OPERATION INHERENT RESOLVE

LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS

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 Congress on each active operation. The Chair of the Council of Inspectors General for 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, and 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

This report normally includes an appendix containing classified information about the U.S. mission to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria. However, due to constraints resulting from the coronavirus disease–2019 pandemic, the Lead IG agencies did not prepare a classified appendix this quarter.

FOREWORD

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

The mission of OIR, which the United States launched in 2014, is to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in designated areas of Iraq and Syria, and to set the conditions for follow-on operations 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 October 1, 2020, through December 31, 2020.

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 nine audit, evaluation, and inspection reports related to OIR.

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

Sean W. O'Donnell
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On the Cover
(Top row): Women residing at al-Hol camp in Syria (VOA photo); A U.S. UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter lands at an airfield in Iraq after conducting flight training (U.S. Army photo); An E-2C Hawkeye rests on the flight deck of the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz, which is conducting missions in support of OIR (U.S. Navy photo); Several hundred military and medical vehicles at the Port of Shuaiba, Kuwait, stand ready for transport to Iraqi Security Forces (U.S. Army photo). (Bottom row): U.S. Army Soldiers scan for threats near an oil refinery in northeast Syria (U.S. Army photo).

MESSAGE FROM THE LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL

I am pleased to present this Lead Inspector General (Lead IG) quarterly report on the status of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR). This quarter, the Coalition and its partners, including the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), continued to contain ISIS, which operated as a low-level insurgency in Iraq and Syria. ISIS was largely unable to seize territory, execute complex attacks, or direct external attacks. Although the number of ISIS attacks continued to decrease this quarter, the group endeavored to exploit ethnic, religious, and political tensions, and took advantage of security gaps in both countries.

Militia groups operating in Iraq and Syria were among some of the greatest security threats to the OIR mission this quarter. After Iranian-aligned militias ended an announced ceasefire, violence against U.S. interests in Iraq increased. Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi took steps to protect Coalition forces and continued to assert authority over the militias incrementally, while taking care to avoid a direct confrontation with them. Iranian and Syrian regime proxies also threatened U.S. interests in northeastern Syria. These groups conducted attacks against the SDF and exploited local grievances to garner support in territory previously held by ISIS.

Sean W. O'Donnell

Over the last year, the situation in Iraq and Syria has settled into a status quo where local partner forces, with Coalition support, are preventing ISIS from resurging, but are unable to degrade ISIS further to the point that it no longer poses a threat. This status quo is due to a number of factors that Coalition and partner forces cannot address by military means alone.

Economic insecurity further crippled Iraqi and Syrian authorities, hindered the provision of essential services, and impoverished large portions of the population this quarter. The coronavirus disease–2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, which authorities were largely unable to contain, continued to overwhelm the public health systems in both countries. In Iraq, government corruption remained pervasive, fueling continued civil unrest. In Syria, conditions in camps for refugees and internally displaced persons remained difficult, taxing local security forces. The combination of these factors perpetuates instability, which may undermine military gains against ISIS.

Economic, political, and societal improvements will likely take years to unfold, even with continued assistance from the Coalition and other members of the international community. This quarter, the United States continued to support COVID-19 response efforts in Iraq and Syria, U.S. officials announced a stabilization package to support religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq, and the United Nations announced the extension of a program aimed at restoring essential services in Iraq. However, open conflict, funding constraints, sanctions, and the COVID-19 pandemic hindered many stabilization and humanitarian aid efforts this quarter.

We will continue to assess the status of OIR as the military campaign progresses. Meanwhile, it will be increasingly important for us to monitor the impact that malign actors in Iraq and Syria are having on the OIR mission, the underlying factors that influence stability in these two countries, and steps nonmilitary actors are taking to address these underlying factors. 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

A U.S. UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter lands at an airfield in Iraq after conducting flight training. (U.S. Army photo)

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As reported last quarter, Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) has entered its fourth and final phase.[1] This quarter, Coalition forces continued to support local security partners, primarily the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in building their capacity to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS.[2] The DoS, USAID, and their partners continued efforts to bring stability to both countries.[3]

Damage from a December 20 rocket attack on U.S. Embassy buildings in Baghdad. (DoD photo)

Iranian and Syrian regime proxies posed some of the most significant security threats to the OIR campaign in Iraq and Syria.[4] For example, on December 20, militia members launched rockets at the International Zone in Baghdad, striking buildings within the U.S. Embassy compound.[5] United States Central Command (USCENTCOM) noted that this attack was the largest that militias have conducted in the International Zone since 2010.[6] The Coalition continued to operate in close proximity to malign actors that pressured U.S. forces and targeted local partners.[7]

ISIS remained a cohesive organization, operating as a low-level insurgency in Iraq and Syria. Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) reported that ISIS strategy, capabilities, and group cohesion remained largely unchanged this quarter.[8] ISIS fighters operated mainly in small cells distributed across rural areas, using improvised explosive devices and small-arms fire to carry out attacks against security forces.[9] CJTF-OIR reported that it is unaware of any significant fractures or power struggles within the ISIS network based in Iraq and Syria.[10]

One estimate of ISIS strength put the number of fighters operating in Iraq and Syria at between 8,000 and 16,000, down from between 14,000 and as many as 18,000 in January 2020.[11] A former senior U.S. diplomat attributed the decrease in ISIS numbers in part to security operations in Turkey, including Turkish policing of the transportation routes into Syria.[12] U.S. European Command reported that the Turkish government's counterterrorism efforts and improved security presence on its borders with Iraq and Syria reduced ISIS's ability to conduct attacks within Turkey, and to launch attacks from the country.[13]

U.S. Soldiers with a Bradley Fighting Vehicle and AH-64 Apache Helicopters in Syria. (U.S. Army photo)

DEVELOPMENTS IN IRAQ

The DoD reduced the number of U.S. troops conducting OIR in Iraq. In late November, citing a presidential directive and ISF progress in the fight against ISIS, the DoD announced plans to reduce U.S. military forces in Iraq from approximately 3,000 to 2,500 by January 15, 2021.[14] According to a DoD press release from January 15, 2 weeks after the quarter ended, the drawdown of U.S. forces in Iraq was complete.[15] Coalition forces continued to operate from three primary locations in Iraq and to maintain capabilities necessary to support the ISF with airpower and intelligence.[16] Approximately 900 U.S. troops were deployed to Syria during the quarter, acccording to the DoD.[17]

