into sexual slavery.⁴²⁸ Although Iraqi forces re-established control of Kocho in 2017, a majority of the community still resides in IDP camps in the Kurdistan region.⁴²⁹ According to USAID, the grant was increased at the direct request from survivors of Kocho who wished to return, but not to the exact site where the atrocities took place.⁴³⁰

The grant, which will be implemented in coordination with the Iraqi government and KRG, Nadia’s Initiative—a local Iraqi organization that advocates for survivors of sexual violence and their communities—and other Yazidi community leaders.⁴³¹ USAID said that funding from the United Nations Development Programme Funding Facility for Stabilization was also allocated in support of the relocation of Kocho and its community.⁴³²

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

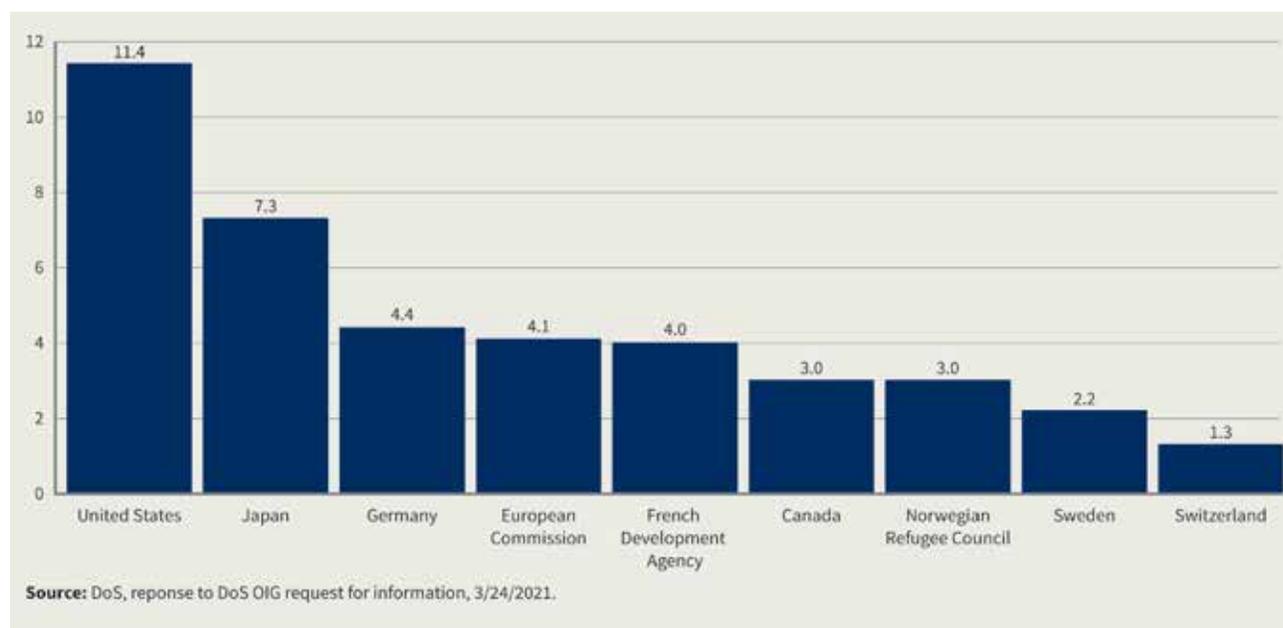
According to the United Nations, 1.7 million people in Iraq need acute humanitarian assistance.⁴³³ The DoS reported that at the end of the quarter, there were 1.27 million IDPs in Iraq, 210,000 of whom lived in crowded camps with limited or no access to proper healthcare or income-generating activities.⁴³⁴

During the quarter, the United States remained the top donor to the Humanitarian Response Plan for Iraq, a UN-coordinated inter-agency response mechanism to support humanitarian efforts in Iraq.⁴³⁵ (See Figure 4.) Since 2019, Coalition partners provided more than \$600 million to the Humanitarian Response Plan in 2019 and 2020.⁴³⁶

The DoS PRM reported that during the quarter, previously announced funding supported the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, IOM, the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund, and other implementing partner operations in Iraq.⁴³⁷ The assistance has been used for countrywide operations in Iraq to provide critical shelter, essential healthcare, emergency food assistance, and water, sanitation, and hygiene services.⁴³⁸ The funding has also been used to improve access to civil documentation and legal services, build the capacity of healthcare facilities, support protection activities including programs targeting gender-based violence, fund camp coordination and camp management, and to increase access to education and livelihoods opportunities.⁴³⁹ All IDP-related activities are focused on facilitating durable solutions—safe, dignified voluntary returns, local integration, and resettlement to another location or country.⁴⁴⁰ The funding also includes support for Iraqi refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.⁴⁴¹

Figure 4.

Top Donors to the Humanitarian Response Plan for Iraq in 2021, in \$ Millions



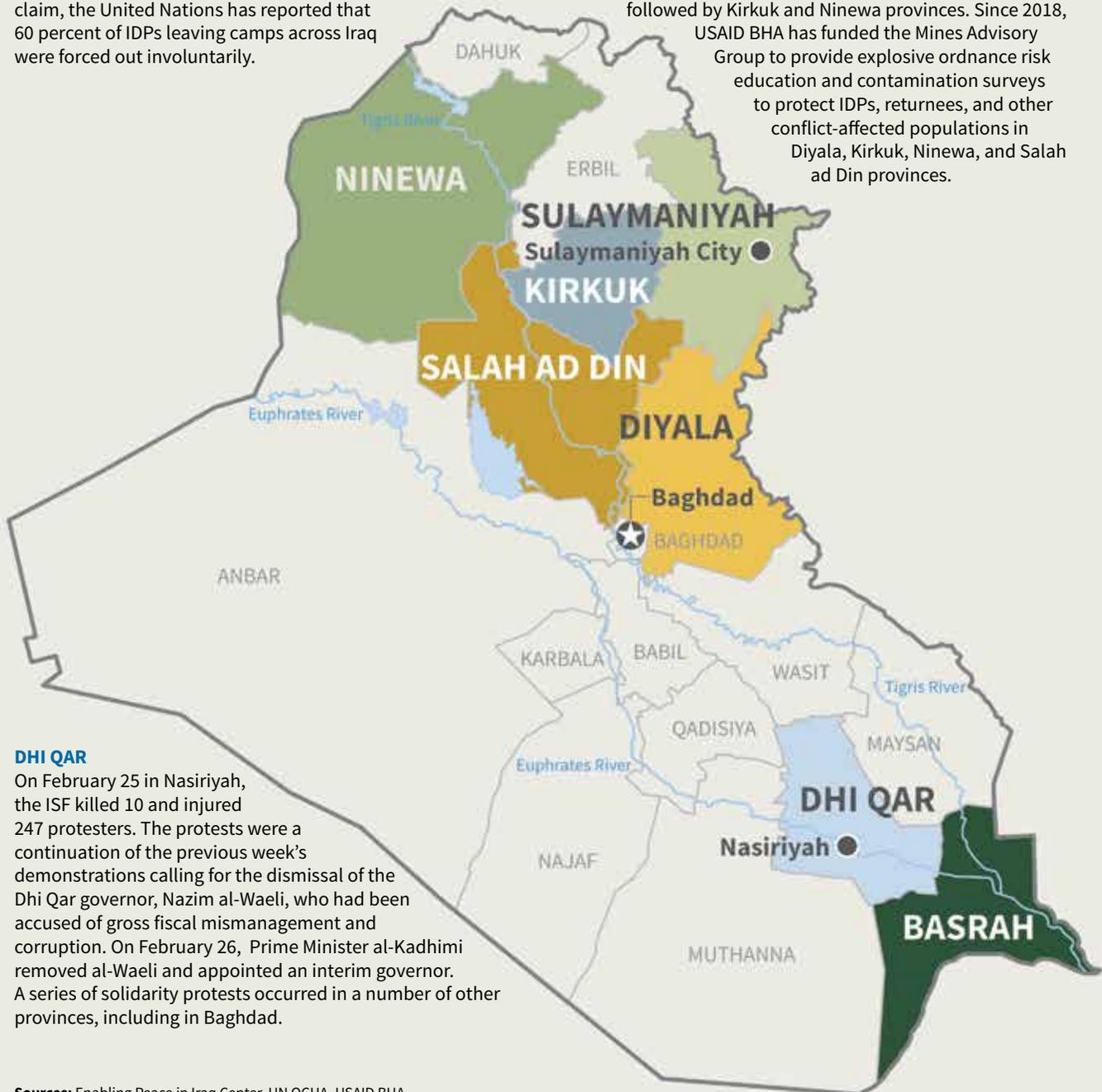
IRAQ: QUARTERLY FOCUS ON HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

SULAYMANIYAH, NINEWA

On January 15, the Iraqi Minister of Migration announced the closure of the Sulaymaniyah IDP camp. During the previous week, more than 5,000 IDPs moved out of the Sulaymaniyah camp as authorities accelerated plans for its closure. The Minister of Migration said that the camp closure would occur only after the voluntary departure of its residents. Despite this claim, the United Nations has reported that 60 percent of IDPs leaving camps across Iraq were forced out involuntarily.

BASRAH, DIYALA, KIRKUK, NINEWA, SALAH AD DIN

A January Assessment Capacities Project report estimated that 8.5 million people remain vulnerable to the risk of explosive remnants of war and mines in Iraq, which creates barriers to IDP returns and critical protection risks for exposed populations. Basrah province accounts for nearly 70 percent of areas with hazardous levels of explosive remnants of war, followed by Kirkuk and Ninewa provinces. Since 2018, USAID BHA has funded the Mines Advisory Group to provide explosive ordnance risk education and contamination surveys to protect IDPs, returnees, and other conflict-affected populations in Diyala, Kirkuk, Ninewa, and Salah ad Din provinces.



DHI QAR

On February 25 in Nasiriyah, the ISF killed 10 and injured 247 protesters. The protests were a continuation of the previous week's demonstrations calling for the dismissal of the Dhi Qar governor, Nazim al-Waeli, who had been accused of gross fiscal mismanagement and corruption. On February 26, Prime Minister al-Kadhimi removed al-Waeli and appointed an interim governor. A series of solidarity protests occurred in a number of other provinces, including in Baghdad.

Sources: Enabling Peace in Iraq Center, UN OCHA, USAID BHA.

Approximately 30 percent of those affected by recent camp closures did not return home; instead they became further displaced at secondary sites.

Iraqi Government Halts Closure of IDP Camps

In mid-October 2020, Iraq's Ministry of Displacement and Migration renewed efforts to close all remaining internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in areas controlled by the Iraqi government.⁴⁴² By February 2021, the Iraqi government had closed all but two IDP camps in areas under its control.⁴⁴³ According to the IOM's Displacement Tracking Mechanism, more than 7,200 people have been affected by camp closures since January 1, bringing the total number of affected persons to 46,800 since mid-October.⁴⁴⁴ (See Figure 5.)

Approximately 30 percent of those affected by recent camp closures did not return home; instead they became further displaced at secondary sites.⁴⁴⁵ USAID reported that IDPs in secondary displacement sites do not have access to the same levels of assistance as IDPs in formal camps.⁴⁴⁶ Of those IDPs who returned to their home village or neighborhood, 30 percent have not been able to secure safe housing and are now living in situations of acute vulnerability.⁴⁴⁷ A USAID implementer's assessments indicate that 33 percent of households forced out of camps were food insecure and 48 percent were vulnerable to food insecurity.⁴⁴⁸

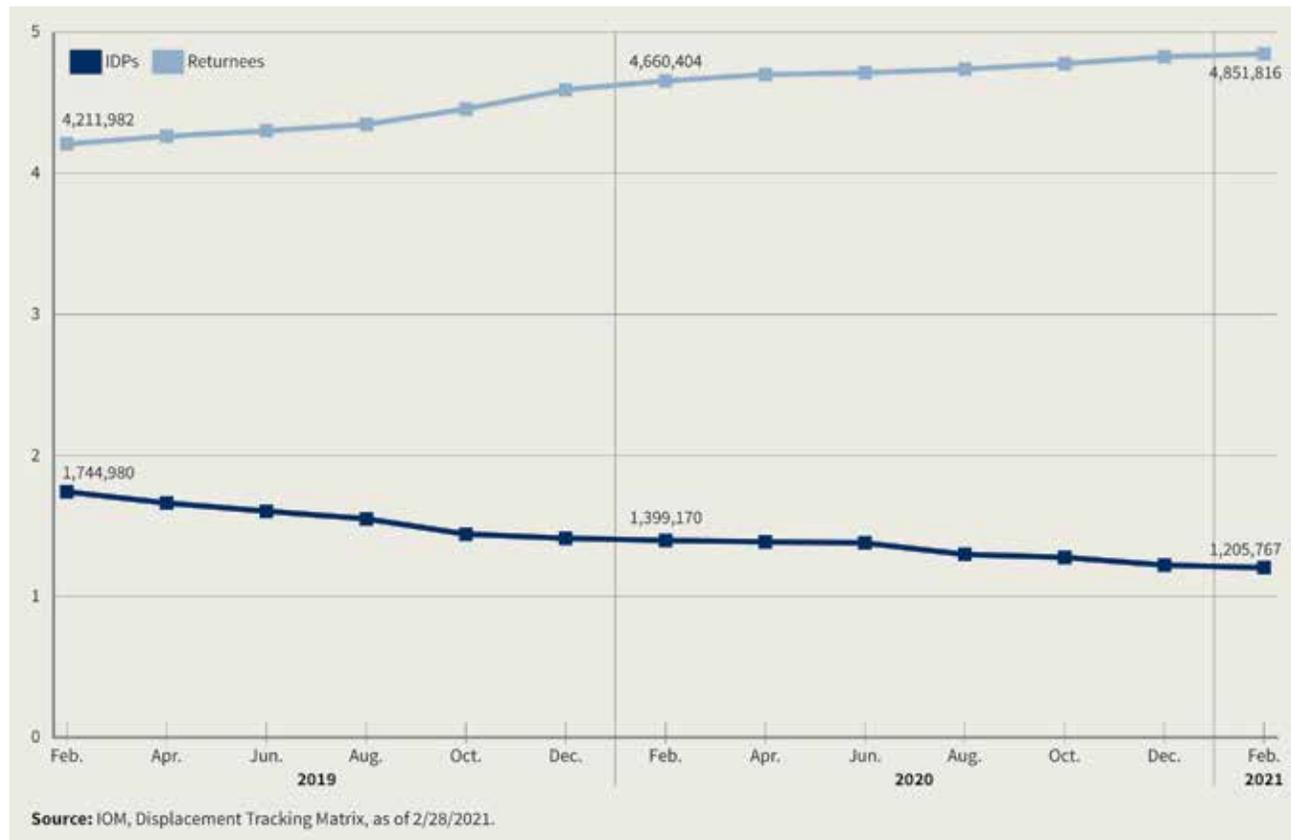
USAID reported that on January 21, the Iraqi government announced plans to close Ninewa province's Jed'dah 5 camp, one of two remaining IDP camps in Iraq.⁴⁴⁹ The U.S. Government, UN agencies, and other international humanitarian organizations expressed concern that the residents lack essential civil documentation, will face discrimination in receiving communities based on their perceived ties to extremist groups, and will lack adequate shelter and access to livelihood opportunities in their areas of origin.⁴⁵⁰ The Iraqi government subsequently agreed to delay the closure of the Jed'dah 5 camp and establish a joint planning process with the IOM and other organizations to coordinate future closures and support sustainable returns.⁴⁵¹ As of April 21, USAID reported that the camp closures in Iraq remain on hold.⁴⁵²

According to USAID, KRG authorities stated they had no plans for imminent closures of an additional 25 IDP camps, hosting nearly 178,000 people, which remain open in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region.⁴⁵³

The U.S. Embassy in Baghdad continued to engage with the Iraqi government on IDP camp closures to promote the safe and voluntary return of IDPs to their places of origin.⁴⁵⁴ Despite these efforts, the UN found that 60 percent of IDPs say their departure was involuntary.⁴⁵⁵

In particular, the U.S. Government and other humanitarian actors continued to encourage the Iraqi government to consider durable solutions beyond return, especially sustainable local integration of IDPs who do not wish to or cannot return to their areas of origin.⁴⁵⁶ The DoS said that to avoid protracted displacement of large numbers of Iraqis, the U.S. Government and others in the humanitarian community will continue to encourage the Iraqi government and the KRG to allow local integration as an option and address the primary concerns noted by those who are not returning: security, lack of livelihoods, and damage to housing.⁴⁵⁷ The DoS said that the humanitarian community is also looking at ways to increase host-community willingness and acceptance of integrating IDPs.⁴⁵⁸

Figure 5.