ISIS fighters in Iraq continued to exploit ethnic and political tensions, as well as gaps in security coverage.[18] For example, ISIS exploitation of the security seams between areas of ISF and Peshmerga control remains a problem, according to the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA).[19] Despite Iraqi initiatives to create joint ISF and Peshmerga structures and operations to secure the territory, there has been little progress on implementing joint operations.[20]

The ISF carried out a greater proportion of its operations against ISIS independently, but still relied on some Coalition support. The ISF conducted operations against ISIS throughout parts of northern and western Iraq.[21] According to CJTF-OIR, these operations restricted ISIS freedom of movement, degraded its leadership, and depleted its manpower, finances, and materiel.[22] The ISF continued to rely on Coalition airpower during complex operations, particularly those that required time-sensitive targeting.[23] CJTF-OIR said that Coalition air advisors continue to encourage their ISF counterparts to employ Iraqi intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets rather than request Coalition support, and the ISF showed an ability to use these assets this quarter.[24]

The political situation in Iraq remained fragile as demonstrators continued calls for political and economic reform.[25] The DoS reported that the Iraqi government made little progress in addressing militia violence against demonstrators, and deaths and injuries during protests increased this quarter.[26] Seeking to address an ongoing financial crisis, the Iraqi government devalued the Iraqi dinar, leading to cost-of-living increases across the country.[27] The Iraqi Council of Ministers, on a recommendation from the electoral commission, postponed early elections to October 10, 2021, but some officials express doubt that the Iraqi government will hold elections during 2021.[28] The DoS reported that even with the added time, significant hurdles remain for Iraq to conduct free, fair—and consequently, credible—elections.[29] An Iraqi government request for elections monitoring support from the United Nations is pending, according to the DoS.[30]

The Iraqi government renewed efforts to close all Iraqi government-controlled internally displaced persons (IDP) camps.[31] As of mid-December, the Iraqi government closed 15 camps and reclassified 2 others as informal habitation sites.[32] According to the DoS, many IDPs faced challenges finding suitable and safe housing after leaving the camps, while others continued to live at or near the sites, without the benefit of camp services.[33] USAID reported that, following successful advocacy by the U.S. Government and other international actors, the Iraqi government paused the closure of three camps that together host an estimated 31,000 individuals.[34] The approximately 25 IDP camps located in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region were unaffected by the Iraqi government's efforts.[35]

The U.S. Government and other international stakeholders continued to invest in programs to stabilize Iraq. USAID announced an additional obligation of $16.3 million for stabilization programs to support members of vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq.[36] The United Nations Development Programme also announced a 3-year extension of the multilateral Funding Facility for Stabilization program, which aims to stabilize areas liberated from ISIS by restoring damaged or destroyed essential services, and by setting conditions for the safe and voluntary return of IDPs.[37] In addition, the U.S. Government continued efforts to mitigate the coronavirus disease–2019 (COVID-19) pandemic by

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Lead IG Oversight Activities

Travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 global pandemic continued to constrain the Lead IG agencies' ability to conduct oversight of projects related to OIR during the quarter. Despite these constraints, the Lead IG agencies completed nine reports related to OIR. These reports examined various activities that support OIR, including tactical signals intelligence processing, U.S. Agency for Global Media journalistic standards and principles, foreign assistance tracking and reporting, the DoS's post security program review process, and USAID's Journey to Self-Reliance initiative. As of December 31, 2020, 27 projects were ongoing, and 14 projects were planned.

During this quarter, Lead IG investigations related to OIR resulted in one arrest, one criminal charge, and one criminal conviction. The investigative branches of the Lead IG agencies and their partner agencies closed 12 investigations, initiated 7 new investigations, and coordinated on 97 open investigations. The investigations involve a variety of alleged crimes, including procurement fraud, corruption, grant fraud, theft, program irregularities, computer intrusions, and human trafficking.

Each Lead IG agency maintains its own hotline to receive complaints and contacts 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 the Lead IG agencies and others, as appropriate. During the quarter, the investigator referred 50 cases to Lead IG agencies or other investigative organizations.

supporting distribution of hygiene products and foodstuffs; rehabilitation of water and sanitation infrastructure; improvements to the healthcare system; support for prevention measures in IDP and refugee camps; and educational outreach.[38]

DEVELOPMENTS IN SYRIA

ISIS attacks decreased this quarter, with activity focused in select provinces and partly aimed at exacerbating sectarian tensions. CJTF-OIR reported that ISIS concentrated attacks in Dayr az Zawr province and increased attacks in the central Syrian desert within Homs and Hamah provinces, where Syrian regime forces operate.[39] ISIS also continued to assassinate local military and civilian leaders in areas under SDF control. In so doing, ISIS is attempting to exacerbate tensions among the Arab population and Kurdish authorities, and to undermine cooperation among these parties, according to USCENTOM.[40]

The SDF maintained the pace of its counter-ISIS operations and proved more capable of defending critical infrastructure this quarter.[41] CJTF-OIR reported that Coalition forces continued to advise the SDF on its independent operations against ISIS.[42] However, the SDF, which has no air assets, relied on Coalition air support, including for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, and partnered with Coalition forces during most of its operations.[43] Coalition forces also conducted patrols with SDF petroleum infrastructure protection forces, which showed greater initiative, competence, and independence than in the past, according to CJTF-OIR.[44]

WFP food distribution in Dayr az Zawr province. (WFP/Taha Hussain photo)

Third parties continued to operate in close proximity to Coalition forces and local partners, perpetuating a crowded operational environment in northeastern Syria. The DIA reported that Iran and its proxies continued efforts to support the Syrian regime and to undermine U.S. forces.[45] The DoS noted that Iranian-aligned groups also continued to conduct operations against ISIS remnants in regime-held areas of Syria.[46] Russia conducted operations against ISIS in Syrian regime-held areas and maintained a troop presence near Coalition forces in northeastern Syria.[47] Last quarter, in addition to coordinating with the Russian military to deconflict operations, the DoD deployed Bradley Fighting Vehicles to the area as a force protection measure. This quarter, the Russian military committed fewer violations of established deconfliction protocols.[48] Clashes with the Turkish military and its affiliates near Ayn Issa drew SDF focus away from counter-ISIS operations.[49] In December, Russia stated it would set up new posts around Ayn Issa to help prevent further violence between the parties, according to media reports.[50]

Although budget shortfalls continued to constrain some stabilization activities, the DoS and USAID dedicated additional funding to address the humanitarian crisis in Syria. The DoS and USAID continued to operate with a limited budget due to a freeze placed on U.S. stabilization assistance for Syria in 2018.[51] This quarter, to preserve its limited funding, the DoS reduced or eliminated some activities that support community education, independent media, vocational training, and the provision of essential services.[52] Meanwhile, USAID and the DoS Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration announced a combined total of $720 million in additional humanitarian assistance in Syria.[53] The funding will support emergency food, health, livelihood, shelter, water, sanitation, and hygiene assistance for IDPs and other vulnerable populations.[54]

Some USAID implementing partners suspended stabilization and humanitarian activities in Syria due to security concerns.[55] Syrian regime and Russian military airstrikes along transportation routes, Iranian encroachment, intense shelling between warring parties, and sporadic ISIS attacks all pose security risks to USAID implementing partners.[56] The U.S. Government continued to engage the Turkish government and its affiliates on alleged human rights abuses reportedly committed by Turkish-supported opposition groups in Syria.[57] The DoS reported that the outcomes of its engagements regarding these violations "have not been fully satisfying."[58]

> Syrian regime and Russian military airstrikes along transportation routes, Iranian encroachment, intense shelling between warring parties, and sporadic ISIS attacks all pose security risks to USAID implementing partners.

A U.S. Soldier sits in the gunner's hatch of a Bradley Fighting Vehicle in Syria. (U.S. Army photo)

THE QUARTER IN REVIEW

■ THE QUARTER IN REVIEW

MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS

STATUS OF OIR

Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), the campaign to defeat ISIS in designated regions of Iraq and Syria and to enable whole-of-government actions to increase regional stability, is currently in the fourth and final phase.[1] During the first three phases of the campaign, which ran from 2014 through mid-2020, the Coalition trained and equipped partner forces in Iraq and Syria, advised and accompanied those forces during operations, provided intelligence, and conducted airstrikes to enable the territorial defeat of ISIS in designated areas in Syria and Iraq.[2] ISIS lost its territorial hold in Iraq in December 2017 and in Syria in March 2019, but has continued to operate as a low-level insurgency in both countries.[3]

In the summer of 2020, OIR transitioned to Phase IV of the campaign, "Normalize."[4] In this phase, the Coalition has largely shifted from hands-on training, developing, and assisting partner forces in both Iraq and Syria to advising and enabling them, mainly remotely, from consolidated bases during operations against ISIS.[5] In Syria, some training of partner forces continues.[6] In Iraq, Coalition efforts focus on reforming and professionalizing Iraqi security institutions and combatting corruption to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS.[7]

The United States Reduces Troop Presence in Iraq

In November, the DoD announced that the President had directed a reduction of OIR forces in Iraq from approximately 3,000 troops to 2,500 by January 15, 2021.[8] General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., commander of United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), said that conditions on the ground in Iraq enabled the Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) to make the troop reduction. In particular, General McKenzie cited the "progress of the Iraqi Security Forces" as a primary enabler of the reduction.[9]

As of the end of the quarter, Coalition forces were consolidated mainly to three major locations in and around Baghdad and Erbil. CJTF-OIR reported that U.S. troops remained at the Union III and Baghdad Diplomatic Security Complex in Baghdad, the al-Asad Air Base in Anbar province, and Erbil Air Base in Iraq's northern Kurdish region.[10] While the Coalition continued to make changes to the composition of its forces in Iraq during the quarter, plans to reposition forces were complete, CJTF-OIR said.[11]

The DoD Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy–International Security Affairs (OUSD(P) ISA) reported that the troop reduction does not signal a change in U.S. policy, but rather is the result of the increased ability of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to combat ISIS.[12] Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher C. Miller said that the drawdown of forces in Iraq aligned with the goals of the Trump Administration and is consistent with previously established plans and objectives.[13]

U.S. Soldiers prepare to dismount an M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle in Syria. (U.S. Army photo)

In addition to U.S. forces in Iraq, approximately 900 U.S. forces were stationed in northeast Syria and around Tanf Garrison, a desert compound near the Jordanian border.[14] The U.S. forces continued to constitute the majority of Coalition forces stationed in Iraq and Syria.[15]

OUSD(P) ISA reported that the reduction in U.S. troops in Iraq had no significant impact on the OIR mission. Additionally, OUSD(P) ISA said that there were no significant changes to the composition of Coalition countries contributing troops to Iraq and Syria.[16] The DoD will continue to have counterterrorism assets in Iraq to support the ISF with airpower and intelligence, OUSD(P) ISA said.[17] OUSD(P) ISA also reported that the resources provided to OIR and Coalition activities carried out in support of OIR remained unchanged.[18] On November 10, 2020, Mauritania joined the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS but does not contribute troops to OIR.[19] The inclusion of Mauritania increased the number of countries and organizations allied against ISIS to 83.[20]

Iranian, Russian, Syrian Regime, and Turkish Military Activity Complicates OIR Mission

As discussed in more detail on pages 33-35 and 60-61, CJTF-OIR reported that in both Iraq and Syria, the most significant security threats to OIR came not just from ISIS, but from other forces working against Coalition interests in each country.[21] In Iraq, militia groups seeking to pressure a U.S. troop withdrawal from the country presented the biggest threat to Coalition forces and the CJTF-OIR campaign.[22] In Syria, CJTF-OIR said that "malign actors" continued to target local partners with harassing attacks.[23]