IDPs and Returnees in Iraq, February 2019–February 2021, in Millions

U.S. Government Partners Modify Programs to Support Informal Settlements

The DoS reported that U.S. Government partners are modifying their programs to move from in-camp settings to areas where IDPs have moved.⁴⁵⁹ UN agencies working on a proposal for humanitarian response in informal settlements with large numbers of IDPs.⁴⁶⁰ USAID said that 13,883 families are currently residing in informal settlements, according to verified numbers provided by the IOM.⁴⁶¹ USAID reported that implementers have requested changes in program funds to address evolving needs.⁴⁶² These changes include transferring child protection and water, sanitation, and hygiene activities from IDP camps to informal settlements; mobilizing remaining award resources to support multi-purpose cash assistance for displaced households; and redirecting hygiene kits to secondarily displaced people.⁴⁶³ One USAID implementer modified its protection response to combine static and mobile approaches in order to respond to the needs of beneficiaries.⁴⁶⁴

USAID said that given their insecure environment, IDPs face numerous mental health risks. USAID-funded mental health programming includes establishing community-based child protection committees and youth clubs where trainings are held; modifying existing funding



Following IOM-led training, 15 young people develop a community garden in Kirkuk. (USAID photo)

to adopt mobile approaches to addressing protection needs; and providing psychosocial support services to IDPs.⁴⁶⁵

New Access Letter Mechanism Benefits Humanitarian Actors

Authorized NGOs that conduct humanitarian activities in Iraq rely on “access letters” to move freely between provinces.⁴⁶⁶ In November 2019, the Iraqi government canceled the national access letter authorization process, preventing humanitarian actors from reaching and providing assistance to vulnerable people in federal Iraq.⁴⁶⁷

USAID reported that since the launch of the online access letter program by the Iraqi government in September 2020, humanitarian organizations have reported modest improvements in the humanitarian operating environment, with a 40 percent reduction in the number of recorded humanitarian access incidents in January 2021 compared to November 2020. Despite this improvement, USAID implementers continued to report barriers to the movement of personnel and goods between provinces, such as interference with subnational authorities, according to USAID.⁴⁶⁸

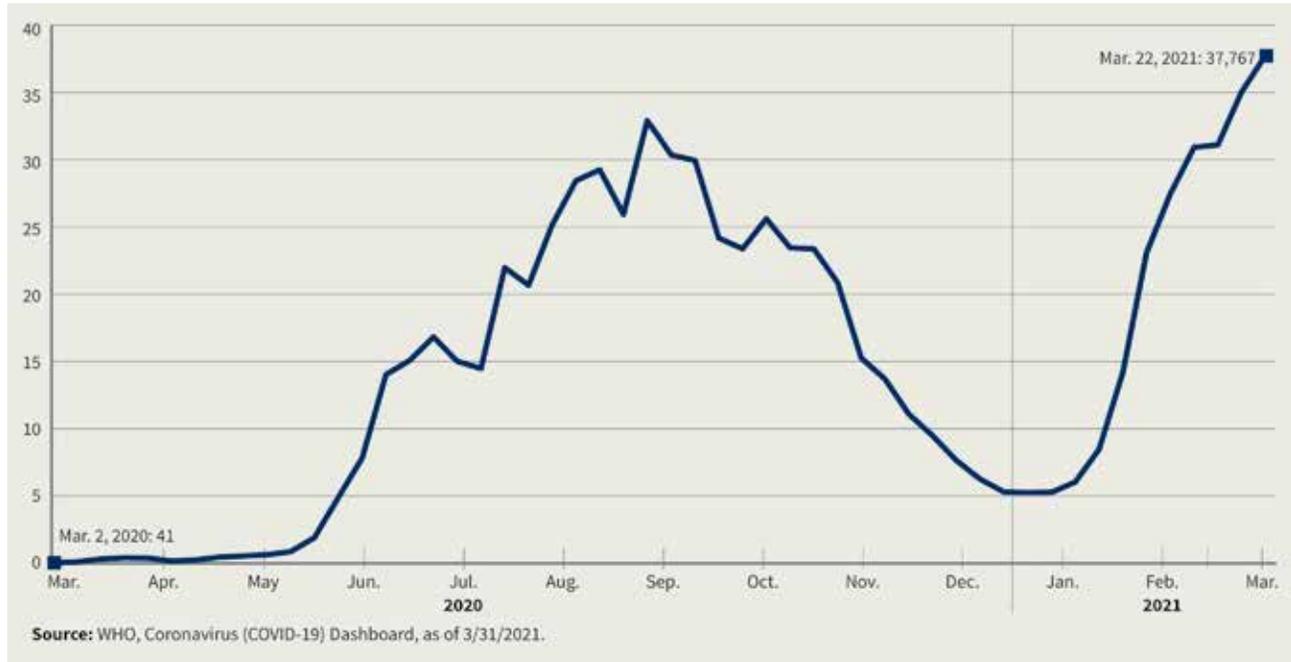
Iraq Begins COVID-19 Vaccination Program Amid Rising Cases

In early March, the Iraqi government announced that it had launched its COVID-19 inoculation program following delivery of 50,000 doses of vaccine from the Chinese firm Sinopharm (part of a 2-million dose purchase).⁴⁶⁹ Also in March, Iraq received the first 336,000 of 16 million doses of AstraZeneca’s COVID-19 vaccine through the global COVAX vaccine-sharing platform.⁴⁷⁰ The Iraqi government also approved the purchase of 1.5 million vaccine doses from Pfizer.⁴⁷¹

USAID reported that the Iraqi government plans to vaccinate an estimated 8 million people against COVID-19 by the end of 2021. The Iraqi government said that it will vaccinate IDPs and refugees as part of the general population, according to the same priority schedule.⁴⁷²

During the quarter, Iraq experienced a spike in COVID-19 cases, reaching more than 9,000 cases per week by the end of the quarter.⁴⁷³ (See Figure 6.) Baghdad province accounted for more than 30 percent of the cases, followed by Basrah, Erbil, Dahuk, and Sulaymaniyah

Figure 6.

Total Confirmed COVID-19 Cases in Iraq, March 2020–March 2021, in Thousands

provinces.⁴⁷⁴ The Iraqi government attributed this increase to the presence of a new variant of COVID-19 that spread from the United Kingdom to Iraq.⁴⁷⁵

During the quarter, the Iraqi government and the KRG re-imposed movement restrictions to mitigate further transmission of the virus.⁴⁷⁶ Security forces, health workers, journalists, diplomats, and UN personnel are exempt from movement restrictions.⁴⁷⁷ Airports and border crossing points have since reopened, with some restrictions.⁴⁷⁸ The DoS and USAID reported challenges implementing programs due to COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions.⁴⁷⁹ Partners delivered essential services to the extent possible, but many non-health project activities were suspended and partner staff are working remotely.⁴⁸⁰ Due to the restriction on gatherings, partners were still largely unable to conduct group services, such as awareness-raising sessions, informal education, livelihoods trainings, and group therapy.⁴⁸¹ The restrictions forced some USAID implementers with programming in federal Iraq to limit operations to certain days.⁴⁸² One-on-one medical appointments, counseling, and legal assistance resumed in limited circumstances while observing COVID-19 protocols.⁴⁸³

The DoS reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated health, economic, socio-political, and security crises in Iraq, which is a fragile state with 4.1 million people still in need of humanitarian assistance.⁴⁸⁴ USAID continued to address the impacts of COVID-19 through a variety of programming focused on health, protection, cash assistance, and water, sanitation, and hygiene.⁴⁸⁵ USAID reported that \$31.9 million of the \$32.5 million FY 2020 USAID programming through the BHA remains available.⁴⁸⁶







A Syrian Democratic Forces Soldier with a mounted .50 Cal. machine gun. (U.S. Army photo)

SYRIA

- 60 Security
- 71 Stabilization
- 78 Humanitarian Assistance

SYRIA

The U.S. Government continued this quarter to prioritize the following strategic objectives in Syria: the enduring defeat of ISIS and al-Qaeda and their affiliates in Syria; countering destabilizing Iranian activity in Syria; and a political resolution of the Syrian conflict as described within the parameters of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 (UNSCR 2254); and promoting the provision of life-saving humanitarian aid to Syrian civilians in need.⁴⁸⁷

During the quarter, the U.S. Government and international partners made limited progress toward these objectives. The Coalition maintained counterterrorism pressure and improved the capacity of partner forces in northeastern Syria, but ISIS continued to operate as an insurgency, most notably in parts of Syria outside of the Coalition's operating areas. Iran-aligned forces and other third parties continued efforts to destabilize Syria, constraining security and humanitarian activities. UN-led efforts to advance a political resolution to the Syrian conflict under UNSCR 2254 stalled after a fifth round of Constitutional Committee talks produced no progress. Meanwhile, international efforts to deliver the stabilization and humanitarian assistance necessary to build a foundation for long-term security in Syria remained constrained by the shifting security environment; an economic crisis; the coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic; and the closure of three UN-mandated cross-border aid access points due to Russian and Chinese vetoes at the UN Security Council.⁴⁸⁸

SECURITY

In Syria, approximately 900 U.S. military personnel support the counter-ISIS mission from bases in northeastern Syria and Tanf, a desert garrison located in southeastern Syria near the border with Iraq and Jordan.⁴⁸⁹ Coalition forces provide training and enabling support to vetted partner forces, predominantly the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the Eastern Syria Security Area (ESSA), the Coalition operating area in the northeastern provinces of Dayr az Zawr and Hasakah. U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) reported that Coalition operating locations and force numbers did not change significantly this quarter.⁴⁹⁰ While the



SELECTED KEY EVENTS, JANUARY 1, 2021–MARCH 31, 2021

JANUARY 1-9

ISIS kills at least 10 people near the al-Hayl gas field in Palmyra province

JANUARY 24

In a daytime attack, ISIS strikes a convoy carrying Syrian Republican Guards with small and heavy arms fire near a Syrian Army base in Dayr az Zawr province

JANUARY 3

ISIS attacks bus and oil tankers on a major highway in Hama province, killing 7 soldiers and 2 civilians and prompting a regime counter-offensive

FEBRUARY 3

ISIS fighters raid a regime base near the Tuwaynan oil fields in Homs province, killing 12 pro-regime forces and wounding 15



U.S. Soldiers conduct security operations in Syria. (U.S. Army photo)

FEBRUARY 25

Regime forces push ISIS out of al-Shoula in Dayr az Zawr province, following weeks of fighting

MARCH 20

Turkey launches airstrikes—the first in 17 months—against SDF positions around Ayn Issa in Raqqah province, amid heavy clashes and artillery exchanges between Turkish-backed and SDF forces

MARCH 7–9

Russian jets conduct nearly 200 airstrikes targeting ISIS in the Syrian Desert

MARCH 28

Following an increase in ISIS-linked murders at the al-Hol displacement camp, approximately 5,000 SDF Asayish forces launch weeklong security operation at the camp, detaining 123 suspects

MAR

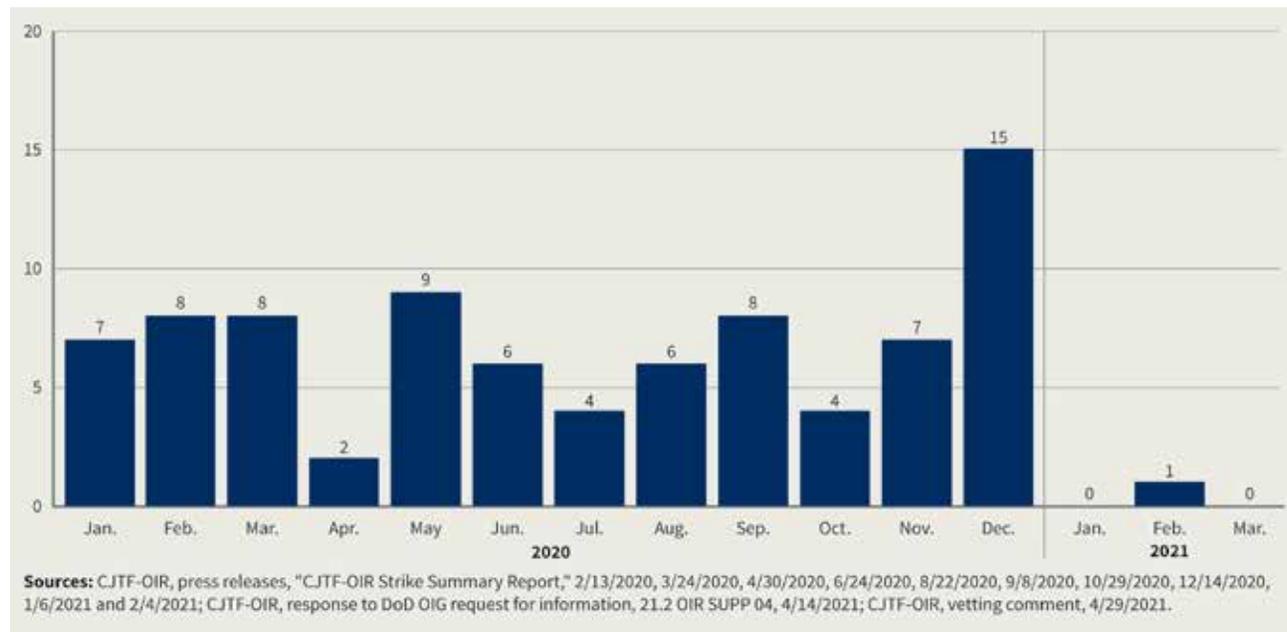
SDF continues to operate in other parts of northeastern Syria, U.S.-led Coalition forces have limited their ground movements to the ESSA and to Tanf since late 2019, after the Turkish incursion into northeastern Syria and redistribution of U.S. troops.

USCENTCOM described the Coalition operating environment in Syria as “an ever-changing, complex environment.”⁴⁹¹ Coalition forces operate in areas where Syrian regime, Russian, and Iranian-aligned forces also have a presence. The SDF operates in proximity to Turkish and Turkish-supported opposition force positions.⁴⁹² While many of these forces conduct some counter-ISIS operations, Syrian regime, Russian and Iran-aligned forces also seek to restrict movement of U.S. forces, and actions by Turkish-backed forces have drawn partner forces away from the counter-ISIS mission.⁴⁹³ In addition, while ISIS focused its higher profile attacks in Syrian regime-controlled areas, particularly in the central Syrian Desert, the group continues to conduct hit-and-run ambushes, IED attacks and assassinations against SDF forces and civilians in SDF areas of operation.⁴⁹⁴ Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) reported that “malign actors”—including ISIS, and Syrian regime or Iran-aligned forces—conduct harassing attacks and exploit local grievances to turn locals against Coalition forces.⁴⁹⁵

U.S. Army Soldiers fire illumination rounds from a 120mm mortar during base defense live fire training in Syria. (U.S. Army photo)



Figure 7.

Coalition Airstrikes Targeting ISIS in Syria, January 2020–March 2021

Further information about Coalition activities to train, advise, and enable Syrian partner forces is available in the classified appendix to this report.

COALITION ACTIVITY

Coalition Forces Enable, Advise, and Train SDF Forces in Support of Counter-ISIS Operations

Coalition forces continued to enable, advise, and train partner forces in Syria during the quarter. Coalition forces also accompanied the SDF on multiple counter-ISIS missions and continued to conduct patrols in the ESSA.⁴⁹⁶ USCENTCOM reported that its forces continued to operate Bradley Fighting Vehicles in the ESSA, where they deployed in August to “enhance the force protection of U.S. forces” and as well as to project force and reassure partners.⁴⁹⁷ USCENTCOM said that the vehicles are still deployed and “regularly employed in the ESSA.”⁴⁹⁸

In addition, CJTF-OIR stated that it conducted one airstrike against ISIS in Syria during the quarter.⁴⁹⁹ CJTF-OIR confirmed that the strike killed ISIS leader Abu Yassin al-Iraqi.⁵⁰⁰ CJTF-OIR reported that it conducted 26 airstrikes against ISIS targets during the previous quarter.⁵⁰¹ (See Figure 7.) The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitoring group, reported that al-Iraqi was an ISIS commander who headed ISIS’s oil network in Dayr az Zawr province, and continued to facilitate the passage of oil trucks after ISIS lost control of the province in 2019.⁵⁰² It said al-Iraqi was killed by a Coalition unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) strike.⁵⁰³

U.S. Efforts to Shape Public Opinion

As part of its military and stabilization activities in Iraq and Syria, the U.S. Government develops and disseminates digital news and entertainment content that contains targeted messaging about ISIS and other topics. This quarter, the DoS and USCENTCOM reported positive outcomes from two recent campaigns to change public opinion in Iraq and Syria.

GEC EFFORTS TO DISCREDIT ISIS LEADER

The Global Engagement Center (GEC)—the DoS office that integrates U.S. Government efforts to counter extremist messaging in Syria and Iraq—conducted an assessment of a joint U.S. Government and partner nation operation to delegitimize ISIS leader Amir Muhammad Sa’id Abdal Rahman al-Mawla (also known as Hajji Abdullah).⁵⁰⁴ Part of the operation, which occurred last quarter, included the release of U.S. interrogation reports of al-Mawla from his time in U.S. custody in 2008, which revealed that al-Mawla betrayed other ISIS members in an effort to further his own goals.⁵⁰⁵ The releases generated millions of unique views on social media. In the first 7 days following the reports’ release, there was a 137 percent increase in media coverage about al-Mawla, the GEC reported.⁵⁰⁶

A 30-day analysis of Google search results found that articles were more likely to refer to al-Mawla as “The Betrayer” and “Canary Caliph” after the operation.⁵⁰⁷ The assessment captured more than 400 articles in 34 countries that relayed the “al-Mawla is a traitor” narrative. The operation damaged al-Mawla’s credibility and ISIS’s broader appeal, the GEC concluded.⁵⁰⁸

ISIS publicly named al-Mawla caliph following the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019 following an “opaque” selection process that was not scrutinized by the broader Islamic community ISIS claims to represent, the GEC reported.⁵⁰⁹ Since al-Mawla’s ascension, ISIS tried to conceal his true identity and image (including giving him a new nom de guerre) within and outside the organization due to his controversial roles and views, including those on the excommunication and targeting of Muslims.⁵¹⁰

USCENTCOM STABILITY-THEMED PROGRAMS IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

USCENTCOM also reported positive results of its Dynamic Always-on Content (DAC) multimedia platforms in Iraq and Syria during the quarter. The DAC platforms deliver themed messaging through locally developed media products and an integrated network of digital dissemination platforms, with the objective of increasing resilience among Iraqi and Syrian audiences. During the quarter, the DAC delivered 860 products in Iraq containing stability themes through news stories, daily and cultural TV shows, and social media. The DAC delivered 1,164 stability-themed products in Syria during the quarter. USCENTCOM reported increased viewership and engagement rates with these platforms during the quarter compared to previous periods.⁵¹¹

To assess the effectiveness of the platform, USCENTCOM administered a 2,000-person survey in Iraq (Ninewa, Baghdad, and Salah ad Din provinces) and another 2,000-person survey in Syria (Raqqa province). The survey respondents reported favorable opinions on topics related to resiliency. For example, survey respondents in Iraq who were frequent consumers of DAC content reported that they were 25 percent more likely to have changed the way they get information to protect against fake news and 10 percent more likely to “definitely” participate in national elections. Syrians exposed to DAC content were 11 percent more likely to say they had changed the way they get their news and 23 percent more likely to agree that their local civic council has a positive impact on their local community.⁵¹²

During the quarter, HAT and SDF Commando forces conducted 51 unilateral and partnered operations against ISIS targets, prioritizing the capture of ISIS weapons facilitators and smugglers.

PARTNER FORCE ACTIVITIES AND CAPABILITIES

SDF Increases Counter-ISIS Operations During the Quarter

During the quarter, the SDF stepped up the pace of its activities against ISIS in response to an increase in ISIS activity in the Middle Euphrates River Valley (MERV).⁵¹³ CJTF-OIR reported that the SDF disrupted smuggling lines and enemy activity through more daytime patrols, traffic control points, and intelligence sharing.⁵¹⁴

Two SDF units are responsible for most targeted operations against ISIS: the Hezen Anti-Terror (HAT) force and the SDF Commandos.⁵¹⁵ CJTF-OIR described the HAT force as the “primary strike force for the internal security forces.”⁵¹⁶ CJTF-OIR said that the HAT force is “trained and capable” of conducting time-sensitive raids to kill or capture mid-level targets, but continues to depend on Coalition intelligence support during the quarter.⁵¹⁷ Although the HAT is capable of conducting its own basic skills training without Coalition support, the force is eager for more Coalition training and equipment, according to CJTF-OIR.⁵¹⁸

The SDF Commandos, which CJTF-OIR described as the “premier” anti-terrorism strike force, are part of the SDF’s conventional force.⁵¹⁹ SDF Commando units conduct detention, maneuver, patrol, and large-scale clearance operations.⁵²⁰ CJTF-OIR assessed that the SDF Commandos are “capable but lack some capacity.”⁵²¹ CJTF-OIR said SDF Commando units are still working to advance their capabilities, are eager to learn from the Coalition advisors, and aim to be the SDF’s main “finish force.”⁵²²

During the quarter, HAT and SDF Commando forces conducted 51 unilateral and partnered operations against ISIS targets, prioritizing the capture of ISIS weapons facilitators and smugglers.⁵²³ Of those operations, 17 were conducted unilaterally by the SDF, and 33 were partnered with Coalition forces.⁵²⁴ The operations, along with one Coalition airstrike, resulted in the capture of 42 targeted individuals, detention of 170 other individuals, and 6 enemies killed.⁵²⁵ An additional 123 detentions resulted from the late March operation at al-Hol.⁵²⁶ In the majority of the partnered operations, Coalition forces did not accompany local partners during the mission, but provided support from a remote position.⁵²⁷ CJTF-OIR reported that during the quarter, the SDF did not conduct any operations outside of the ESSA (referred to as “over the horizon” operations) where the SDF operates unilaterally on occasion.⁵²⁸

USCENTCOM reported that the local population in northeastern Syria generally views the SDF as an “effective security provider” and favors the SDF over other actors, including the Syrian regime and its partners.⁵²⁹ USCENTCOM said that in some parts of Dayr az Zawr province, public opinion regarding the SDF’s ability to provide security weakened following the assassinations of tribal leaders, municipal leaders, and other influential figures in the region. Nevertheless, the local SDF-aligned administration has addressed priority concerns of tribal leaders in the area, including the return and reintegration of displaced persons from the al-Hol camp.⁵³⁰ (For more on return and reintegration of displaced persons in Syrian IDP camps, see pages 75-77.)