In Iraq, several Iranian-aligned militias, including some incorporated into the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), remain hostile toward the U.S. troop presence, according to media sources.[24] Toward the end of the quarter, militia violence against U.S. interests in Iraq increased ahead of the 1-year anniversary of the U.S. strike on Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, who headed the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Qods Force until his death on January 3, 2020.[25]

In Syria, Coalition forces continued to operate in a complex security environment in the northeast.[26] Coalition forces operate in close proximity to Russian, Syrian regime, and pro-regime forces which moved into areas of northeastern Syria that U.S. troops vacated when Turkey launched an incursion into northern Syria in October 2019. The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) reported that "malign actors," including ISIS and forces associated with Iran and the Syrian regime, posed the most significant threat to the Coalition and its mission.[27]

STATUS OF ISIS

ISIS Sustains Cohesive, Low-level Insurgency

ISIS's strategy, capabilities, and cohesion in Iraq and Syria either remained unchanged or did not change significantly this quarter.[28] As in previous quarters, ISIS operated as a low-level insurgency in both countries.[29] Its fighters remained organized mainly in small cells, operating in rural areas and relying primarily on improvised explosive devices (IED) and small-arms fire to carry out attacks against both civilians and security forces.[30] CJTF-OIR reported that it was unaware of any significant internal fractures or power struggles in ISIS leadership that could threaten the group's unity of effort in either country.[31] The DIA reported that it has not observed any large-scale defections or splintering of ISIS.[32]

Public estimates of the number of ISIS fighters were lower this quarter than previous estimates.[33] Ambassador James Jeffrey said, following his retirement this quarter as U.S. Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, that ISIS is estimated to have between 8,000 and 16,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria, down from 14,000 to 18,000 in January 2020.[34] In a December article for a U.S.-based policy research organization, Ambassador Jeffrey wrote that the flow of foreign fighters into the region had dropped off, partly due to a shortage of fighters and partly because the Turkish government improved policing along the routes ISIS uses through Turkey.[35] United States European Command (USEUCOM) reported that Turkey's improved security presence along its borders with Iraq and Syria during the quarter reduced ISIS's ability to conduct attacks from Turkey.[36]

CJTF-OIR reported that in both Iraq and Syria, the most significant security threats to OIR came not just from ISIS, but from other forces conducting harassing attacks against Coalition forces in each country.

According to CJTF-OIR, ISIS remains "territorially defeated, controls no major population centers, and has limited finances."[37] USCENTCOM Commander General McKenzie said in November that the group has "demonstrated tenacity and an ability to reconstitute" and "continues to pose a real threat."[38] Speaking to a policy organization in November, General McKenzie added that maintaining military pressure on ISIS is crucial to containing the group, which he described as a "learning, adaptable, and committed violent extremist organization" that can sustain itself at a local level.[39]

Some independent analysts echoed General McKenzie's description of ISIS as an ongoing threat. Analysts at the Middle East Institute and the Wilson Center said that ISIS demonstrates a willingness to try to retake territory in Iraq and has the makings of a "growing and dangerous insurgency."[40] Research groups also observed an ISIS resilience in Syria. The Counter Extremism Project, an international policy organization that identifies and monitors extremist activity, described ISIS attacks in November as "high quality."[41] The Institute for the Study of War reported in early December that ISIS "continues to carry out sophisticated and effective attacks indicating its capabilities have not been significantly degraded."[42]

The DIA and CJTF-OIR reported that ISIS leadership in Iraq and Syria remains interested in carrying out attacks in the West but is probably unable to direct external operations.[43] The DIA said that ISIS is probably working to reestablish its ability to direct attacks in Europe from Syria. The DIA reported that for the moment, lone actors inspired by ISIS propaganda continue to constitute the most likely threat to the West, largely because they are already in western countries and can attack with little or no warning.[44] For example, following several ISIS attacks, including an attack in Nice, France in October, ISIS supporters coordinated an online, global campaign to encourage further attacks.[45]

ISIS Presence and Activity in Iraq

ISIS ATTACKS DOWN AGAIN THIS QUARTER

As in previous quarters, ISIS fighters operated mainly from outlying desert, mountain, or rural areas, in predominantly Sunni areas, and in "legacy regions" of its self-proclaimed "caliphate."[46] The areas are located in five provinces—Anbar, Ninewa, Salah ad Din, Kirkuk, and Diyala— that stretch north and west of Baghdad from the Jordanian border to the Iranian border.[47]

CJTF-OIR reported that, according to the Iraqi government, ISIS activity—which includes attacks, movements, bed downs, and establishing weapons caches—increased in all of these provinces except Salah ad Din this quarter.[48] However, CJTF-OIR reported that the overall number of ISIS attacks decreased in Iraq. According to CJTF-OIR, ISIS claimed 175 attacks this quarter, including 65 attacks in October, 65 attacks in November, and 45 attacks in December, down from 228 last quarter.[49] See Figure 1 on page 14 for data on attacks claimed by ISIS and locally reported attacks attributed to ISIS.

According to CJTF-OIR, the most significant ISIS activity occurred October 21 through 28, during the group's seventh global attack campaign. During this campaign, ISIS claimed 29 attacks in Iraq—fewer than the number of attacks it carried out during each of the previous four global attack campaigns. CJTF-OIR said that the week-long spate of attacks "did not demonstrate an increase in attack sophistication."[50]

Figure 1.

ISIS Attacks in Iraq this Quarter
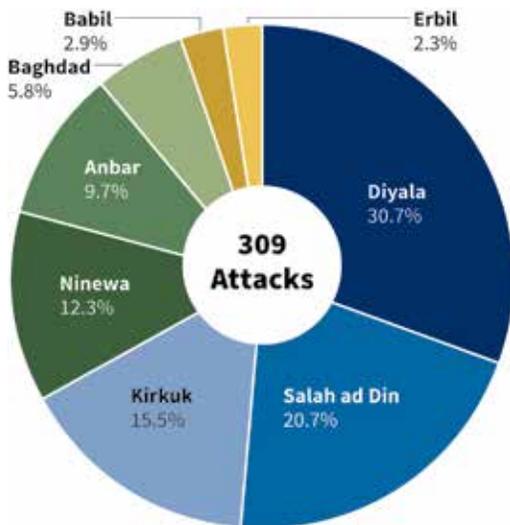
Sources: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), Janes Terrorism and Insurgency database (Janes), and the Enabling Peace in Iraq Center (EPIC).
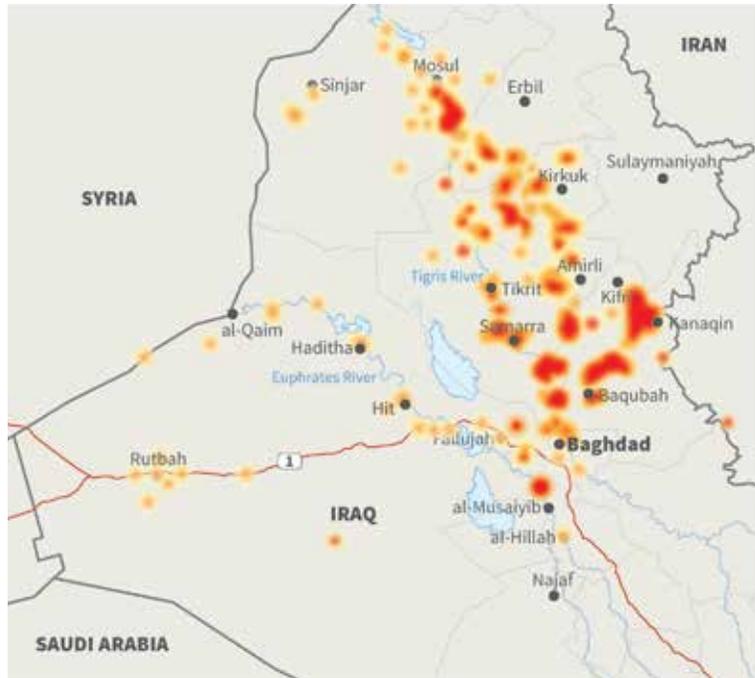
CJTF-OIR reported that, outside of this campaign, ISIS's attacks in Iraq this quarter included a small-arms and grenade attack on an Iraqi security outpost south of Baghdad's airport that killed six Tribal Mobilization Force members and five civilians, and a rocket attack on a state-owned oil refinery in Salah ad Din province that caused a fire and briefly shut down operations but did not cause casualties. ISIS also claimed three car bomb attacks in Anbar province and one suicide car bomb attack in Kirkuk province, which were all carried out against ISF checkpoints and convoys.[51]

According to the DoD OIG's independent analysis of publicly available data, ISIS also carried out nearly 50 attacks in Kirkuk province and more than 100 in Diyala.[52] Almost 180 of the attacks carried out in all provinces were classified as "small," resulting in 1 to 2 deaths and fewer than 5 wounded, and about 65 others produced no casualties; only 20 attacks were classified as "medium," defined as 3 to 7 deaths, with less than 10 wounded.[53] ISIS directed about 65 attacks against civilians.[54]

CJTF-OIR said there was a slight increase in ISIS attacks on civilians, typically Shias or those ISIS suspects of spying. ISIS also increased attacks on tribal members, including tribal leaders and members of the Tribal Mobilization Forces, compared to last quarter.[55] Last quarter, CJTF-OIR reported an uptick in attacks on Shia gatherings and religious targets, which it said were intended to foment sectarian unrest.[56]

The DIA reported that ISIS continued to seek to foment sectarian tension between Shia and Sunni Arabs living in Salah ad Din and other provinces in which it operates. ISIS also sought to exploit gaps in security coverage along a demarcation line that separates territory

The DIA reported that ISIS continued to seek to foment sectarian tension between Shia and Sunni Arabs living in Salah ad Din and other provinces in which it operates.

governed by Iraq's central government from territory governed by the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government.[57] As the DoD OIG has reported previously, ISIS has operated in this region since the loss of the territory it had seized in Iraq, and while the ISF and the Peshmerga have taken steps to develop joint security structures and conduct joint operations, they have yet to come to fruition.

The DoD OIG notes that the inability to secure the disputed region in northern Iraq is one of several concerning dynamics in the country. The patchwork of security forces operating across Iraq, the economic crisis in the country, and sectarian divides in some communities allow the ISIS insurgency to persist. Effectively degrading the ISIS insurgency will require political, economic, and social improvements in Iraq that will likely take years to fully develop.

ISIS Presence and Activity in Syria

ISIS CONTINUES SMALL-SCALE ATTACKS

As in previous quarters, ISIS operated across Syria, but focused its attacks mainly in areas controlled by the Syrian regime and areas held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and its affiliated governing body, the Self-administration of North and East Syria (SNES).[58] ISIS carried out small-scale attacks and assassinations against civilians and security forces in both areas, but, according to the DIA, ISIS did not claim any complex or high-profile attacks during the quarter.[59] The DIA defines complex as those that are bolder or more frequent, with larger formations and the use of combined arms, against hardened military targets, while high-profile attacks are those that result in high casualty rates.[60] United States Central Command (USCENTCOM) reported that the attacks indicated that the group still lacks the manpower and resources needed to conduct large-scale operations.[61]

CJTF-OIR reported that ISIS claimed 101 attacks across Syria this quarter—down from 131 last quarter—including 37 attacks in October, 29 attacks in November, and 35 attacks in December.[62] USCENTCOM reported that there were 68 ISIS-claimed attacks across Syria in the first eight weeks of the quarter, a more than 30 percent drop from the 102 attacks in the first eight weeks of the previous quarter. Compared with the same period in FY 2020, ISIS-claimed attacks were down by almost two-thirds, USCENTCOM said.[63]

According to the Rojava Information Center, a northeastern Syria-based research organization sympathetic to the SDF, ISIS attacks declined in SDF operating areas of northeastern Syria. The organization said that ISIS claimed 80 percent fewer attacks in November 2020 compared to November 2019, and that in November 2020, ISIS carried out the fewest number of attacks in single month since the group's territorial defeat in Syria in March 2019.[64] See Figure 2 on page 16 for data on attacks claimed by ISIS and locally reported attacks attributed to ISIS.