SDF Improves Operational Planning, Continues to Rely on Coalition for Intelligence

In addition to enabling SDF counter-ISIS operations, Coalition forces work with the SDF to improve their ability to plan operations and perform other tasks that contribute to the effectiveness of operations. CJTF-OIR reported that, during the quarter, the SDF continued to increase its capabilities to plan and conduct unilateral operations, emphasizing basic counter-insurgency techniques.⁵³¹ These techniques included conducting joint tactical ground movements with partner forces, establishing snap traffic control points, and conducting daytime patrols to deter or disrupt smuggling and other “nefarious” activity while legitimizing the SDF among the local population.⁵³²

Development of the SDF’s intelligence capabilities remains a persistent challenge. The SDF has no aircraft, and relies mostly on the human intelligence it collects to support its operations. The SDF is unable to conduct persistent surveillance or maintain situational awareness during its operations without the support of Coalition ISR.⁵³³ CJTF-OIR said that under current conditions, it is unlikely that the SDF could operate and maintain ISR systems, and thus will continue to rely on Coalition ISR assets.⁵³⁴ However, CJTF-OIR reported that the SDF is able to effectively interpret and act on intelligence once received.⁵³⁵ According to CJTF-OIR, a lack of trust between SDF units persists, but Coalition forces have observed an increased willingness to share information.⁵³⁶

CJTF-OIR said that Coalition forces trained the SDF in operational skills such as marksmanship, use of heavy weapons, and mounted maneuver (vehicle operations). It also provided instruction in drone reconnaissance, medical techniques, and communications. Coalition forces also provided explosive ordnance disposal training, which focused on IED identification, evidence exploitation, and common emplacement in urban environments.⁵³⁷ CJTF-OIR said that it focused on “training the trainers” to help the SDF develop and conduct training independently.⁵³⁸

During an exercise with the SDF in March, U.S. Army and Air Force personnel trained SDF forces to direct and coordinate airstrikes with U.S. Army AH-64 Apache attack helicopters. CJTF-OIR confirmed reporting that U.S. forces trained the SDF to relay intelligence to U.S. joint tactical air controllers in order to improve SDF capabilities while also reducing civilian or friendly forces casualties.⁵³⁹

CJTF-OIR Divestments Help Improve SDF Detention Facilities Holding 10,000 ISIS Fighters

CJTF-OIR reported that the SDF continues to hold approximately 10,000 ISIS fighters in 19 detention facilities in the ESSA.⁵⁴⁰ The detainees include 8,000 Iraqi and Syrian nationals and 2,000 fighters from other countries. Almost 500 are women.⁵⁴¹ Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy–International Security Affairs (OUSD(P) ISA) said that the “most durable long-term course of action” regarding the disposition of ISIS detainees is to repatriate them to their home countries. In the interim, continued U.S. support for SDF detention capabilities helps “buy time for diplomatic progress on the issue by helping to mitigate the risk of breakouts from SDF detention facilities that could fuel ISIS’s efforts to reconstitute itself,” OUSD(P) ISA said.⁵⁴²

CJTF-OIR said that Coalition forces trained the SDF in operational skills such as marksmanship, use of heavy weapons, and mounted maneuver (vehicle operations).

CJTF-OIR said that a majority of the ISIS detainees are being held in two SDF-run facilities in Hasakah province.⁵⁴³ Those, and nearly all the other SDF detention facilities holding ISIS detainees, are makeshift. There is only one purpose-built SDF detention facility which CJTF-OIR said is the location with the greatest long-term viability.⁵⁴⁴ The SDF operates one youth rehabilitation center and plans to construct a second youth facility with Coalition support, CJTF-OIR said.⁵⁴⁵

CJTF-OIR reported that continued divestment of equipment to the SDF through the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) helps increase physical security and capacity at the remaining ad-hoc facilities.⁵⁴⁶ Further investments in facilities, equipment, and training during the quarter enabled the SDF to improve moderately its ability to manage the detention facilities.⁵⁴⁷ OUSD(P) ISA said that previous divestments included closed-circuit television systems and detainee transport vehicles, and that divestment of information technology equipment is pending.⁵⁴⁸ During the quarter, the DoD also provided food, water, fuel, and sanitation support to improve detainee living conditions. The DoD plans to deliver COVID-19 testing equipment in the third quarter of FY 2021.⁵⁴⁹

OUSD(P) ISA said that the DoD continued to work with other U.S. Government departments and agencies to facilitate the repatriation of non-Syrian ISIS fighters to their countries of origin. In certain circumstances, the DoD may provide logistical support to these missions, enabling progress on this critical issue.⁵⁵⁰

OUSD(P) ISA reported that there were multiple repatriations of ISIS fighters during the quarter, including a U.S.-supported operation that focused on repatriation of a number of Kazakh nationals from SDF custody.⁵⁵¹ OUSD(P) ISA said that incremental progress has been made in repatriation efforts, but the risk of riots, breakouts, and other disturbances at SDF facilities remains, and could potentially enable ISIS fighters to return to the group's ranks.⁵⁵²

During the quarter, U.S. forces conducted joint patrols with the SDF Critical Petroleum Infrastructure Guard (CPIG) force, vetted guard forces that protect critical oil infrastructure sites across the ESSA, some vulnerable to ISIS attacks.

Coalition Conducts Joint Patrols with Critical Petroleum Infrastructure Guard Forces

During the quarter, U.S. forces conducted joint patrols with the SDF Critical Petroleum Infrastructure Guard (CPIG) force, vetted guard forces that protect critical oil infrastructure sites across the ESSA, some vulnerable to ISIS attacks.⁵⁵³ CJTF-OIR said that U.S. forces are not currently training the CPIG forces.⁵⁵⁴ However, they do visit critical petroleum infrastructure locations across the ESSA approximately 3 to 5 times a week to assess CPIG forces' defenses.⁵⁵⁵

CJTF-OIR began working with the SDF on the CPIG force in early 2020, following the consolidation of U.S. forces in northeastern Syria, and a Coalition focus at the time on helping the SDF protect oil infrastructure from ISIS.⁵⁵⁶ Citing the CPIG commander, CJTF-OIR said that approximately 2,500 trained CPIG personnel are currently deployed across the ESSA.⁵⁵⁷ Their role is to prevent ISIS from damaging, seizing control of, and exploiting petroleum infrastructure sites.⁵⁵⁸ CJTF-OIR said there were no kinetic engagements during joint U.S.-CPIG patrols, but the CPIG forces reported sporadic attacks during the quarter, including small arms fire and the sabotage of isolated petroleum infrastructure sites.⁵⁵⁹

CJTF-OIR said that CPIG operations are limited to conducting patrols and hardening defenses, and there was no significant change in CPIG capabilities from the previous quarter.⁵⁶⁰ No new guards were trained or deployed during the quarter due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.⁵⁶¹

According to CJTF-OIR, the objective of the joint patrols is to help improve CPIG capabilities and encourage them to patrol more frequently and independently.⁵⁶² CJTF-OIR said U.S. forces conducted weekly patrols with the CPIG forces in the northern sector of the ESSA around Qamishli, where the guard forces do not conduct independent patrols due to the proximity of the Turkish border.⁵⁶³ U.S. forces also conducted periodic joint patrols with the CPIG forces in the MERV.⁵⁶⁴ CJTF-OIR said the CPIG forces are able to conduct independent patrols in the central and southern sectors of the ESSA, but a lack of vehicles limited their activities.⁵⁶⁵

CJTF-OIR said U.S. forces are assessing opportunities to divest materiel to the CPIG—including vehicles and basic defensive materials to defend petroleum sites—in areas most at risk of ISIS attack.⁵⁶⁶

**U.S. Soldiers
conduct security
operations in Syria.
(U.S. Army photo)**



Role of Third Parties in Syria

PRO-REGIME AND RUSSIAN FORCES STRUGGLE TO CONTAIN ISIS ATTACKS IN SYRIAN DESERT

The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) reported that pro-Syrian regime and Russian forces struggled to eliminate ISIS cells operating in the Syrian Desert this quarter.⁵⁶⁷ Despite concerted counter-ISIS operations, pro-regime and Russian forces were not able to stem the gradual escalation of ISIS attacks, which the DIA reported occurred almost daily.⁵⁶⁸ According to the Institute for the Study of War, Syrian regime forces and their Russian and Iranian partners have been unwilling to commit forces in the Syrian Desert “at the scale necessary to stem ISIS activity.”⁵⁶⁹

Pro-regime and Russian forces conducted multiple operations against ISIS in the Syrian Desert during the quarter, particularly in Dayr az Zawr and Homs provinces, the DIA reported.⁵⁷⁰ Russian aircraft conducted hundreds of airstrikes against ISIS in Aleppo, Hama, and Raqqah provinces in support of the Syrian regime.⁵⁷¹ During the second week in March, for example, Russian jets executed approximately 190 airstrikes in three days in the Syrian Desert, targeting ISIS vehicles and hideouts in caves and bunkers.⁵⁷²

One research group that monitors ISIS activity reported that pro-regime force operations around al-Shoula in Dayr az Zawr province in February appeared to succeed in pushing ISIS from the area.⁵⁷³ However, despite Syrian regime efforts to secure major highways that run through the Syrian Desert, ISIS continued to conduct attacks against oil tankers and convoys along transportation routes in the region.⁵⁷⁴

RUSSIA CONTINUES TO VIOLATE DE-CONFLICTION PROCESS, SEEKS TO INCREASE INFLUENCE

During the quarter, Russia continued to violate the de-confliction processes that the Coalition and Russia established in northeastern Syria to prevent inadvertent escalations.⁵⁷⁵ CJTF-OIR reported that while Russian forces largely adhered to the de-confliction processes, violations increased slightly compared to the previous quarter.⁵⁷⁶ Types of violations include the addition of an extra vehicle to pre-arranged patrols and not providing proper notification of military transport and fighter aircraft moving from Russia to Syria.⁵⁷⁷ CJTF-OIR said these violations did not pose a threat to Coalition forces.⁵⁷⁸

Russian forces have been operating in larger numbers and closer proximity to Coalition forces in northeastern Syria since the 2019 Turkish incursion, when Russian forces moved into parts of northeastern Syria vacated by U.S. forces.⁵⁷⁹ The DIA reported that Russia seeks to harass and constrain U.S. forces, with the ultimate goal of compelling U.S. forces to withdraw from northeastern Syria.⁵⁸⁰

During the quarter, Russia also continued to try to assert its influence with the SDF and engage with the local population in northeastern Syria.⁵⁸¹ USCENTCOM reported that Russia sought to present itself as a broker for ongoing tensions between the SDF and Turkish-aligned forces, but the SDF continued to reject Russian offers.⁵⁸²

(continued on next page)

Role of Third Parties in Syria *(continued from previous page)*

Russia also helped broker a cease-fire after skirmishes erupted in January between pro-regime militias and SDF internal security forces in Hasakah province following weeks of rising tensions, according to media reports.⁵⁸³ The reports stated that local SDF officials said that regime forces blocked essential goods from reaching Kurdish neighborhoods in Aleppo province. In response, SDF forces surrounded pro-regime forces and headquarters in the cities of Hasakah and Qamishli.⁵⁸⁴ Under the Russia-mediated deal, both sides agreed to lift their blockades.⁵⁸⁵

AMID HEAVY FIGHTING, TURKISH JETS FIRE ON SDF POSITIONS NEAR AREA OF 2019 INCURSION

Tensions near Syria's northern border with Turkey remained high during the quarter, with clashes and artillery exchanges between the SDF and Turkey-aligned forces. Turkey views the SDF with deep suspicion. Specifically, Turkey views the People's Protection Units (YPG), which constitutes a significant part of the SDF, as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The PKK has waged a long and violent insurgency inside Turkey and against Turkish interests in the region and is a U.S.-designated terrorist organization.⁵⁸⁶ Turkey said its 2019 incursion aimed to push the YPG from its southern border and tensions have continued since.⁵⁸⁷

As in the previous quarter, the DIA reported that although Turkish officials continue to publicly threaten further military incursions into Syria, it did not see any indications during the quarter that Turkey is preparing its military for a major operation in northeastern Syria.⁵⁸⁸

IRAN AND IRAN-BACKED FORCES MAINTAIN PRESENCE, ABILITY TO STRIKE U.S. FORCES IN SYRIA

According to the DIA, Iran and Iran-aligned forces, notably the Iraqi militia Kata'ib Hezbollah, continued to maintain positions in Syria during the quarter while advancing key goals that include expelling U.S. forces from the country. The DIA assessed that Iran-aligned forces probably retain the ability to conduct low-level rocket and IED attacks against U.S. interests in Syria with little warning, while Iran separately maintains the ability to conduct more complex attacks using advanced weapons. The DIA said that the February 25 U.S. strikes against a Kata'ib Hezbollah position in Syria would likely raise the risk of retaliation against the U.S. presence in Iraq and Syria into the next quarter.⁵⁸⁹

Publicly available sources and press reporting indicate that Iran has not minimized its presence in Syria, despite economic and military pressure to abandon its support for the Syrian regime and its larger regional goals.⁵⁹⁰ According to public reporting, Iran-aligned militias maintain forces throughout Syria including at strategic points along the country's borders with Lebanon, Iraq, and Israel. Amid Syria's dire economic situation, Iranian forces offer financial and social incentives to encourage Syrian Sunnis to convert to Shiism, an effort aimed at ensuring Tehran's long-term influence.⁵⁹¹ The extent of Syria's dependence on Iranian support was evident at the end of this quarter, as Syria's oil ministry began rationing fuel due to the blockage of the Suez Canal that briefly delayed Iranian shipments of oil.⁵⁹²

Areas liberated from ISIS suffered shortfalls in essential services such as water and electricity, insufficient health services, and the lack of education and income.

STABILIZATION

U.S. stabilization efforts in Syria during the quarter included work with local governance actors, civil society, and Syrian communities to support education, community security, independent media, civil society, social cohesion, transitional justice, accountability, restoration of essential services, and a political resolution to the conflict in line with UNSCR 2254, the DoS reported.⁵⁹³ The DoS said that stabilization assistance is key to preventing an ISIS resurgence in northeastern Syria and counters the destabilizing influence of Iran, Russia, and the regime in the area.⁵⁹⁴

The DoS and USAID face many challenges in implementing stabilization programming in Syria. They operate with a limited budget following the March 2018 Presidential freeze of stabilization assistance for Syria.⁵⁹⁵ Although the freeze has been lifted, and some stabilization assistance was obligated during the freeze, the budgetary impact will be felt through 2022 due to the nature of U.S. budget cycles.⁵⁹⁶ In addition, movement restrictions and insecurity limit where U.S. stabilization programs can operate, the USAID Middle East Bureau said.⁵⁹⁷ The presence of Iranian, Russian, and Syrian regime forces is another destabilizing factor in northeastern Syria that impedes USAID's programming.⁵⁹⁸ Expanding COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions in northeastern Syria present another challenge to U.S. stabilization activities.⁵⁹⁹

Areas liberated from ISIS suffered shortfalls in essential services such as water and electricity; insufficient health services; and the lack of education and income.⁶⁰⁰ The province was hardest hit by the final battle against ISIS's "caliphate" in 2019 and now requires significant recovery efforts to establish essential services. In addition, many former residents of the al-Hol displaced persons camp are returning to Dayr az Zawr and require additional resources to support their reintegration.⁶⁰¹ In addition, a depreciated currency and shortages of key commodities like bread and fuel led to nationwide economic hardship. These conditions gave U.S. adversaries opportunities to exploit grievances and mobilize populations against the SDF and the Coalition, but ongoing stabilization programming provides a critical counterweight, the DoS reported.⁶⁰²

U.S. Stabilization Programs Continue, but Face Funding Limits

This quarter, the DoS Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs Office of Assistance Coordination (DoS NEA AC) reported that all U.S. stabilization programs in northeastern Syria continued during the quarter, although some DoS NEA AC programs operated at reduced levels of programming to preserve limited funding.⁶⁰³ Table 6 details USAID-funded stabilization programs that were active during the quarter.

The DoS reported that its civil society projects supported more than 25 Syrian civil society partners across northeastern Syria during the quarter.⁶⁰⁴ This support included training and coaching sessions for local civil society organizations that focused on reintegration, strategic planning, gender equity, and sustainability. In addition, the civil society partners participated in a virtual summit designed to enhance collaboration among partners, inform future programming, and help build a civil society coalition that can more effectively

engage with local authorities, the DoS reported.⁶⁰⁵ The DoS also funded programming at independent media outlets across northeastern Syria that promote moderate voices, diversity, and coexistence.⁶⁰⁶

DoS NEA AC also supported the COVID-19 pandemic response in northeastern Syria through water rehabilitation and educational projects, provided personal protective

Table 6.

USAID-funded Stabilization Activities in Syria, January 2021–March 2021

Program	Accomplishments in FY21 Q2
<i>USAID Essential Services, Good Governance, and Economic Recovery Project</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established an oxygen bottling plant supplying Dayr az Zawr hospitals, COVID-19 treatment facilities, and private patients with medical-grade oxygen. Rehabilitated a hospital to serve 350,000 residents of southern Dayr az Zawr. Installed electrical transformers at seven agricultural irrigation stations, allowing consistent water delivery to farmers in the lower MERV. Rehabilitated eight agricultural nurseries in the lower MERV supplying pomegranate farmers with saplings. Rehabilitated a water filtration station in Hasakah province that supplies 420,000 residents with clean drinking water. Rehabilitation of four schools in Hasakah province, providing 230 students with safe and comfortable learning environments.
<i>Syria Livelihoods Program</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continued to support vocational training and support to small businesses in the construction, telecommunications, and other skilled trades.
<i>Restoring Livelihoods through Agricultural Revitalization</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completed distribution of livestock voucher kits to 1,200 households (to purchase two or three sheep and fodder) in Raqqa, Northern Aleppo, and Dayr az Zawr. Completed beneficiary selection and planning for summer season agricultural kit distribution. Trained groups of paravets and supplied them with basic veterinary kits. Organized and trained groups of farmers in preparation for the summer vegetable kit distribution. Rehabilitated the al-Hamrat secondary canal (approximately 0.5km of canal) to bring water to 900 farmers in the four al-Hamrat villages in al-Karama sub-district of Raqqa district. Continued to support vocational training and support to small businesses in the construction, telecommunications, and other skilled trades.
<i>Supporting Livelihoods in Syria</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completed a mid-season assessment of the wheat season to assess likely crop losses and gauge farmers' concerns. Issued contracts for the rehabilitation of 10 bakeries (5 in Hasakah and 5 in Dayr az Zawr). Work to begin next quarter.
<i>Economic Management for Stabilization</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This new program will provide direct technical assistance and advice to economic managers of the SNES to help them address issues related to the economic crisis. The program is in an analysis phase and work planning. Completed work planning and built relationships (virtually) with SNES officials. Provided technical advice on tax and customs laws, monetary/currency policy options, subsidy rationalization, and other technical economic issues.