USCENTCOM reported that as in previous quarters, ISIS continued its tactic of assassinating military and civilian leaders in SDF areas in an attempt to exacerbate tensions between the Arab population and the Kurdish-led SDF authorities.[65] The DIA said that ISIS was able to operate clandestinely in SDF territory by exploiting ethnic tensions and intimidating the local population.[66]

Figure 2.

ISIS Attacks in Syria this Quarter
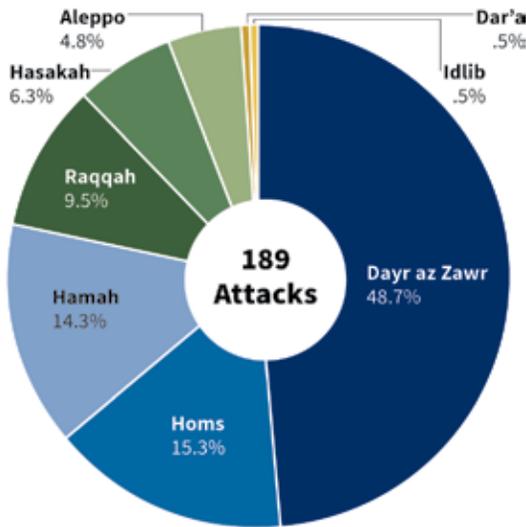
Sources: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) and Janes Terrorism and Insurgency database (Janes).
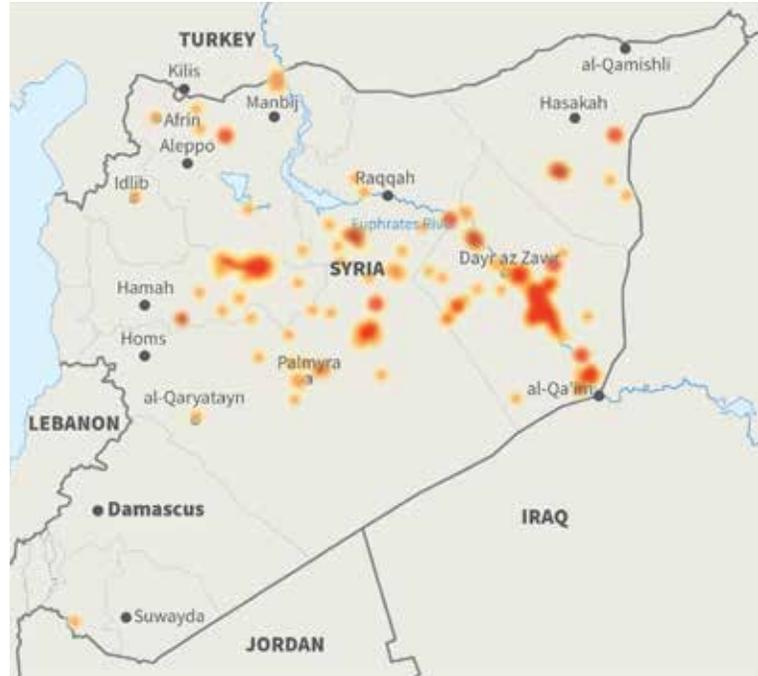
In all, ISIS claimed 27 attacks against SDF forces this quarter, according to CJTF-OIR.[67] USCENTCOM said that ISIS capabilities or operating patterns appeared to be the same in areas where the Coalition is active and in areas where the SDF operates without Coalition assistance.[68]

The DIA reported that this quarter ISIS sought to capitalize on the release of hundreds of Syrians with low-level links to ISIS from SDF-run detention facilities, as well as the reintegration of Syrian families from the al-Hol displaced persons camp. The DIA said that ISIS attempted to reintegrate newly released detainees and ISIS-affiliated families from al-Hol into its ranks and that, in the past, ISIS has bolstered its forces with released detainees.[69] The DoS Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) reported that it has not seen concrete evidence that Syrian families who were released from al-Hol—the vast majority women and children—were being recruited back into ISIS.[70] The DoS said it views the release of detainees as positive since it "responsibly reduces overcrowding in the SDF detention system."[71]

Officials described the release as part of a general amnesty for Syrian detainees who are not linked to violent terrorist acts, honor killings, espionage or drug trafficking.[72] Separately, OUSD(P) ISA reported that approximately 10,000 captured ISIS fighters remained in SDF detention.[73] Since the defeat of the ISIS territorial "caliphate" in Syria in March 2019, U.S. and Coalition officials have expressed concerns that the captured ISIS fighters held in crowded, ad-hoc SDF detention facilities pose a significant risk to the OIR campaign.[74] Similarly, U.S. and Coalition officials have called for a solution to the dangers posed by any ISIS-linked individuals living among and seeking to radicalize civilians at al-Hol and other internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in northeastern Syria.[75]

The DIA reported that although the SDF described the released detainees as "low-level" ISIS members, the SDF, with its constrained resources, had "limited capacity" to vet the released detainees.[76] Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) officials told reporters in October that 631 detainees with "no blood on their hands" had been released,[77] The Rojava Information Center reported that ISIS attacks in areas where those residents returned did not change following the releases.[78]

According to media reporting, the releases were in response to pressure from Arab community leaders in northeastern Syria.[79] SNES officials said the releases were intended to relieve pressure on SDF detention facilities and revitalize community relations, according to the Rojava Information Center.[80] More information about the release of Syrian nationals from detention and from al-Hol can be found on pages 58-59 and 68-70.

U.S. Army Soldiers scan for threats near an oil refinery in northeast Syria. (U.S. Army photo)

ISIS ATTACKS INCREASE IN DAYR AZ ZAWR PROVINCE AND OTHER AREAS UNDER SYRIAN REGIME CONTROL

Although ISIS activity in Syria decreased overall, CJTF-OIR reported that ISIS maintained its highest attack activity in the Middle Euphrates River Valley (MERV), which runs through Dayr az Zawr province, where both Syrian regime forces and the SDF operate. The MERV marks a dividing line between Syrian regime-controlled territory south and west of the river and SDF forces that operate in areas north and east of the river.[81] (See page 56 for a map showing forces' areas of operations in northeastern Syria.)

According to the DoD OIG's independent analysis of publicly available data and ISIS attack claims, ISIS carried out nearly half of its attacks in Syria this quarter in Dayr az Zawr province, followed by more than 15 percent in Homs province and 14 percent in Hamah province.[82] While ISIS attacked security forces on both sides of the Euphrates River, it carried out more frequent and larger scale attacks against Syrian regime forces and their supporters this quarter.[83] The highest-profile ISIS-attributed operation occurred on December 30, when ISIS fighters attacked a bus convoy carrying Syrian regime and pro-regime forces in Dayr az Zawr province, killing as many as 39, according to media and observer reporting.[84] The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an independent monitoring organization, described the incident as the deadliest ISIS attack in Syria in 2020.[85]

ISIS increased attacks in other areas under Syrian regime control. CJTF-OIR reported that ISIS activity increased in Homs and Hamah provinces.[86] Data compiled by the DoD OIG indicates that ISIS stepped-up assaults on Syrian regime positions in sparsely populated regions of the central Syrian Desert, including along the critical highway connecting the cities of Dayr az Zawr and Palmyra and in the tri-border area connecting Hamah, Aleppo, and Raqqah provinces.[87] The DIA reported that ISIS attacks targeted oil infrastructure in Homs province, while in southern Syria, the group stepped up attacks seeking to exploit unrest and bolster support from anti-regime factions operating there.[88] According to USCENTCOM, ISIS also conducted multiple attacks in Aleppo province.[89] The DIA assessed that ISIS continued to exploit a security vacuum in Aleppo and neighboring Idlib provinces in northwestern Syria to find sanctuary, and its fighters were increasingly hiding out in the Syrian Desert.[90]

The high levels of ISIS activity in regime-controlled areas of Syria reinforces a concern discussed in previous reports.[91] Specifically, CJTF-OIR only operates in northeastern Syria and the Tanf Garrison in the southeast near the Jordanian border, while ISIS has the ability to move throughout Syria. The DoD OIG notes that if the Syrian regime and its patrons, Russia and Iran, are unable to maintain adequate pressure on ISIS, then the group is likely to persist and remain a threat.

ISIS Smuggles Funds Across Iraq and Syria

As in previous quarters, ISIS used money services, including alternate money transmittal services known as hawalas, this quarter to move funds in and out of Iraq and Syria, often relying on logistical hubs in Turkey and in other financial centers.[92] The Department of the Treasury (Treasury) reported that ISIS supporters increasingly relied on cryptocurrencies to finance their operations.[93]

As in previous quarters, ISIS used money services, including alternate money transmittal services known as hawalas, this quarter to move funds in and out of Iraq and Syria, often relying on logistical hubs in Turkey and in other financial centers.

The Department of Justice has charged more than 185 individuals with terrorism related to ISIS, including foreign terrorist fighters and homegrown violent extremists, since 2014.

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.[94] ISIS probably has as much as $100 million available in cash reserves dispersed across the region, according to Treasury. However, Treasury reported that it does not know the amount of money ISIS distributed during this quarter.[95]

Treasury reported that it continued to work with interagency and Coalition partners, including the Iraqi government, to identify ISIS's financial reserves and financial leaders.[96] The efforts sought to disrupt ISIS financial facilitation networks in Iraq, and designate ISIS facilitators, front companies, and fundraisers in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and elsewhere.[97]

Department of Justice Reports Updates on Four ISIS-related Cases

The Department of Justice (DoJ) has charged more than 185 individuals with ISIS-related terrorism including foreign terrorist fighters and homegrown violent extremists, since 2014. Of that number, the DoJ has obtained 145 convictions, and the remaining cases are in various stages of litigation.[98]

The DoJ reported details of 4 cases this quarter involving indictments, convictions, and sentencings of persons accused of activity related to ISIS.

- **November 9, 2020**, Samantha Elhassani was sentenced to 78 months in prison and three years of supervised release after pleading guilty to financing terrorism by transferring money from the United States to Hong Kong to enable her husband to travel to Syria to join ISIS.

- **November 18, 2020**, Shahidul Gaffar and Nabila Khan pleaded guilty to conspiracy to provide material support and resources to ISIS by conspiring to provide financial support to two of Khan's brothers who traveled to Syria to join ISIS fighters.

- **November 20, 2020**, Murat Suljovic pleaded guilty to one count of attempting to provide material support to ISIS by posing as an ISIS leader and providing advice about how to plan an ISIS attack, including a bomb-making tutorial, to two people not identified in the indictment.

- **November 24, 2020**, Kristopher Sean Matthews pleaded guilty to conspiring to provide material support to ISIS by conspiring with a co-defendant to share bomb-making information for the purpose of domestic and foreign attacks on behalf of ISIS and to radicalize and recruit other individuals to support ISIS.

The DoJ also reported that since 2014, it has transferred 12 individuals from Iraq and Syria to the United States to face federal criminal charges related to terrorism. The total includes two individuals from Iraq and two from Syria who were transferred this quarter.[99]

Iranian-aligned Militias Inflame Sunni Resentment in Salah ad Din, an ISIS Hotspot

Salah ad Din province has consistently experienced high levels of ISIS violence throughout 2020. According to publicly available data, more ISIS attacks occurred in the central Iraqi province north of Baghdad in 2020 than in any other province except Diyala.[100] (See Figure 3.) Multiple attacks were complex—employing combined tactics or multiple points of assault—and resulted in a high number of casualties, including an attack in November that killed 10 people when ISIS ambushed ISF members responding to an IED attack on a civilian vehicle.[101] Additionally, ISIS conducted a spate of attacks in May that resulted in 20 deaths. CJTF-OIR described these attacks as "more audacious and larger scale" than those carried out in the preceding quarter and noted that they demonstrated evidence of "extensive pre-operational planning and preparation."[102]