Source: USAID ME Bureau, response to USAID OIG request for information, 3/26/2021.

The DoS and USAID have notified Congress of their intent to program a total of \$49.95 million in FY 2020 funds to support Syria stabilization.

equipment and training to internal security forces, and supported independent media stations in producing critical public health information broadcasts for reaching communities in northern Syria. Some of this work was funded through the COVID-19 pandemic supplemental fund. In addition, DoS NEA AC programmed funds contributed by a Coalition partner to rehabilitate points of entry into northeastern Syria and equip them with medical and nonmedical supplies to screen for COVID-19.⁶⁰⁷

However, the 2018 presidential freeze on stabilization funding for Syria has limited the reach of some U.S. programs, the DoS said.⁶⁰⁸ The USAID Middle East Bureau said that, absent additional funding, many USAID-funded stabilization projects will close soon. Although funding for USAID's Southern Syria Assistance Platform will run out in mid-2021, USAID reported that the release of FY 2020 funds will extend the projects until the end of the year. For USAID START, two stabilization activities will run out of funding by the end of April 2021. With recently released FY 2020 funding, the wheat value chain activity will continue at reduced levels until September 2021. The vegetable value chain program will run out of funds before FY 2021 funding becomes available and will likely close early. USAID reported that START is applying for supplemental resources internal to USAID, to keep programs open.⁶⁰⁹

Congress has appropriated International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) funding for the DoS's Office of Global Criminal Justice to support transitional justice and accountability programming, including in Syria.⁶¹⁰ In coordination with the Office of Foreign Assistance and in consultation with Congress, the DoS and USAID identified additional funding for Syria stabilization in FY 2019 following then-President Trump's announcement of \$50 million for Syria stabilization, and in FY 2020.⁶¹¹

For funds appropriated in FY 2019, the DoS and USAID notified Congress of their intent to program a total of \$54.5 million to support Syria stabilization, including \$43 million in ESF funding, \$6.5 million in INCLE funding, and \$5 million in Non-proliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs-Conventional Weapons Destruction funding. For funds appropriated in FY 2020, the DoS and USAID have notified Congress of their intent to program a total of \$49.95 million to support Syria stabilization, including \$42.75 million from ESF and \$7.2 million from INCLE funds. This funding became available after Congressional notification was completed on March 25. The DoS said it has not finalized its FY 2021 Syria stabilization funding levels.⁶¹²

Economic Crisis Impacts USAID Stabilization Programming & Partners

Many Syrians have lost their jobs due to the devaluation of the Syrian pound, and unemployment has begun to impact stabilization programming implementation. USAID reported that some participants in vocational training activities have considered leaving the training to find paid work.⁶¹³

Rapidly changing prices also impacted programs doing rehabilitation work or distribution of agricultural inputs. For example, the Restoring Livelihoods through Agricultural Revitalization project's rehabilitation of secondary canals near al-Hamrat village went through multiple contractors due to shortages of necessary equipment and parts.⁶¹⁴

USAID emphasized that the economic downturn also created greater unrest and increasing security concerns. A USAID-funded NGO reported multiple closures of its office in Dayr az Zawr due to frequent protests by local citizens over how authorities are handling the economic crisis and rapidly increasing prices.⁶¹⁵

DoS Expresses Concern about Judicial Process for ISIS Victims

This quarter, the judicial sector in northeastern Syria came under strain, the DoS reported. In addition to the daily demand for routine judicial services, the Self-administration of North and East Syria (SNES) seeks to prosecute ISIS atrocities, including prosecution of Syrian ISIS fighters.⁶¹⁶ The lack of a judicial process capable of prosecuting ISIS offenders undermines stability, according to the DoS.⁶¹⁷

Due to the “existential threat” posed by terrorist organizations, the SNES created a process to address terrorism and established three “Peoples’ Defense Courts” to handle issues, the DoS reported.⁶¹⁸ More than 11,000 individuals were in detention related to their support for ISIS as of the end of the quarter, according to the SNES, referring to all pretrial detainees including Syrians, Iraqis, and other third-country nationals. The DoS agreed with an SNES assessment that the SNES has neither the legal expertise, human resources, nor infrastructure to deal with a challenge of this size.⁶¹⁹ The SNES as a matter of policy has not prosecuted non-Syrians, although there are occasional local calls for international tribunals for non-Syrians. The SNES continued to seek capacity building support and assistance to prosecute individuals accused of being ISIS fighters.⁶²⁰ The DoS warned that the inability to effectively investigate and prosecute hardened ISIS members exacerbates the risk of ISIS reorganizing.⁶²¹

During the previous quarter, the DoS reported, the SNES issued an “amnesty” for 630 individuals accused of ISIS crimes. It was the first such “amnesty” for suspected ISIS criminals, as previously the SNES limited amnesties to common criminality.⁶²² SNES officials provided reassurances to the DoS that those released were low-level ISIS associates and said that they had seen no recidivism. However, the DoS reported that the SNES said it was concerned because the process was not controlled by judicial officials but by a commission with representatives from local tribes, the SDF, and other governing bodies.⁶²³ The SNES added that when individuals whom the population perceives to have “blood on their hands” are released without a credible legal process, the community’s faith in SNES governance is undermined, and there is a risk that revenge killings will lead to a new cycle of violence.⁶²⁴

DoS Partner Assists UN in Identifying ISIS Victims in Mass Graves

This quarter, the UN Human Rights Council’s Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, an entity established in 2011 to investigate alleged human rights violations and abuses, asked the DoS Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor’s local partner for information regarding individuals missing due to actions by ISIS.⁶²⁵ In the past, the bureau provided technical expertise to first responders and civil society to document, preserve, and exhume mass graves for identifications and future criminal accountability and worked with international partners to establish a secure, centralized, and impartial database for missing persons in northeastern Syria.⁶²⁶ The DoS explained that revealing the fate of missing Syrians captured by ISIS, the Assad regime,

During the quarter, the humanitarian community reported more than 23,000 spontaneous returns of internally displaced persons across Syria.

(which is responsible for the vast majority of forced disappearances in Syria), and other actors is critical to achieving justice for Syrian victims and their families and for promoting an end to the conflict.⁶²⁷

The local partner provided detailed information on more than 25 grave sites and 50 detention centers. The list included four ISIS detention sites located next to grave sites, which may hold the bodies of detainees executed by ISIS. Additionally, this partner launched a new forum for families of those missing to learn about missing persons investigations, obtain training on advocacy and campaigning, and receive psychosocial support, the DoS reported.⁶²⁸

Ongoing Challenges to Reintegration and Repatriation of Displaced Persons

During the quarter, the humanitarian community reported more than 23,000 spontaneous returns of internally displaced persons (IDP) across Syria.⁶²⁹ The DoS said that successful reintegration of IDPs is key to stability in Syria and throughout the region.⁶³⁰

For example, Syrian IDPs in the al-Hol camp who wish to leave are required to complete a security vetting process, including an interview which includes all family members, who are photographed and provide verification of their documents, and undergo a final vetting by the camp security services.⁶³¹ Last quarter, the SNES eliminated the requirement that Syrians in the al-Hol camp first obtain tribal sponsorship before being permitted to depart.⁶³² The DoS reported no changes this quarter to the Syrian Democratic Council's (SDC) process for returning IDPs living in camps administered by the SNES.⁶³³

This quarter, the DoS said that returns of IDPs from al-Hol camp to their home communities continued about every 2 weeks; approximately 1,060 Syrians returned to Raqqah, Dayr az Zawr, and Manbij areas during the quarter.⁶³⁴ The DoS reported that the SDF and the SDC managed the IDP returns programs from al-Hol camp responsibly and successfully, though they faced significant challenges.⁶³⁵

REINTEGRATION

Though successful reintegration is key to stability in Syria and throughout the region, IDP reintegration into their home communities can be difficult. The DoS said that many returnees encounter challenges faced shortfalls in essential services, lack of employment and livelihood opportunities, and insufficient educational resources for children.⁶³⁶ Other challenges are specific to areas of return. For example, those returning to Dayr az Zawr province reported fewer issues reintegrating than those in Raqqah province, where the more urban environment can be less welcoming, and host communities view returnees with more suspicion for perceived ISIS affiliation.⁶³⁷ Syrians from regime-held areas, including approximately 50 percent of Syrians in al-Hol camp, likely do not wish to return home in the near term due to fear of reprisal by the Assad regime, the DoS said, even if there were a mechanism that allowed Syrians from regime areas to return.⁶³⁸ In addition, the under-resourced SNES has no reintegration programming of its own and relies on aid from the international community and NGOs for stabilization support to aid IDP reintegration.⁶³⁹ This quarter, more than 70,000 Syrian civilians displaced by Turkey's October 2019 invasion of northeastern Syria remained unable to return home.⁶⁴⁰

REPATRIATION

Many Iraqis in Syrian displacement camps are unable to return home because the Iraqi government does not permit their return, even though many have registered to do so.⁶⁴¹ This includes approximately 31,000 Iraqis who live in the al-Hol displaced persons camp in northeastern Syria. Many of these residents have registered to return to Iraq, which the Iraqi government currently does not allow.⁶⁴² During the quarter, the United States and international NGOs continued to encourage the Iraqi government to develop an effective mechanism to facilitate their return, including an appropriate vetting system. Specifically, the international community encouraged the Iraqi government to allow repatriation of those Iraqis who were living in al-Hol before the influx of people from Baghuz in March 2019, during which some ISIS sympathizers likely arrived at the camp.⁶⁴³

This quarter, of the approximately 31,000 Iraqi civilians who remain in al-Hol camp, 4 Iraqi households returned to Sinjar province in northern Iraq in mid-March due to security threats in the camp. The move was facilitated by the camp administration and family members in Iraq.⁶⁴⁴ In early March, 13 Yezidi children were repatriated without U.S. Government assistance from an orphanage in northeastern Syria and were reunited with their mothers in northern Iraq. The DoS reported that on February 10, the SDF and Iraqi government arranged transfer of some 100 Iraqi detainees from detention facilities in northern Syria to Iraq.⁶⁴⁵

Finally, many countries are reluctant to repatriate their nationals in Syria for a variety of reasons including security concerns, domestic political risks, economic costs, and legal issues.⁶⁴⁶ The DoS said that countries of origin or nationality may contact the SDF directly to make repatriation arrangements and logistics for their nationals. Some countries proactively repatriate fighters and associated family members, while others remain reluctant to do so. The DoS said that it prioritizes repatriation to countries of origin and continues to engage allies and local partners on options to return their nationals.⁶⁴⁷

The DoS reported that, during the quarter, repatriations of foreign terrorist fighters and accompanying family members from northern Syria and Iraq were limited by the COVID-19 pandemic. Travel restrictions and limited access to COVID-19 testing and vaccinations, among other logistical disruptions, delayed the planning of repatriation missions for all countries involved in repatriation efforts.⁶⁴⁸

REFUGEES

In addition to Syrians who are displaced within their home country, millions of Syrians have been forced to flee their homes since 2011, seeking safety as refugees in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and beyond, or as displaced persons inside Syria.⁶⁴⁹

The DoS Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration funds international organizations and NGOs to provide humanitarian assistance, including education, health, protection, shelter, psychosocial support, and water, sanitation, and hygiene to refugees, IDPs, and vulnerable host community members inside Syria and in the neighboring refugee-hosting countries of Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt.⁶⁵⁰

For fiscal year 2019, the DoS Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) obligated nearly \$765 million in humanitarian assistance to support Syrians displaced

internally and Syrian refugees living in other countries. Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey received the majority of money obligated in FY 2019 and FY 2020 and expended as of the first quarter of FY 2021.⁶⁵¹ As of the end of the quarter, the U.S. Government had obligated more than \$596 million in humanitarian assistance to support people in need in Syria and Syrian refugees throughout the region. Of this amount, DoS PRM provided more than \$249 million.⁶⁵²

No Progress Made After the UN-led Constitutional Committee’s Fifth Round of Meetings

In January, the UN-facilitated Syrian Constitutional Committee convened in Geneva for its fifth round of talks.⁶⁵³ Established in 2019 under the auspices of the United Nations, the committee seeks to draft a new constitution as called for in UNSCR 2254.⁶⁵⁴ The meetings resulted in no progress, the DoS reported.⁶⁵⁵

Speaking to the media after the talks concluded, UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen said that the current approach to dialogue “is not working” and said that he would not call another session unless he could be sure it would result in concrete progress.⁶⁵⁶ The DoS reported that Pedersen and his staff have considered new approaches, such as combining the Astana Group (comprising Turkey, Russia, and Iran and ostensibly formed to help negotiate an end to the Syrian Civil War) and the U.S.-led Small Group (comprising the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt).⁶⁵⁷ Pedersen and his team will also propose a step-by-step process that the United States and its allies, and Russia, and its partners could use to develop a new approach, the DoS reported.⁶⁵⁸ The DoS said that despite the lack of progress, the U.S. Government will continue to promote a political settlement to end the conflict in Syria, because without a “durable political solution” that addresses the underlying causes of the Syrian conflict, the enduring defeat of ISIS is likely to remain elusive.⁶⁵⁹



The UN Security Council holds a virtual meeting about Syria. (UN photo)

New Special Envoys Named

This quarter, the Secretary of State designated Deputy Assistant Secretary for Levant Affairs Aimee Cutrona as acting Special Representative for Syria Engagement and also designated acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism John Godfrey as acting Special Envoy for the Global Coalition, the DoS reported.⁶⁶⁰

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

The U.S. Government, through USAID and the DoS, works with the United Nations, international and nongovernmental organizations, and local Syrian organizations to deliver aid to those in need in Syria.⁶⁶¹ U.S. humanitarian funding supports the provision of emergency food, health, livelihoods, shelter, and water, sanitation, and hygiene services for internally displaced persons and other vulnerable populations in Syria and Syrian refugees in the region.⁶⁶² During the quarter, 13.4 million people in Syria required humanitarian assistance, a 20 percent increase compared to the previous year.⁶⁶³

The U.S. Government and the international community face several challenges in delivering humanitarian aid to Syria. USAID reported that its implementing partners are being asked to do more than ever with fewer resources, and major donors have been reducing their foreign assistance budgets.⁶⁶⁴ At the same time, the humanitarian community has been



Syrian children participate in structured psychosocial support activities in Syria. (USAID photo)

In February, the World Food Programme cited “alarming” new data that showed that 12.4 million Syrians, nearly 60 percent of the population, lacked access to sufficient food.

scrambling to plan for the expected cessation of UN-sponsored cross-border assistance.⁶⁶⁵ Syria’s ongoing economic crisis and the first- and second-order impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic also continued to pose major operational strains for USAID, DoS PRM, their implementing partners, and the NGO community.⁶⁶⁶

In northeastern Syria, the only region of Syria where USAID operates both stabilization and humanitarian assistance programs, several developments this quarter with effects on partner implementation. These developments included increased violence at the al-Hol displaced persons camp, declining kinetic activity in and around Ayn Issa between Turkish-backed opposition groups and the SDF, and disruptions to the water supply sourced from the Alouk Water Station.⁶⁶⁷

Food Insecurity Worsens

USAID reported that the rising prevalence of food insecurity throughout Syria was a particularly worrying indicator during the quarter.⁶⁶⁸ In February, the World Food Programme cited “alarming” new data that showed that 12.4 million Syrians, nearly 60 percent of the population, lacked access to sufficient food.⁶⁶⁹ In March, the Syrian pound fell to its lowest point ever against the dollar, leading to increased prices of imported food, upon which Syrians are heavily dependent.⁶⁷⁰ Many Syrian families have exhausted their savings and have lost jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and cannot afford food.⁶⁷¹

In January, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) released its annual Humanitarian Needs Overview for 2021. The report highlighted the devastating impact that the COVID-19 pandemic, economic crisis, and a decade of conflict has had on the Syrian population, and projected that humanitarian needs will increase in 2021.⁶⁷² According to the needs overview, in January 2021, the average price of food was 222 percent higher than in January 2020.⁶⁷³ The UN Food and Agricultural Organization assessed that investing in and building the agricultural sector in Syria would provide an essential and sustainable source of livelihoods for rural populations, offering crisis-affected families the opportunity to recover and rebuild their lives.⁶⁷⁴

Fighting Disrupts Humanitarian Aid and Water Services in Northeastern Syria

Beginning in early December 2020, Turkish-supported opposition groups and the SDF exchanged fire near the town of Ayn Issa, on the southwestern edge of the area administered by Turkey. Concurrently, tensions grew between the SDF and Syrian regime forces in the region, resulting in movement restrictions for NGOs operating in affected areas, most notably in Qamishli city. Tensions increased in mid-January, when the SDF installed checkpoints between Hasakah and Qamishli cities, antagonizing government forces and temporarily blocking commercial and humanitarian cargo from entering these areas. While both sides had largely backed down by mid-February, tensions persisted between the two parties. In part due to these clashes, water security in Hasakah province continued to be challenged during the reporting period.⁶⁷⁵

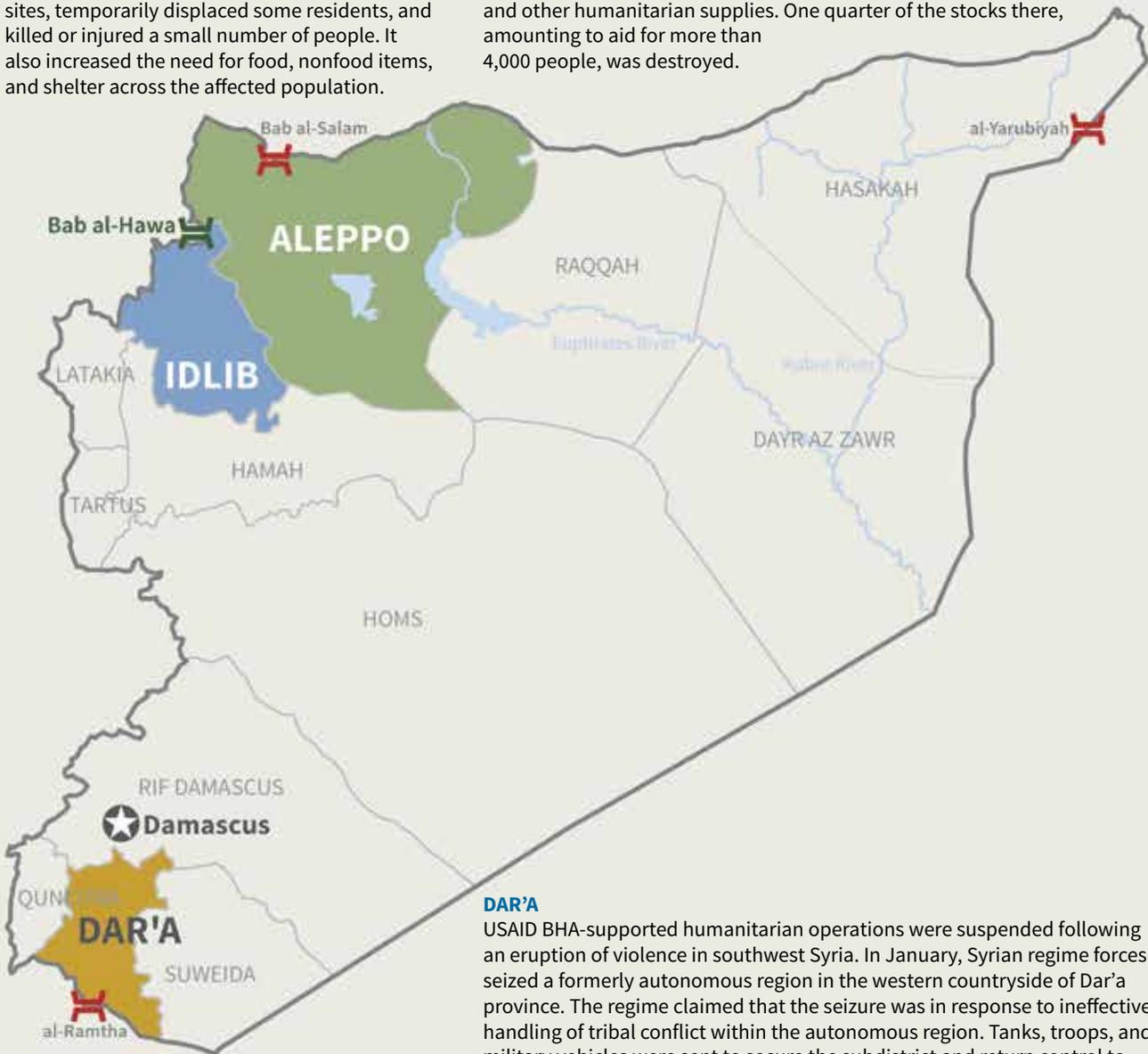
SYRIA: QUARTERLY FOCUS ON HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

IDLIB AND ALEPPO

USAID reported that extreme winter weather from January 14 to February 4 caused severe flooding in northwest Syria affecting more than 140,000 IDPs across more than 400 IDP sites in Idlib and Aleppo provinces. The flooding damaged or destroyed 25,000 tents in these sites, temporarily displaced some residents, and killed or injured a small number of people. It also increased the need for food, nonfood items, and shelter across the affected population.

BAB AL-HAWA

According to the United Nations, approximately 1,000 trucks of UN-provided assistance cross through Bab al-Hawa every month. On March 21, multiple air-to-surface missiles hit the road leading to Bab al-Hawa border crossing in northern Idlib. One of the missiles struck parked trucks used for transporting humanitarian supplies, destroying or damaging 24 of them. The airstrikes also started a fire in a nearby NGO warehouse storing food and other humanitarian supplies. One quarter of the stocks there, amounting to aid for more than 4,000 people, was destroyed.



DAR'A

USAID BHA-supported humanitarian operations were suspended following an eruption of violence in southwest Syria. In January, Syrian regime forces seized a formerly autonomous region in the western countryside of Dar'a province. The regime claimed that the seizure was in response to ineffective handling of tribal conflict within the autonomous region. Tanks, troops, and military vehicles were sent to secure the subdistrict and return control to the centralized Assad regime. In mid-February, Russia was able to mediate between the two actors and restabilize the region, allowing USAID BHA-supported operations to resume.

Sources: USAID BHA, UN.

As of mid-March, health authorities and NGOs had confirmed more than 46,000 COVID-19 cases throughout Syria, including approximately 2,100 deaths.

The Alouk Water Station in Hasakah province operated below capacity and with intermittent shutoffs during the quarter, disrupting water supply to half a million civilians. Human rights and humanitarian groups reported that the disruption of water by the Turkish-supported opposition groups who control the area was often deliberate. Turkish officials and the Turkish-supported opposition groups controlling the area, alleged that the shutoffs were due to insufficient electricity supply coming from the SDF-controlled areas. These ongoing power shortages that affected the Alouk water station persisted despite UN efforts to send technical teams to help solve the problem, according to a UN report.⁶⁷⁶ The DoS reported that while a Turkish company signed an electricity agreement on February 25 with local councils to supply parts of the Turkish area of incursion it remains unclear if this will positively impact the situation at Alouk.⁶⁷⁷

COVID-19 Cases Increase in Syria

As of mid-March, health authorities and NGOs had confirmed more than 46,000 COVID-19 cases throughout Syria, including approximately 2,100 deaths.⁶⁷⁸ USAID reported that challenges to accurate case counting remained, including limited laboratory testing capability, limited numbers of COVID-19 tests available, political obfuscation in reporting, and fragmented reporting across Syria's various coordination "hubs," among others.⁶⁷⁹

USAID reported that its COVID-19 pandemic response programs were unchanged this quarter. Restrictions associated with the pandemic limited partners' capacity to implement many group-based activities, such as hygiene promotion and protection awareness-raising, at the levels needed. Many partners shifted to remote implementation, which is challenging for beneficiaries who lack smartphones or internet connectivity.⁶⁸⁰ Partner staff who implement activities in-person risk contracting COVID-19, and routine curfews, and pervasive physical insecurity impede their mobility.⁶⁸¹ Additionally, pandemic-related procurement issues—stemming from shortages in global supply chains for pharmaceuticals, medical consumables, and medical equipment—resulted in significant delays to COVID-19 health programs. USAID BHA cited these justifications for three unfunded modifications to extend COVID-19-related awards' periods of performance.⁶⁸²

In early February, the international community granted the Syrian government entry into the COVAX program, covering government-held areas of Syria and northeastern Syria. In addition, the WHO submitted another application to ensure vaccine coverage in the northwest.⁶⁸³ Although these organizations have made progress in securing vaccines, the country will be dependent on the largesse of foreign states to ensure nationwide distribution. The Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization reported that Syria will receive a donation of 1.02 million doses of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine by the end of June, enough to cover up to 20 percent of the country's population.⁶⁸⁴

With limited vaccine supply, USAID reported that they expect that the Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine and the Chinese-made Sinopharm vaccine will become prominent in Syria. USAID said that it cannot confirm media reports about the procurement of the Sputnik V and Sinopharm vaccines for in Syria.⁶⁸⁵





U.S. Airmen and U.S. Navy aviators train in a downed aircraft scenario. (U.S. Army photo)

OVERSIGHT ACTIVITIES

- 84 Strategic Planning
- 86 Audit, Inspection, and Evaluation Activity
- 97 Investigations and Hotline Activity

OVERSIGHT ACTIVITIES

This section of the report provides information on Lead IG and partner agencies' strategic planning efforts; completed, ongoing, and planned Lead IG and partner agencies' oversight work related to audits, inspections, and evaluations; Lead IG investigations; and hotline activities from January 1 through March 31, 2021.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Pursuant to Section 8L of the Inspector General Act, the Lead IG develops and implements a joint strategic plan to guide comprehensive oversight of programs and operations for each overseas contingency operation. This effort includes reviewing and analyzing completed oversight, management, and other relevant reports to identify systemic problems, trends, lessons learned, and best practices to inform future oversight projects. The Lead IG agencies issue an annual joint strategic oversight plan for each operation.

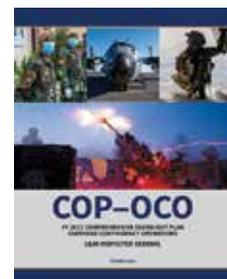
FY 2021 Joint Strategic Oversight Plan Activities

In 2014, upon designation of the DoD IG as the Lead IG for Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), the three Lead IG agencies developed and implemented a joint strategic oversight plan for comprehensive oversight of OIR. The three Lead IG agencies update the oversight plan annually.

The *FY 2021 Joint Strategic Oversight Plan for OIR*, effective October 1, 2020, organized OIR-related oversight projects into three strategic oversight areas: 1) Military Operations and Security Cooperation; 2) Governance, Humanitarian Assistance, and Development; and 3) Support to Mission. The *FY 2021 Comprehensive Oversight Plan for Overseas Contingency Operations* included the Joint Strategic Oversight Plan for OIR.

The Overseas Contingency Operations Joint Planning Group serves as a primary venue to coordinate audits, inspections, and evaluations of U.S. Government-funded activities supporting overseas contingency operations, including those relating to the Middle East. The Overseas Contingency Operations Joint Planning Group meets quarterly to provide a forum for coordination of the broader Federal oversight community, including the military service IGs and audit agencies, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), and the OIGs from the Departments of Justice, the Treasury, Energy, and Homeland Security.

In February 2021, the Joint Planning Group held its 53rd meeting, carried out virtually to accommodate participants because of coronavirus disease–2019 (COVID-19) precautions. Former Deputy Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations Michael S. Child, Sr. led a discussion of lessons learned since 2015 related to oversight and sustainability of U.S. Government programs, facilities and operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.



**FY 2021
Comprehensive
Oversight Plan
for Overseas
Contingency
Operations**

Lead IG Strategic Oversight Areas

MILITARY OPERATIONS AND SECURITY COOPERATION

Military Operations and Security Cooperation focuses on determining the degree to which the contingency operation is accomplishing its security mission. Activities that fall under this strategic oversight area include:

- Conducting unilateral and partnered counterterrorism operations
- Providing security assistance
- Training and equipping partner security forces
- Advising, assisting, and enabling partner security forces
- Advising and assisting ministry-level security officials

GOVERNANCE, HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE, AND DEVELOPMENT

Governance, Humanitarian Assistance, and Development focuses on some of the root causes of violent extremism. Activities that fall under this strategic oversight area include:

- Countering and reducing corruption, social inequality, and extremism
- Promoting inclusive and effective democracy, civil participation, and empowerment of women
- Promoting reconciliation, peaceful conflict resolution, demobilization and reintegration of armed forces, and other rule of law efforts
- Providing food, water, medical care, emergency relief, and shelter to people affected by crisis
- Assisting and protecting internally displaced persons and refugees
- Building or enhancing host-nation governance capacity
- Supporting sustainable and appropriate recovery and reconstruction activities, repairing infrastructure, removing explosive remnants of war, and reestablishing utilities and other public services
- Countering trafficking in persons and preventing sexual exploitation and abuse

SUPPORT TO MISSION

Support to Mission focuses on U.S. administrative, logistical, and management efforts that enable military operations and non-military programs. Activities that fall under this strategic oversight area include:

- Ensuring the security of U.S. Government personnel and property
- Providing for the occupational health and safety of personnel
- Administering U.S. Government programs
- Managing U.S. Government grants and contracts
- Inventorying and accounting for equipment.

AUDIT, INSPECTION, AND EVALUATION ACTIVITY

The Lead IG agencies use dedicated, rotational, and temporary employees, as well as contractors, to conduct oversight projects, investigate fraud and corruption, and provide consolidated planning and reporting on the status of overseas contingency operations.

The COVID-19 global pandemic continued to affect the Lead IG agencies' ability to conduct oversight of projects related to overseas contingency operations, due to related travel restrictions. In response to travel restrictions, the Lead IG agencies either delayed or deferred some oversight projects or revised or narrowed the scope of ongoing work. The Lead IG agencies continued to conduct oversight work while teleworking and practicing social distancing.

Prior to the pandemic, oversight staff from the Lead IG agencies stationed in field offices in Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt, and Germany, as well as from the United States, would travel to locations in the region to conduct fieldwork for their projects.

Based on DoD Force Health Protection Guidance, the DoD OIG will determine when to re-initiate travel to overseas locations and augment overseas offices on a case-by-case basis. DoD OIG oversight and investigative staff maintained their presence in Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain during the quarter. The DoS OIG and USAID OIG also monitored local conditions to determine when to resume overseas oversight operations. Because of the ordered departure that has been in place since March 2020, none of the DoS OIG staff assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad worked in Iraq during the quarter. DoS OIG staff stationed in Frankfurt, Germany, primarily worked from home rather than their offices in the consulate.

The Lead IG agencies and their partner agencies completed 16 reports related to OIR during the quarter. These reports examined various activities that support OIR, including U.S. Central Command's (USCENTCOM) response to the COVID-19 pandemic; DoS funding to public international organizations; the DoS's preparations to return personnel to federal offices during the COVID-19 pandemic; DoD's processes to protect friendly forces during close air support operations; U.S. assistance to the Iraqi Ministry of Interior (MoI); and oversight and financial accountability in USAID assistance programs.

As of March 31, 2021, 22 projects related to OIR were ongoing and 11 projects related to OIR were planned.

Final Reports by Lead IG Agencies

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

Evaluation of the U.S. Central Command's Response to the Coronavirus Disease–2019

DODIG-2021-058; March 5, 2021

The DoD OIG evaluated how USCENTCOM and its component commands executed pandemic response plans and identified both the challenges encountered in implementing the response plans and the impact to operations resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The report is classified. Details are contained in the classified appendix to this report.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL***Information Report: Review of Department of State Preparations to Return Personnel to Federal Offices During the Global Coronavirus Pandemic***

AUD-MERO-21-22; March 12, 2021

In response to a June 15, 2020, request from the Chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Subcommittee on Government Operations, the DoS OIG reviewed the DoS's plans and procedures for returning personnel to onsite work during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the methods outlined to ensure suitable safety and welfare considerations and precautions were undertaken on behalf of DoS personnel. During the review, the DoS OIG conducted interviews with DoS officials at various domestic bureaus and offices and at the U.S. Consulate General in Frankfurt, Germany, the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, Iraq, and the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan.

The DoS OIG found that DoS officials developed and implemented a conditions-based, three-phased plan for returning personnel to the workplace, based on authoritative U.S. Government guidelines. The DoS OIG found that DoS officials considered data specific to local conditions, such as health care availability, COVID-19 case counts, testing data, and shelter-in-place orders when determining whether domestic and overseas facilities should move between phases in the DoS's reopening framework. The DoS OIG also found that the DoS executed the reopening framework to implement suitable safety and welfare considerations and precautions for personnel. These protocols included notifying the DoS when an employee tested positive for COVID-19, isolating the infected employee, identifying and quarantining close contacts, and ensuring that facilities were properly disinfected.

The report contained no recommendations.

Audit of the Department of State's Risk Assessments and Monitoring of Voluntary Contributions to Public International Organizations

AUD-MERO-21-18, March 3, 2021

The DoS OIG conducted this audit to determine whether the DoS's policies, guidance, and processes for voluntary contributions ensured that 1) risks are identified, assessed, and responded to before providing funds to Public International Organizations (PIO) and that 2) funds are monitored to achieve the award's objective.

PIOs, including the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the International Organization for Migration, partner with the United States pursuant to a treaty, law, or legal determination. The DoS provides financial assistance to PIOs through voluntary contributions to advance U.S. strategic goals on a variety of national security and humanitarian issues. The DoS OIG reviewed 21 voluntary contributions valued at \$4.7 billion that were issued to PIOs in FYs 2018 and 2019 and were administered by eight DoS bureaus.

The DoS OIG found that the DoS's processes for identifying, assessing, and responding to risks before awarding funds to PIOs needed improvement to align with the Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government. The DoS OIG found that six of the eight DoS bureaus that awarded voluntary contributions to PIOs during FYs 2018 and 2019 failed to formulate specific measurable objectives for voluntary contributions and assess risk prior to award issuance. Moreover, the DoS OIG found that five of the eight DoS bureaus failed to consistently document their monitoring activities and could not demonstrate that award objectives were being actively monitored.

The DoS OIG made four recommendations in this report, all to the DoS's Office of the Procurement Executive, which is responsible for developing policies and procedures to guide DoS bureaus in managing Federal assistance. The Office of the Procurement Executive concurred with all four recommendations and the DoS OIG considered each recommendation resolved pending further action at the time the report was issued.

Inspection of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security's Special Program for Embassy Augmentation and Response

ISP-I-21-12, January 14, 2021

The DoS OIG inspected the operational effectiveness, resource management and management controls, and program management of the DoS Bureau of Diplomatic Security's Special Program for Embassy Augmentation and Response (SPEAR). SPEAR was established in 2014 to address assessed weaknesses in host-nation capacity to protect U.S. personnel and facilities at high-threat posts. SPEAR is designed to enhance the security of high-threat, high-risk posts, including at Consulate General Erbil in Iraq, by providing training and loaning equipment to host-nation law enforcement security units assigned to respond to emergencies at U.S. diplomatic facilities.

The DoS OIG found that SPEAR was succeeding in its mission to enhance protection of overseas U.S. facilities and personnel but that 1) the Bureau of Diplomatic Security did not provide clear, updated guidance or sufficient training to overseas staff on the use of the DoS's logistics management system for management of property assigned to SPEAR; 2) SPEAR's motor vehicle operations did not comply with all DoS guidelines and processes; 3) the contracts supporting the program lacked quality assurance surveillance plans and formal contractor performance assessment reports; 4) third-party contractors performed inherently governmental functions while providing support to SPEAR; and 5) program management guidance contained unrealistic goals for the transition of SPEAR units to embassy control.

The DoS OIG made nine recommendations in this report, eight to the Bureau of Diplomatic Security and one to the Bureau of Administration. Each bureau concurred with the respective recommendations and the DoS OIG considered all nine recommendations resolved pending further action at the time the report was issued.

**U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL**

Examination of The QED Group, LLC's Indirect Cost Rate Proposals and Related Books and Records for Reimbursement Fiscal Years Ended December 31, 2016 and 2017

3-000-21-030-I; March 26, 2021

USAID's Office of Acquisition and Assistance, Cost Audit and Support Division contracted with the independent certified public accounting firm Booth Management Consulting, LLC to express an opinion on whether the cost claimed by The QED Group, LLC (QED) on contracts for the FYs ended December 31, 2016 and 2017, are allowable, allocable, and reasonable in accordance with applicable contract terms.

The firm audited \$38,868,480 of QED's incurred costs for the fiscal years ended December 31, 2016 and 2017. QED expenditures of U.S. Government financial assistance included awards in Iraq and Afghanistan. The audit firm's examination disclosed questioned amounts and unsupported direct costs, both under \$1,000. The audit firm disclosed one finding, a material weakness in internal control due to a deficiency in the Incurred Cost Proposal. Questioned costs did not meet the established threshold of \$25,000 for making a recommendation, but USAID OIG suggested that USAID's Office of Acquisition and Assistance, Cost, Audit and Support Division determine the allowability of the \$849 in unsupported direct questioned costs and recover any amount determined to be unallowable. USAID OIG recommended that USAID's Office of Acquisition and Assistance, Cost, Audit and Support Division verify that QED corrects the one material weakness in internal controls.

Financial Audit of Danish Refugee Council Under Multiple Awards, for the Fiscal Year Ended December 31, 2018

3-000-21-017-R; March 11, 2021

Danish Refugee Council (DRC) contracted with the independent certified public accounting firm Deloitte Denmark to 1) express an opinion on whether the fund accountability statement for the period audited was presented fairly, in all material respects; 2) evaluate DRC's internal controls; 3) determine whether DRC complied with award terms and applicable laws and regulations; 4) determine if cost-sharing contributions were made and accounted for by DRC in accordance with the terms of the agreements; 5) perform an audit of the indirect cost rate; and 6) perform an audit of the general purpose financial statements.

The audit firm examined USAID audited expenditures of \$33,356,288 for the fiscal year ended December 31, 2018. DRC expenditures of U.S. Government financial assistance included awards in Iraq and Syria. The audit firm concluded that the relevant fund accountability statement was presented fairly; there were no identified material weaknesses in internal control or instances of material noncompliance with applicable laws, regulations, and award terms; and that DRC financial statements presented fairly, in all material respects, the financial position of DRC as of December 31, 2018. In addition, the audit firm stated that the schedule of computation of indirect cost rate was fairly stated in all material respects in relation to the basic financial statements taken as whole.

Single Audit of International Relief and Development Holdings, Inc., and Affiliates, for the Fiscal Year Ended 2016

3-000-21-005-T; March 9, 2021

International Relief and Development Holding, Inc. (IRD Holdings) contracted with the independent certified accounting firm Deloitte & Touche LLP to 1) express an opinion on whether the financial statements as of December 31, 2016, were presented fairly, in all material respects; 2) express an opinion on whether the schedule of expenditures of federal awards was fairly stated, in all material respects; 3) describe the scope of testing of internal control over financial reporting and compliance and the results of that testing, and not to provide an opinion on its effectiveness; and 4) determine whether IRD Holdings and affiliates for the fiscal year ended December 31, 2016 complied with the types of compliance requirements that could have a direct and material effect on each of its major federal programs and describe the scope of testing of internal control over compliance and the results of that testing, but not to express an opinion on its effectiveness.

IRD Holdings and affiliates' expenditures of U.S. Government financial assistance included awards in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. The audit firm performed a financial audit that covered total federal award expenditures of \$71,352,282 of which USAID audited expenditures were \$64,035,469 for the fiscal year ended December 31, 2016. The audit firm identified deficiencies in internal control over financial reporting which they considered to be significant deficiencies and a material weakness. USAID OIG did not make a recommendation for significant deficiencies noted in the audit report, but suggested that USAID's Office of Acquisition and Assistance, Cost, Audit and Support Division determine if the recipient addressed the issues noted. USAID OIG recommended that USAID's Office of Acquisition and Assistance, Cost, Audit and Support Division verify IRD Holdings and affiliates correct the material weakness in internal control to address the issues identified in the report.

Weaknesses in Oversight of USAID's Syria Response Point to the Need for Enhanced Management of Fraud Risks in Humanitarian Assistance

8-000-21-001-P; March 4, 2021

USAID OIG conducted this performance audit to 1) assess USAID's and International Rescue Committee's (IRC) responses to fraud risks identified by OIG investigations in Syria cross-border activities through fiscal year 2017; and 2) determine whether USAID's and IRC's corrective actions were implemented and operating effectively. IRC implemented USAID-funded humanitarian assistance for the Syrian crisis response.

Part of the more than \$5.6 billion in aid provided to Syria between 2012 and 2020 were IRC procurements that required transportation of resources across the borders from Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey to be delivered in Syria. Limited oversight of these activities left the response vulnerable to fraud and abuse and assessments showed that IRC was at heightened risk. In response, the organization developed an action plan to improve controls.

USAID OIG determined that some of the corrective actions taken by USAID and IRC from December 2015 through September 2017 were not implemented, and others, while implemented, did not operate effectively. USAID OIG made three recommendations to

improve USAID's anti-fraud controls for its humanitarian assistance response and one recommendation to determine what is allowable for questioned costs and recover funds, as appropriate. USAID agreed with three of the recommendations and partially agreed with the remaining recommendation, which remains unresolved.

Financial Audit of People in Need Under Multiple USAID Agreements for the Fiscal Year Ended December 31, 2017

3-000-21-016-R; February 25, 2021

People In Need (PIN) contracted with the independent certified public accounting firm Grant Thornton LLC Georgia to 1) express an opinion on whether the fund accountability statement for the period audited was presented fairly, in all material respects; 2) evaluate PIN's internal controls; 3) determine whether PIN complied with award terms and applicable laws and regulations; 4) determine if cost-sharing contributions were made and accounted for by PIN in accordance with the terms of the agreement; and 5) determine if PIN had taken adequate corrective action on prior audit recommendations.

The audit firm examined \$6,552,782 in USAID audited expenditures for the fiscal year ended December 31, 2017. PIN expenditures of U.S. Government financial assistance included awards in Syria. The audit firm identified one material weakness in internal control related to errors in calculation of indirect costs. The audit firm did not identify any instances of material noncompliance with applicable laws, regulations, and agreement terms. USAID OIG recommended that USAID's Office of Acquisition and Assistance, Cost, Audit and Support Division verify that PIN corrects the material weakness in internal control to address the issue identified in the report.

Examination of DAI Global, LLC Indirect Cost Rate Proposals and Related Books and Records for Reimbursement for the Fiscal Year Ended December 31, 2017

3-000-21-019-I; February 23, 2021

USAID's Office of Acquisition and Assistance, Cost, Audit, and Support Division contracted with the independent certified public accounting firm Booth Management Consulting, LLC to express an opinion on whether the costs claimed by DAI Global, LLC (DAI) on contracts for the fiscal year ended December 31, 2017 were allowable, allocable, and reasonable in accordance with applicable contract terms.

The audit firm examined USAID incurred costs of \$281,564,653. DAI expenditures of U.S. Government financial assistance included awards in Iraq and Afghanistan. The audit firm expressed an unqualified opinion, stating that costs claimed by DAI on contracts and subcontracts for the FY 2017 are allowable, allocable, and reasonable in accordance with contract terms. The audit firm did not question any costs or identify any findings that are required to be reported under government auditing standards.

Enhanced Guidance and Practices Would Improve USAID's Transition Planning and Third-Party Monitoring in Iraq

9-266-21-003-P; February 19, 2021

USAID OIG conducted this performance audit to 1) assess the management of transition strategy for humanitarian assistance in Iraq, and 2) assess USAID's use of third-party monitoring in the oversight of its humanitarian assistance and stabilization activities in Iraq. In response to the rise of ISIS in 2014 and the resulting humanitarian crises of internally displaced persons, USAID has provided more than \$2.2 billion in assistance to the country. USAID OIG determined that 1) USAID's guidance and practices do not encourage transitioning from humanitarian assistance in Iraq; and 2) USAID did not provide timely follow-up or resolutions to issues that third-party monitors identified. USAID OIG made five recommendations to strengthen USAID's guidance and processes for transition planning and oversight in Iraq. USAID agreed with all recommendations.

Financial Audit of Handicap International Federation Under Multiple USAID Awards for the Fiscal Year Ended December 31, 2017

3-000-21-015-R; February 3, 2021

Handicap International Federation (HIF) contracted with the independent certified public accounting firm Gelman, Rosenberg & Freedman to 1) express an opinion on whether the fund accountability statement for the period audited was presented fairly, in all material respects; 2) evaluate HIF's internal controls; 3) determine whether HIF complied with awards' terms and applicable laws and regulations; 4) report on the cost-sharing schedule and determine if the cost sharing schedule was presented fairly; and 5) express an opinion on the statement of indirect rate calculation.

The audit firm examined \$22,466,433 of HIF expenditures, of which USAID's audited expenditures were \$14,222,472. HIF expenditures of U.S. Government financial assistance included awards in Iraq. The audit firm identified two significant deficiencies in internal control and two instances of noncompliance related to anti-terrorism provisions and sub-recipient monitoring. The firm identified questioned costs that did not meet the established threshold of \$25,000 for making a recommendation, but USAID OIG did suggest that USAID's Office of Acquisition and Assistance, Cost, Audit, and Support Division determine what is allowable of the \$6,157 in questioned direct cost and recover any amount determined to be unallowable. In addition, although USAID OIG did not make a recommendation for the significant deficiencies and instances of noncompliance noted in the report, USAID OIG did suggest that USAID's Office of Acquisition and Assistance, Cost, Audit, and Support Division determine if the recipient addressed the issues noted.

Examination of DAI Global, LLC for the Certified Final Indirect Cost Rate Proposals and Related Books and Records for Reimbursement for the Fiscal Year Ended December 31, 2016

3-000-21-012-I; January 14, 2021

USAID's Office of Acquisition and Assistance, Cost, Audit, and Support Division contracted with the independent certified public accounting firm Booth Management Consulting, LLC to express an opinion on whether the costs claimed by DAI Global, LLC's (DAI) contracts and subcontracts for the fiscal year ended December 31, 2016 are allowable, allocable, and reasonable in accordance with applicable contract terms.

The audit firm examined USAID incurred costs of \$305,888,194. DAI expenditures of U.S. Government financial assistance included awards in Iraq and Afghanistan. Booth Management Consulting expressed a qualified opinion due to unallowable amounts pertaining to accumulating and billing incurred amounts. As a result, except for the instances of noncompliance, Booth Management Consulting stated that costs claimed by DAI on contracts and subcontracts for the FY 2016 are allowable, allocable, and reasonable in accordance with contract terms. The auditor did not question any direct costs, but questioned \$629,578 in total indirect questioned costs, composed of \$280,656 in overhead, and \$348,922 in General and Administrative pool costs. The audit firm did not identify any findings that are required under government auditing standards.

Financial Audit of The Mentor Initiative Under Multiple USAID Agreements for Fiscal Year Ended September 30, 2016

3-000-21-013-R; January 11, 2021

The Mentor Initiative (TMI) contracted with the independent certified public accounting firm Kingston Smith LLP to 1) express an opinion on whether the fund accountability statement for the period audited was presented fairly, in all material respects; 2) evaluate the TMI's internal controls; 3) determine whether TMI complied with the award terms and applicable laws and regulations including cost sharing and counterpart contribution; and 4) perform an audit of the indirect cost rate.

The audit firm examined USAID incurred costs of \$5,704,252 for the fiscal year ended September 30, 2016. TMI expenditures of U.S. Government financial assistance included awards in Syria. The audit firm expressed an unmodified opinion on the fund accountability statement. The audit firm identified \$21,038 in total questioned costs (\$21,038 unsupported). The audit firm did not identify any material internal control weaknesses. The audit firm identified one material instance of noncompliance. The audit firm stated that the schedule of computation of indirect cost rate is fairly stated in all material respects in relation to the basic financial statements taken as whole. Questioned costs did not meet the established threshold of \$25,000 for making a recommendation, but USAID OIG did suggest that USAID's Office of Acquisition and Assistance Cost, Audit and Support Division determine what is allowable of the \$21,038 in questioned costs and recover any amount determined to be unallowable. USAID OIG made one recommendation that USAID's Office of Acquisition and Assistance, Cost, Audit and Support Division verify that TMI corrects the one material instance of noncompliance identified in the report.

Final Reports by Partner Agencies

GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

Iraq: U.S. Agencies Have Provided Assistance to the Ministry of Interior Since 2014, but Have Not Yet Fully Assessed the Effectiveness of the Assistance

GAO-21-228RC; February 23, 2021

The GAO conducted this audit to determine the goals, types, and amounts of assistance the U.S. Government provided to Iraq's MoI since 2014; and the extent to which the U.S. Government assessed and evaluated the assistance it provided to the MoI since 2014. The report is classified. Details are contained in the classified appendix to this report.

Close Air Support: Actions Needed to Enhance Friendly Force Tracking Capabilities and Fully Evaluate Training

GAO-21-99; January 21, 2021

The GAO conducted this audit to determine the DoD's requirements for friendly force identification associated with close air support; the extent to which the DoD identified initiatives to enhance friendly force identification capabilities for close air support (CAS) missions and ensured the capabilities are interoperable; and the extent to which the DoD evaluated the training for forces integrating and delivering close air support.

The National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2020 included provisions for the GAO to evaluate issues related to friendly force identification capabilities in CAS missions. CAS is an aircraft action against hostile targets that are in close proximity to friendly forces and that requires detailed integration of each air mission with the fire and movement of those forces. U.S. military forces have performed CAS in a range of military operations, from permissive environments, such as in Afghanistan throughout Operation Enduring Freedom, to contested environments, such as in the initial stages of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The GAO determined that the DoD has made progress implementing initiatives to enhance capabilities that are used to identify friendly force locations during CAS missions. However, the GAO made 11 recommendations to strengthen these efforts. The recommendations included that the DoD implement and assess initiatives to improve the interoperability of digital systems used in CAS, and take additional steps to evaluate the training for certain forces that participate in CAS missions. In its response to the GAO on behalf of the DoD, the Director of the Joint Staff concurred with the recommendations.

ONGOING OVERSIGHT ACTIVITIES

As of March 31, 2021, the Lead IG agencies and their partner agencies had 22 ongoing projects related to OIR. Figure 8 describes the ongoing projects by strategic oversight area.

Table 7, contained in Appendix E, list the title and objective for each of these projects. Appendix E also identifies ongoing projects that the DoD OIG suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Those projects will restart when the DoD OIG resumes normal operations.

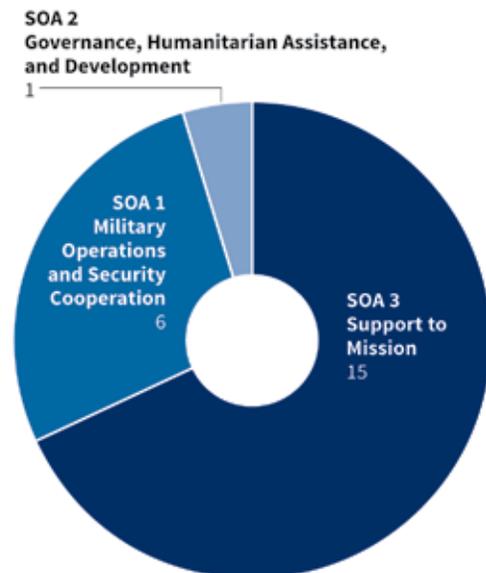
The following sections highlight some of these ongoing projects by strategic oversight area.

MILITARY OPERATIONS AND SECURITY COOPERATION

- The **DoD OIG** is conducting an evaluation to determine the effectiveness of USCENTCOM's target development and prosecution processes, as well as post-strike collateral damage and civilian casualty assessment activities.
- The **DoD OIG** is conducting an evaluation to determine whether USCENTCOM and other combatant commands are effectively planning and conducting activities to deter adversaries' ability to use financial networks to negatively affect U.S. interests.
- The **DoD OIG** is conducting an evaluation to determine whether USCENTCOM properly screened, documented, and tracked DoD Service members suspected of sustaining a traumatic brain injury to determine whether a return to duty status for current operations was acceptable or evacuation and additional care was required.

Figure 8.

Ongoing Projects by Strategic Oversight Area



GOVERNANCE, HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE, AND DEVELOPMENT

- **USAID OIG** is conducting an audit to determine whether USAID has taken action to prevent, detect and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse.

SUPPORT TO MISSION

- The **DoD OIG** is conducting an audit to determine whether the deployment process resulted in accurate and timely entitlements and allowances for deployed members of the Military Service Reserves.
- The **DoD OIG** is conducting an audit to determine whether the Military Services effectively conducted pre-deployment training to counter an adversary's use of unmanned aircraft systems.
- The **DoS OIG** is conducting an evaluation to determine whether the DoS Office of Safety, Health, and Environmental Management effectively manages overseas posts' compliance with DoS safety, occupational health, and environmental management requirements; and reviews its workplace, residential, and motor vehicle safety programs.

PLANNED OVERSIGHT PROJECTS

As of March 31, 2021, the Lead IG agencies and their partner agencies had 11 planned projects related to OIR. Figure 9 describes the planned projects by strategic oversight area.

Tables 8 and 9, contained in Appendix E, list the titles and objectives for each of these projects. Appendix F also identifies planned projects that the DoD OIG suspended due to COVID-19; those projects will restart when health protection conditions permit. The following sections highlight some of these planned projects by strategic oversight area.

MILITARY OPERATIONS AND SECURITY COOPERATION

- The **DoD OIG** intends to conduct an evaluation to determine whether the Theater Support Activity's tactical signals intelligence processing is sufficient to satisfy priority intelligence requirements.
- The **DoD OIG** intends to conduct an audit to determine whether the Army provided oversight of DoD interpreter and translator contractors in Afghanistan and to ensure the contractors fulfilled requirements.

GOVERNANCE, HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE, AND DEVELOPMENT

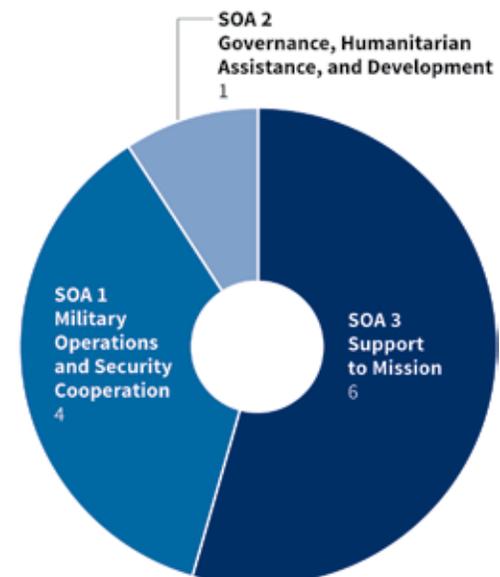
- **USAID OIG** intends to conduct an audit to determine if USAID is managing risks inherent to providing humanitarian and stabilization assistance and determine the extent to which USAID support to IDP activities support the joint DoS/USAID strategic plan objectives.

SUPPORT TO MISSION

- The **DoD OIG** intends to conduct an audit to determine whether the DoD is implementing effective oversight, controls, and processes to mitigate cybersecurity risks to unmanned systems.
- The **DoS OIG** intends to conduct an audit to determine whether the DoS considered existing and future electrical power needs and infrastructure of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad when designing the new power plant, conducted oversight of the construction and commissioning of the new power plant, and took measures to mitigate design or construction deficiencies, if any.

Figure 9.

Planned Projects by Strategic Oversight Area



INVESTIGATIONS AND HOTLINE ACTIVITY

Investigations

The investigative components of the Lead IG agencies and their partner agencies continued to conduct investigative activity related to OIR during the quarter. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Lead IG agencies consolidated resources and temporarily closed offices in Iraq. The Defense Criminal Investigative Service (DCIS, the DoD OIG's criminal investigative component) transferred some OIR related cases to their Bahrain office. During the quarter, DCIS returned investigative personnel to Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar, where they are working cases related to OIR. DoS OIG and USAID OIG investigators have returned investigative personnel to Washington, D.C., where they have been working on cases related to OIR.

INVESTIGATIVE ACTIVITY RELATED TO OIR

During this quarter, Lead IG investigations resulted in 1 criminal charge, 3 debarments, and \$6.9 million recovered to the U.S. Government based on a settlement in a previous criminal case. Those actions are discussed below.

The investigative branches of the Lead IG agencies and their partner agencies closed 26 investigations, initiated 2 new investigations, and coordinated on 98 open investigations. The open investigations involve grant and procurement fraud, corruption, theft, program irregularities, computer intrusions, and human trafficking allegations.

The Lead IG agencies and partners continue to coordinate their investigative efforts through the Fraud and Corruption Investigative Working Group, which consists of representatives from DCIS, the DoS OIG, USAID OIG, the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command, the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, and the Air Force Office of Special Investigations. This quarter, the Fraud and Corruption Investigative Working Group conducted 24 fraud awareness briefings for 146 participants.

The Dashboard on page 98 depicts activities of the Fraud and Corruption Investigative Working Group.

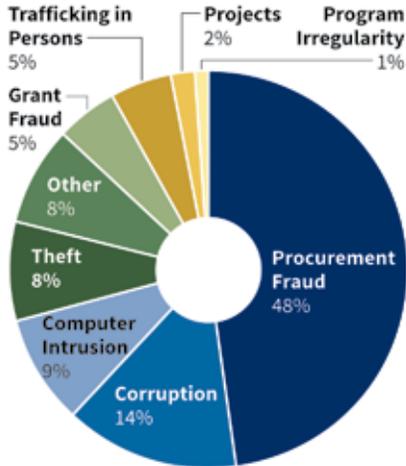
CONTRACTOR AGREES TO PAY \$6.9 MILLION TO SETTLE ALLEGATIONS THAT IT PERFORMED PROCUREMENT FRAUD BY ENGAGING IN COLLUSIVE BEHAVIOR AND MISCONDUCT

The Department of Justice (DoJ) announced that the International Rescue Committee (IRC) has agreed to pay \$6.934 million to settle allegations under the False Claims Act related to USAID-funded programming for beneficiaries affected by the conflict in Syria. The settlement, announced on March 16, 2021, is part of a civil resolution involving the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia, USAID, and USAID OIG.

USAID OIG conducted investigations in Turkey into allegations that IRC staff participated in a collusion and kickback scheme with a Turkish supply ring, which included bid-rigging activities in the selection of goods and services contracts for cross-border humanitarian

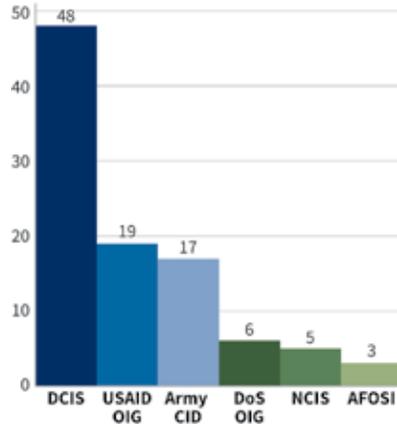
ACTIVITY BY FRAUD AND CORRUPTION INVESTIGATIVE WORKING GROUP

OPERATION INHERENT RESOLVE
As of March 31, 2021

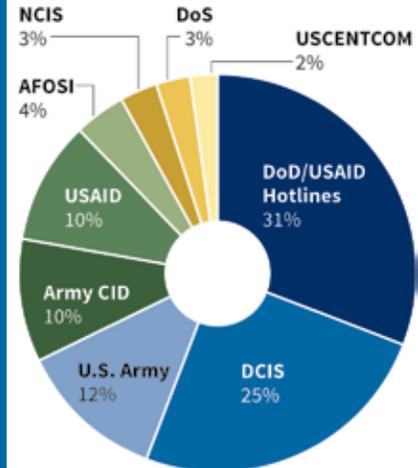


OPEN INVESTIGATIONS*
98

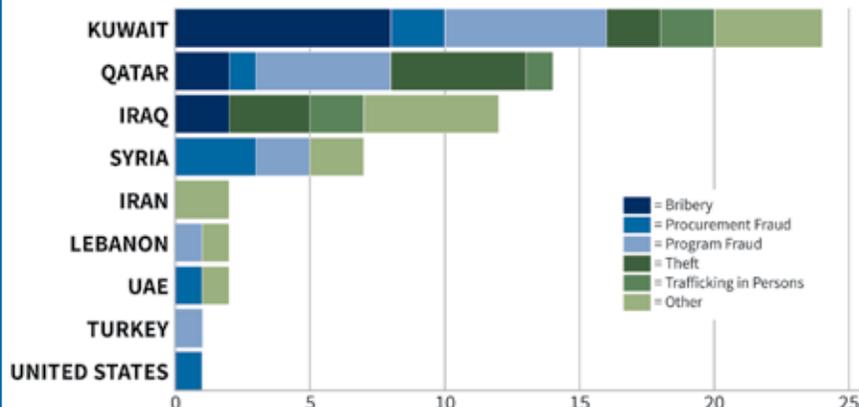
OPEN INVESTIGATIONS BY WORKING GROUP MEMBER*



SOURCES OF ALLEGATIONS



PRIMARY OFFENSE LOCATIONS



Q2 FY 2021 BRIEFINGS

Briefings Held	24
Briefing Attendees	146

Q2 FY 2021 RESULTS

Arrests	—
Criminal Charges	1
Criminal Convictions	—
Fines/Recoveries	\$6,934,500
Debarments	3
Contract Terminations	—
Personnel Actions	—
Administrative Actions	—

*Some investigations are joint with more than one agency and some not joint with any other agency. Therefore, the total number of Joint Open Cases may not equal the total number of Open Cases. Open Cases as of 3/31/2021.

relief into Syria. USAID OIG and the U.S. Attorney's Office Civil Division, Washington, D.C., also investigated allegations that IRC staff received kickbacks, steered bid procurement tenders, and allowed conflicts of interest between staff and suspect vendors. The investigation revealed that conduct by IRC staff resulted in the procurement of goods at unreasonably high prices, which were subsequently invoiced to USAID from October 2012 to December 2015.

TWO INDIVIDUALS AND ONE COMPANY DEBARRED FOR A KICKBACK SCHEME IN IRAQ

During the quarter, the U.S. Army debarred two individuals and a company from U.S. Government contracting based on an investigation of an alleged kickback scheme for Army contracts in Iraq.

DCIS and Army CID conducted the investigation based on allegations that a procurement team leader for SOS International, a DoD contractor, was involved in a kickback scheme.

According to the investigation, the scheme involved a manager for another company, the Sama Dhok General Trading & Contracting Company (Sama Dhok) of Baghdad, Iraq. The SOSI procurement leader allegedly accepted kickbacks from the Sama Dhok manager in exchange for U.S. Government contracts and procurement sensitive information. These contracts were for a Base Operations and Support contract awarded to SOS International to support Camp Taji, Iraq.

On December 23, 2019, investigators presented the case to the DoJ, which declined prosecution. On February 28, 2021, the U.S. Army Office of the Judge Advocate General, Procurement Fraud Division, Fort Belvoir, Virginia, debarred the procurement team leader for four years, and the other individual and Sama Dhok company for two years, from U.S. Government contracting.

U.S. GOVERNMENT CHARGES UK NATIONAL WITH BRIBERY SCHEME TO OBTAIN CONTRACTS IN IRAQ

An investigation conducted by DCIS and Army CID resulted in Shwan al-Mulla, an Iraqi-born British national, being charged in New Jersey on January 27, 2021, for his role in a bribery scheme involving millions of dollars of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) reconstruction contracts in Iraq.

Al-Mulla, the former owner of Baghdad-based Iraqi Consultants & Construction Bureau, and his co-conspirators allegedly received confidential information concerning bids, independent government estimates, and the selection process from a USACE employee. According to the investigation, al-Mulla and his co-conspirators allegedly used this information to submit winning bids for millions of dollars in contracts. In total, al-Mulla and others paid more than \$1 million in bribes from 2007 to 2009 to the USACE employee, who was deployed in Tikrit, Iraq. Al-Mulla was charged with seven counts of honest services wire fraud and one count of conspiracy to commit bribery.

The USACE employee, John Salama Markus of Nazareth, Pennsylvania, pleaded guilty to fraud, money laundering, and tax offenses in 2012 and is serving a 13-year prison term. Another co-conspirator, Ahmed Nouri, pleaded guilty to a conspiracy charge in 2018 and has yet to be sentenced.

ICCB paid \$2.7 million in 2013 to resolve DoJ allegations it violated the federal False Claims Act by paying bribes to Salama Markus.

INVESTIGATIVE ACTIVITY RELATED TO LEGACY CASES

The Lead IG agencies and their partner agencies have eight ongoing “legacy” investigations related to crimes involving the OIR area of operations that occurred prior to the designation of OIR.

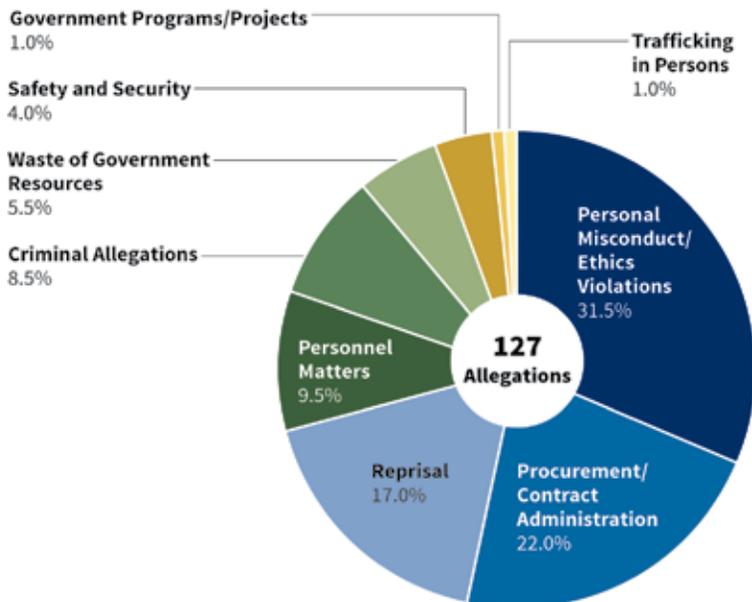
Hotline

Each Lead IG agency maintains its own hotline to receive complaints specific to its agency. The hotlines provide a confidential, reliable means for individuals to report violations of law, rule, or regulation; mismanagement; gross waste of funds; or abuse of authority. A DoD OIG investigator coordinates among the Lead IG agencies and others, as appropriate. During the quarter, the DoD OIG hotline investigator received 127 allegations and referred 75 cases to Lead IG agencies and other investigative organizations.

As noted in Figure 10, the majority of the allegations during the reporting period were related to personal misconduct, procurement and contract administration, reprisal, personnel matters, and criminal allegations.

Figure 10.

Hotline Activities









A U.S. Air Force KC-135 Stratotanker aircraft crew chief directs aircraft prior to departure at Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar. (U.S. Air Force photo)

APPENDICES

- 104 Appendix A: Classified Appendix to this Report
- 104 Appendix B: Methodology for Preparing this Lead IG Quarterly Report
- 105 Appendix C: Department of Justice Prosecutions and Activities Against Terrorism
- 106 Appendix D: Department of the Treasury and Department of State Actions Against Terrorist Financing
- 108 Appendix E: Ongoing Oversight Projects
- 110 Appendix F: Planned Oversight Projects
- 112 Acronyms
- 113 Map of Iraq
- 114 Map of Syria
- 115 Endnotes

APPENDIX A

Classified Appendix to this Report

A classified appendix to this report provides additional information on Operation Inherent Resolve, as noted in several sections of this report. The classified appendix combines information relevant to the first and second quarters of FY2021. The DoD OIG received classified information for the first quarter but was unable to prepare an appendix that quarter because of constraints resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. This quarter's classified appendix will be delivered to relevant agencies and congressional committees. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the DoS and USAID OIGs did not provide information for or participate in the preparation of the classified appendix.

APPENDIX B

Methodology for Preparing this Lead IG Quarterly Report

This report complies with section 8L of the Inspector General Act of 1978, which requires that the designated Lead IG provide a quarterly report, available to the public, on each overseas contingency operation, and is consistent with the requirement that a biannual report be published by the Lead IG on the activities of the Inspectors General with respect to that overseas contingency operation. The Chair of the Council of Inspectors General for Integrity and Efficiency designated the DoD IG as the Lead IG for Operation Inherent Resolve. The DoS IG is the Associate IG for the operation.

This report covers the period from January 1, 2021, through March 31, 2021. The three Lead IG agencies—DoD OIG, DoS OIG, and USAID OIG—and partner oversight agencies contributed the content of this report.

To fulfill the congressional mandate to report on OIR, the Lead IG agencies gather data and information from Federal agencies and open sources. The sources of information contained in this report are listed in endnotes or notes to tables and figures. Except in the case audits, inspections, investigations, and evaluations referenced in this report, the Lead IG agencies have not verified or audited the information collected through open-source research or from Federal agencies, and the information provided represents the view of the source cited in each instance.

INFORMATION COLLECTION FROM AGENCIES AND OPEN SOURCES

Each quarter, the Lead IG agencies gather information from the DoD, DoS, USAID, and other Federal agencies about their programs and operations related to OIR. The Lead IG agencies use the information provided by their respective agencies for quarterly reporting and oversight planning.

This report also draws on current, publicly available information from reputable sources. Sources used in this report may include the following:

- U.S. Government statements, press conferences, and reports
- Reports issued by international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and think tanks
- Media reports

The Lead IG agencies use open-source information to assess information obtained through their agency information collection process and provide additional detail about the operation.

REPORT PRODUCTION

The DoD IG, as the Lead IG for this operation, is responsible for assembling and producing this report. The DoD OIG, the DoS OIG, and USAID OIG draft the sections of the report related to the activities of their agencies and then participate in the editing of the entire report. Once the report is assembled, each OIG coordinates a two-phase review process within its own agency. During the first review, the Lead IG agencies ask relevant offices within their agencies to comment, correct inaccuracies, and provide additional documentation. The Lead IG agencies incorporate agency comments, where appropriate, and send the report back to the agencies for a second review prior to publication. The final report reflects the editorial view of the DoD OIG, the DoS OIG, and USAID OIG as independent oversight agencies.

APPENDIX C

Department of Justice Prosecutions and Activities Against Terrorism

Since 2014, the Department of Justice (DoJ) has charged more than 200 individuals with international terrorism-related conduct relating to ISIS. From those cases charged since 2014, the DoJ has obtained more than 150 convictions; the remaining cases remain open. These numbers include individuals who could be described as foreign terrorist fighters or homegrown violent extremists linked to ISIS, as well as those who may have assisted their conduct, obstructed investigations, or otherwise involved an identified link to ISIS.

The following examples include details on indictments, convictions, or sentences related to foreign terrorist fighters and homegrown violent extremists related to ISIS activity from January 1 through March 31, 2021:

- **On January 13, 2021, in the District of Minnesota, Abdelhamid Al-Madioum** pleaded guilty to one count of providing material support and resources to ISIS. Al-Madioum previously had been detained overseas by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). According to the defendant's guilty plea and documents filed with the court, on June 23, 2015, al-Madioum and his family traveled from Minnesota to Morocco, to visit their extended family. On July 8, 2015, al-Madioum left Morocco and traveled to Istanbul, Turkey. There, al-Madioum met with ISIS members who helped him cross into Syria. According to the defendant's guilty plea, al-Madioum later received military training in Mosul, Iraq from ISIS members and was then assigned to frontline ISIS units until he was injured in 2016. Following al-Madioum's injury, he remained a member of ISIS and continued to receive a stipend until his surrender to the SDF in or near Baghouz, Syria, in March 2019.
- **On January 14, 2021, in the Eastern District of New York, Azizjon Rakhmatov** was sentenced to 150 months in prison for conspiring to provide material support to ISIS. In August 2019, Rakhmatov pleaded guilty to the charge. According to court filings, in 2014, Rakhmatov's co-defendants Abdurasul Juraboev and Akhror Saidakhmetov planned to travel to Syria to fight on behalf of ISIS. Rakhmatov and co-defendant Abror Habibov discussed providing their own money to cover Saidakhmetov's travel expenses and to purchase a firearm for Saidakhmetov once he arrived in Syria. Rakhmatov also agreed to collect money from others to fund Saidakhmetov's travel. On the day before Saidakhmetov's scheduled departure, Rakhmatov transferred \$400 into co-defendant Akmal Zakirov's personal bank account to facilitate Saidakhmetov's travel to and expenses in Syria.

- **On January 25, 2021, in the Western District of Texas, Jaylyn Christopher Molina, aka Abdur Rahim**, admitted to conspiring to provide material support to ISIS. By pleading guilty, Molina admitted that since May 2019, he conspired with others to provide services to ISIS by administering an encrypted, members-only chat group for persons who supported ISIS ideology; by collecting, generating, and disseminating pro-ISIS propaganda; by attempting to recruit individuals to join ISIS; and by disseminating bomb-making instructions.
- **On March 3, 2021, in the Northern District of Illinois, Joseph Jones** was sentenced to 12 years in prison following a 2019 conviction on one count of conspiring to provide material support and resources to ISIS. According to court documents, Jones advocated on social media for violent extremism in support of the terrorist group. In 2015, Jones began meeting with undercover FBI employees and individuals who, unbeknownst to Jones, were cooperating with law enforcement. During the meetings, Jones discussed his devotion and commitment to ISIS. In 2017, Jones furnished cellular phones to one of the cooperating individuals, believing the phones would be used to detonate explosive devices in ISIS attacks overseas. On April 7, 2017, Jones drove with the cooperating individual to O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, with the understanding that the cooperating individual would be traveling to Syria to fight with ISIS.

In addition, 12 people have been transferred to the United States from Iraq and Syria to face federal criminal charges related to terrorism since 2014.

The DoJ continued efforts to train Coalition partners in Iraq and Syria on law enforcement and domestic intelligence as part of counter-ISIS operations, although some programs remained affected by COVID-19 limitations. For example, the DoJ's Office of the Deputy Attorney General, through its Rule of Law Office, maintained its Office of the Justice Attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, which re-opened last quarter, the office's capacity building programs remain on hold.

APPENDIX D

Department of the Treasury and Department of State Actions Against Terrorist Financing

Under Executive Order 13224, as amended, the Secretary of the Treasury and the Secretary of State have global terrorism authorities to target activities of extremist groups, including ISIS. The Department of the Treasury's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence and its Office of Foreign Assets Control work to disrupt the ability of terrorist organizations to fund their operations. The DoS's Bureau of Counterterrorism leads DoS activities to counter terrorist finance and to designate Specially Designated Global Terrorists and Foreign Terrorist Organizations.

DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY DESIGNATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Since 2014, the Secretary of the Treasury has designated a total of 95 individuals and entities providing support to ISIS pursuant to Executive Order 13224.

This quarter, the Secretary of the Treasury did not make any new designations.

The Secretary of the Treasury did not sanction any individuals or organizations during this quarter. No individuals or organizations sanctioned for providing support to ISIS were removed from the sanctions list during this reporting period.

The Department of the Treasury (Treasury) leverages its participation and influence to develop a shared understanding of the threat posed by ISIS, as well as to encourage countries to take action within their jurisdictions and in coordination with others to disrupt ISIS financing and facilitation.

Treasury works with interagency and Coalition partners, including the Iraqi government, to prioritize identifying ISIS's financial reserves and financial leaders, disrupting its financial facilitation networks in Iraq, and designating ISIS facilitators, front companies, and fundraisers in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and elsewhere. Treasury reported that ISIS continued to raise funds through extortion of oil smuggling networks in eastern Syria, kidnapping for ransom targeting civilian businesses and populations, looting, and possibly the operation of front companies. ISIS also continued to use networks of couriers to smuggle cash between Iraq and Syria. The group relied on money services businesses, including hawalas, to transfer funds between Iraq and Syria as well as internationally, often relying on logistical hubs in Turkey. ISIS probably has tens of millions of U.S. dollars available in cash reserves dispersed across the region, but Treasury did not speculate on the amount of money ISIS distributed during this quarter.

Treasury reported that during this quarter ISIS and its supporters also relied on cryptocurrencies and online fundraising platforms, apart from traditional methods of transferring funds into Iraq and Syria. ISIS members in Iraq transferred funds to ISIS members in northeastern Syria, including in IDP camps, such as al Hol. The group often gathered and sent funds to intermediaries in Turkey who smuggle the cash into Syria or send the funds to hawalas operating in the camp.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE DESIGNATIONS

This quarter's Department of State SDGT designations relevant to OIR were:

- **Niamat Hama Rahim Hama Sharif, Isma'il Fu'ad Rasul Ahmed, and Fuad Ahmad Nuri Ali al-Shakhan**, leaders of the al-Qaeda Kurdish Battalions, an al-Qaeda-linked group that operates on the border between Iran and Iraq.
- **Muhammad Abbatay** and **Sultan Yusuf Hasan al-Arif**, Iran-based al-Qaeda leaders.
- **Abd al-Aziz Malluh Mijirash al-Muhammadawi**, also known as **Abu Fadak**, a former secretary general of Kata'ib Hizballah, an Iran-backed terrorist organization active in Iraq, and who, according to the Department of State's mid-January press release, is working in conjunction with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force to reshape official Iraqi institutions away from defending the Iraqi state and fighting ISIS to instead support Iran's malign activities.



APPENDIX E

Ongoing Oversight Projects

Table 7 lists the title and objective for Lead IG and partner agencies' ongoing oversight projects related to OIR.

Table 7.

Ongoing Oversight Projects Related to OIR by Lead IG Agency, as of March 31, 2021

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

Evaluation of U.S. Central Command's Kinetic Targeting Processes and Reporting Procedures

To evaluate the effectiveness of USCENTCOM's target development and prosecution processes, as well as post-strike collateral damage and civilian casualty assessment activities.

Audit of Pre-Deployment Training on Counter Unmanned Aerial Systems

To determine whether the Military Services effectively conducted pre-deployment training to counter an adversary's use of Unmanned Aerial Systems in accordance with the operational requirements of the geographic combatant commands.

*Suspended due to COVID-19. The project will restart when force health protection conditions permit.

Audit of the Cybersecurity of DoD Additive Manufacturing Systems

To determine whether DoD Components are effectively securing additive manufacturing systems and data to prevent unauthorized changes and ensure integrity of design data.

*Suspended due to COVID-19. The project will restart when force health protection conditions permit.

Audit of Entitlements and Allowances for Processing for Military Service Reserve Deployments

To determine whether the deployment process resulted in accurate and timely entitlements and allowances for deployed members of the Military Service Reserves.

Follow Up Audit of the U.S. Army's Management of the Heavy Lift VIII Contract to Meet Changing Middle East Mission

To determine whether the Army implemented corrective actions in response to six open recommendations in Report No. DODIG-2017-095, "U.S. Army's Management of the Heavy Lift 7 Commercial Transportation Contract Requirements in the Middle East," June 26, 2017. In addition, to determine whether the Army implemented the corrective actions before issuing the Heavy Lift VIII contract.

Evaluation of Combatant Command Counter Threat Finance Activities in Support of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, U.S. Africa Command, U.S. Central Command, and U.S. European Command Priorities

To determine whether U.S. Africa Command, U.S. Central Command, U.S. European Command, and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command are effectively planning and executing counter threat finance activities to impact adversaries' ability to use financial networks to negatively affect U.S. interests.

Evaluation of Traumatic Brain Injury Screening in the U.S. Central Command Area of Responsibility

To determine whether U.S. Central Command properly screened, documented, and tracked DoD Service members suspected of sustaining a traumatic brain injury to determine whether a return to duty status for current operations was acceptable, or evacuation and additional care was required.

Audit of the DoD's Counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria Train and Equip Fund Stipends to the Vetted Syrian Opposition

To determine whether DoD properly evaluated if Vetted Syrian Opposition participants met DoD requirements to receive stipends from the Counter Islamic State of Iraq and Syria Train and Equip Fund for Syria, and if the stipends were properly paid to Vetted Syrian Opposition participants.

Follow-Up Evaluation of Report No. DoDIG-2019-088, “Evaluation of DoD Efforts to Combat Trafficking in Persons in Kuwait,” June 11, 2019

To determine whether the DoD implemented corrective actions for report recommendations in DODIG-2019-088, “Evaluation of DoD Efforts to Combat Trafficking in Persons in Kuwait,” June 11, 2019.

Evaluation of U.S. Central Command and U.S. Special Operations Command Implementation of DoD’s Law of War Program

To determine 1) the extent to which U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) and U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) developed and implemented programs in accordance with DoD Law of War requirements in order to reduce potential law of war violations when conducting operations; and 2) whether potential USCENTCOM and USSOCOM law of war violations were reported and reviewed in accordance with DoD policy.

Audit of DoD Implementation of the DoD Coronavirus Disease–2019 Vaccine Distribution Plan

To determine whether DoD officials effectively distributed and administered coronavirus disease–2019 vaccines to DoD’s workforce in accordance with DoD guidance.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

Audit of Nonexpendable Personal Property at U.S. Embassy Baghdad, Iraq

To determine whether U.S. Embassy Baghdad has implemented internal controls to account for and manage the life cycle of nonexpendable personal property in accordance with Federal requirements and DoS regulations.

Audit of the Use of Non-Competitive Contracts in Support of Overseas Contingency Operations in Afghanistan and Iraq

To determine 1) whether acquisition policy was followed in awarding non-competitive contracts in support of overseas contingency operations in Afghanistan and Iraq; and 2) whether, in awarding the non-competitive contracts, the justifications for doing so met the criteria specified in the Federal Acquisition Regulation and the Competition in Contracting Act.

Compliance Follow-up Review on Audit of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs Selection and Management of Contract Oversight Personnel in Iraq

To determine the extent to which the DoS has taken action to close the four open recommendations, considered resolved pending further action, that the DoS OIG made in an earlier audit report (AUD-MERO-19-10) to improve the process to identify and nominate qualified contract oversight personnel in Iraq.

Audit of the Acquisition Planning and Contract Extensions of Iraq Support Services Contracts while Preparing for the Transition to the Worldwide Diplomatic Support Services Contract

To determine whether the DoS followed Federal and DoS requirements in performing acquisition planning and controlling costs associated with contract extensions for the Baghdad Life Support Services and Operations and Maintenance Support Services contracts while preparing for the transition to the worldwide Diplomatic Platform Support Services contract.

Audit of the Department of State’s Use of Undefined Contract Actions

To determine whether the DoS Office of Acquisitions Management met Federal Acquisition Regulation requirements and DoS guidelines for issuing contract actions for which performance begins before the contract terms and conditions were finalized, and whether fees or profits were paid to contractors during the period after performance began but before the contract terms and conditions were finalized.

Inspection of the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations, Directorate of Operations, Office of Safety, Health, and Environmental Management

To determine if the Office of Safety, Health, and Environmental Management had taken steps to address its staffing shortages, mitigated potential safety issues, used its corrective action planning process effectively, updated its database of deficiencies that needed correcting, and improved safety program participation and compliance with DOS safety standards at overseas posts.

Inspection of the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations, Directorate of Operations, Office of Fire Protection

To 1) evaluate whether the Office of Fire Protection effectively directs and monitors overseas posts’ compliance with the DoS fire protection program; and 2) review the Office of Fire Protection’s inspection, safety, and prevention programs.

Inspection of the Bureau of Administration, Office of the Procurement Executive, Office of Acquisitions Management, Diplomatic Security Contracts Division

To 1) evaluate how the Office of Acquisitions Management, Diplomatic Security Contracts division uses funds received through a security contract surcharge to provide overall support to the Diplomatic Security program office for the administration of overseas local guard force contracts and 2) assess the Office of Acquisitions Management, Diplomatic Security Contracts division's timeliness in executing contract awards and modifications.

Review of the Public Diplomacy Locally Employed Staff Initiative

To assess program leadership effectiveness; survey public diplomacy officers to assess the clarity, progress, and results of the program in the field; and review coordination and communication effectiveness among stakeholders.

U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL***Audit of USAID's Initiative Against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse***

To determine to what extent USAID has taken action to prevent and detect sexual exploitation and abuse; and to assess USAID's process for responding to allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Audit of USAID's Contract Termination Practices

To assess USAID's procedures guiding acquisition award terminations.

APPENDIX F

Planned Oversight Projects

Tables 8 and 9 list the title and objective for Lead IG and partner agencies' ongoing oversight projects.

Table 8.

Planned Oversight Projects Related to OIR by Lead IG Agency, as of March 31, 2021**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL*****Audit of Unmanned Systems Cybersecurity Controls***

To determine whether the DoD is implementing effective oversight, controls, and processes to mitigate cybersecurity risks to unmanned systems.

Audit of the U.S. Army Central Command's Modernized Enduring Equipment Set in the U.S. Central Command Area of Responsibility

To determine whether the Army's implementation of the modernized enduring equipment sets in the USCENTCOM area of responsibility is meeting mission goals.

Evaluation of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency in Support of Combatant Commands Overseas Contingency Operations' Intelligence Requirements

To determine whether the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency is collecting, analyzing, and distributing geospatial intelligence in support of Combatant Commands Overseas Contingency Operations' intelligence requirements in accordance with law and DoD policy and guidance.

Follow up Audit of Management of Army Prepositioned Equipment

To determine whether the Army implemented the recommendations identified in DODIG-2018-132, "Management of Army Equipment in Kuwait and Qatar," June 29, 2018, to improve Army Prepositioned Stock-Southwest Asia inventory accountability and equipment maintenance.

Audit of Oversight of the Department of Defense Language Interpretation and Translation Enterprise II Contract In Afghanistan

To determine whether the Army provided effective oversight of DoD Language Interpretation and Translation Enterprise II Contractors in Afghanistan to ensure the contractors fulfilled requirements.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

Audit of the Performance of the New Embassy Baghdad Power Plant

To determine whether the DoS 1) assessed the existing and future electrical power needs and infrastructure of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad when designing the new power plant, 2) conducted oversight of the construction and commissioning of the new power plant, and 3) took measures to mitigate design or construction deficiencies, if any.

Audit of the PAE Operations and Maintenance Contract at Embassy Baghdad, Iraq

To determine whether the DoS is administering the PAE operations and maintenance contract in accordance with Federal and DoS requirements and whether PAE is operating in accordance with the contract terms and conditions.

U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

Audit of USAID's Internally Displaced Person's Activities in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen

To determine if USAID is managing risks inherent to providing humanitarian and stabilization assistance and determine the extent to which USAID internally displaced persons activities support the objectives of the joint DoS/USAID strategic plan.

Table 9.

Planned Oversight Projects Related to OIR by Lead IG Partner Agency, as of March 31, 2021

AIR FORCE AUDIT AGENCY

Redeployed Unit Equipment Account Closure

To determine if installation and unit procedures were followed to ensure equipment accounts of redeployed units are closed properly at al-Udeid Air Base.

Electronic Countermeasure Pod Centralized Repair Facility

To determine the efficiency of Electronic Countermeasure repair at al-Udeid Air Base.

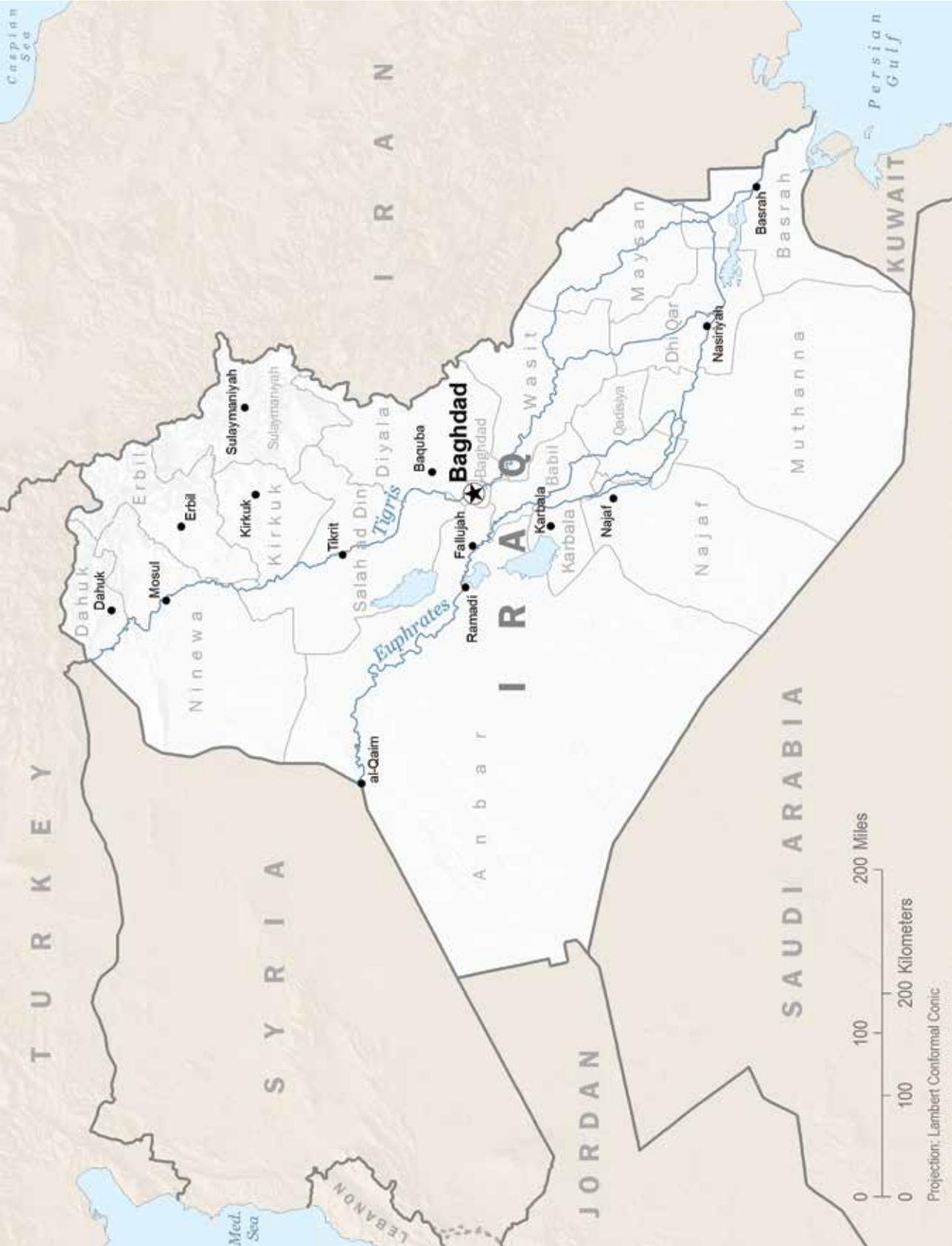
Personal Wireless Communication System Accountability

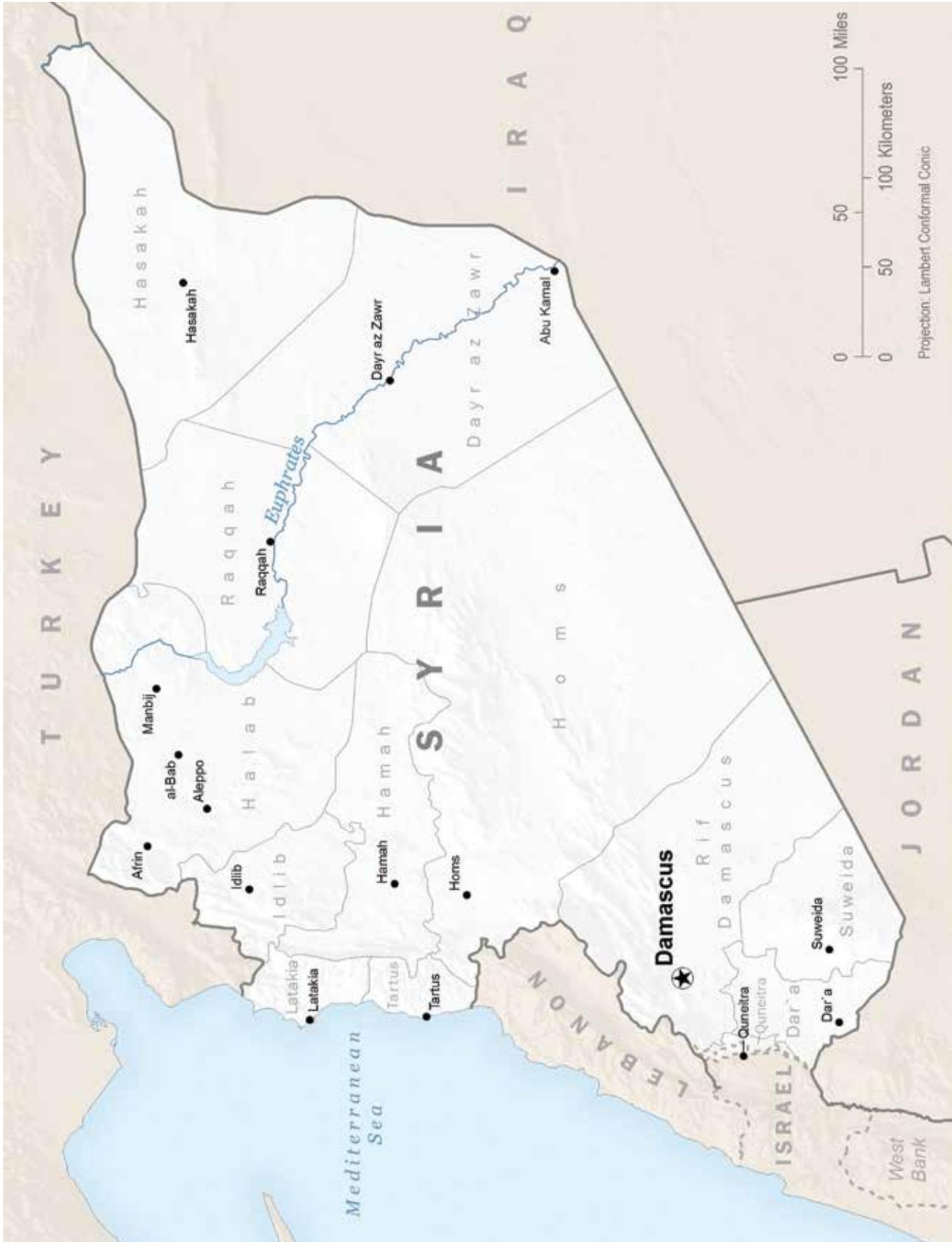
To determine if al-Udeid Air Base personnel properly accounted for cellular phones and established personal wireless communication system contracts that met mission requirements.

ACRONYMS

Acronym	
BDSC	Baghdad Diplomatic Support Center
BHA	USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance
CAS	close air support
CJTF-OIR	Combined Joint Task Force-OIR
COVID-19	coronavirus disease-2019
CPIG	Critical Petroleum Infrastructure Guard
CTEF	Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund
CTS	Counterterrorism Service
DAC	Dynamic Always-on Content
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
ESSA	Eastern Syria Security Area
FFS	Funding Facility for Stabilization
GAO	Government Accountability Office
GEC	Global Engagement Center
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
HAT	Hezen Anti-Terror Force
HIF	Handicap International Federation
ICRRP	Iraq Crisis Response and Resiliency Program
IDP	internally displaced person
IHEC	Independent High Electoral Commission
INCLE	International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRC	International Rescue Committee
IRD	International Relief and Development
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance

Acronym	
JOC-I	Joint Operations Command-Iraq
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
MERV	Middle Euphrates River Valley
NEA AC	DoS Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs Office of Assistance Coordination
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NMI	NATO Mission-Iraq
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OCO	overseas contingency operation
OIR	Operation Inherent Resolve
OSC-I	Office of Security Cooperation-Iraq
OUS(D)(P) ISA	DoD Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy-International Security Affairs
PIN	People in Need
PIO	Public International Organization
PMC	Popular Mobilization Committee
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
PRM	DoS Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SNES	Self-Administration of North and East Syria
SPEAR	Special Program for Embassy Augmentation and Response
TMI	The Mentor Initiative
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicles
UNAMI	United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq
USACE	U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
USCENTCOM	U.S. Central Command





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