According to the DIA, ISIS is able to take advantage of the province's sparse population and rural areas, gaps in coverage between security forces, and tension between the local majority Sunni population and Shia militias in the area. ISIS exploits these dynamics in Salah ad Din for safe haven. The DIA added that ISIS also exploited ongoing government crises that have reduced counterterrorism pressure on the group, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.[103] Meanwhile, the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported in April that 521,100 people residing in Salah ad Din province were in need of assistance, with only 34,300 receiving some kind of targeted support.[104]

The DIA said that ISIS members are most prevalent in the rural and mountainous regions of Salah ad Din, such as the Hamrin Mountains, the Jallam desert, and the desert highway corridors, from where ISIS fighters can avoid counterterrorism pressure and launch attacks.[105] The DIA observed that ISIS has at times blocked commercial and civilian traffic along the Bayji-Hadithah pipeline and Bayji-Mosul pipeline roads. ISIS continues to target the ISF, Shia militias, Sunni Tribal Mobilization Forces, police, Sunni civilians, and infrastructure, predominantly through small-scale attacks, such as armed assaults, IEDs, and sniper attacks. The DIA reported that in December, ISIS launched two rockets at the Siniyah oil refinery, starting a fire that caused the refinery to temporarily pause operations.[106]

CJTF-OIR reported that local ISF units conduct battalion- and brigade-level operations on a weekly basis in the province, as determined by leadership within the Salah ad Din Operational Command. Additionally, CJTF-OIR said that ISF units from the operational command participated in two large-scale Joint Operations Command–Iraq (JOC-I)-led operations this quarter.[107] CJTF-OIR said that the Kurdish Peshmerga did not conduct any counter-ISIS operations in Salah ad Din during the quarter because they do not operate in the province given its location outside of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region.[108]

CJTF-OIR also reported that the Coalition's Military Advisor Group (MAG), which advises and enables the ISF, has a "functioning operational relationship" with the Salah ad Din Operational Command. For example, CJTF-OIR said that an advisor from the MAG works with a liaison officer from the Salah ad Din Operational Command on any operations that are conducted and ensures appropriate officers are vetted to receive equipment from the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF). CJTF-OIR added that the Salah ad Din Operational Command is very involved in the counter-ISIS campaign and receives CTEF divestments to ensure it can continue counter-ISIS operations. CJTF-OIR reported that the designated MAG advisor has created a "strong relationship" with the ISF commander and other key leaders of the Salah ad Din Operational Command, but that the relationship is limited to the

Figure 3.

Salah ad Din Province
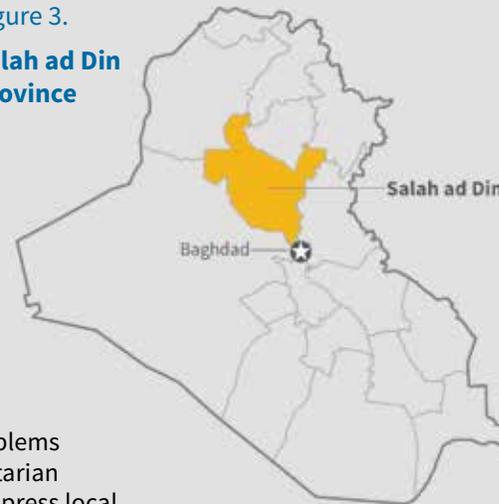
command leadership and the liaison officer. CJTF-OIR specified that the MAG has no coordination with the ISF at the division-level or below across all operational commands.[109]

SHIA MILITIAS EXERT "STRONG INFLUENCE" ON LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND SECURITY

USCENTCOM reported that PMF and Iranian-aligned militia groups operating in Sunni areas of the province exacerbated a variety of humanitarian and security problems in Salah ad Din.[110] The DIA also assessed the risk for sectarian violence in Salah ad Din is high because Shia militias oppress local Sunni populations.[111]

The DIA and USCENTCOM pointed to an incident in October when 12 Sunni civilians were kidnapped and at least 8 were killed in Farhatiya village in Salah ad Din.[112] The DIA said local authorities suspect the Iranian-backed Shia militia Asaib Ahl al-Haq conducted the attack in retaliation for an ISIS attack on one of their positions.[113] USCENTCOM reported that the incident is still under investigation, with many Iraqis claiming Iranian-aligned militias carried out the killings despite PMF assertions that ISIS was responsible.[114] The DoS blamed "Iran-backed militias" in a statement that condemned "the massacre of innocent civilians."[115]

According to the DIA, Shia militias operate in Salah ad Din province to conduct operations against ISIS and protect religious shrines. The DIA reported that Asaib Ahl al-Haq-aligned brigades affiliated with the Popular Mobilization Committee probably have the largest presence in the area, followed by the Saraya al-Salam, a militia headed by Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr that focuses on shrine protection in and around the holy city of Samarra.[116]

The DIA assessed that operations in Salah ad Din conducted by these militias have given them "strong influence" on local governance and security, which they have partially maintained "through intimidation and coercion" since ISIS's territorial losses in the area in 2015.[117] USCENTCOM reported that local government and tribal officials continue to work through some humanitarian and security problems in the province even as they face violence, extortion, and political opposition from Iranian-aligned militias.[118]

USCENTCOM stated that the militia groups primarily leverage the al-Fatah Alliance, an Iranian-aligned political bloc with significant representation in the Iraqi parliament, to challenge Sunni influence in Salah ad Din and strive for economic, political, and security superiority, with limited yet disruptive results. For instance, according to USCENTCOM, many Iraqis believe that al-Fatah party members and Iranian-aligned militias are purposely delaying the return of internally displaced families who evacuated due to the counter-ISIS fight several years ago. Overall, USCENTCOM assessed that the coercive tactics used by Iranian-aligned militias operating in the Sunni-dominated province stoke tensions, build public resentment, and degrade the ability of local governments to provide essential services and security, contributing to an environment that ISIS seeks to exploit.[119]

EVENTS IN IRAQ

ACTIONS CONDUCTED AGAINST ISIS IN IRAQ

Coalition Advises ISF, Conducts Airstrikes Against ISIS

As in previous quarters, CJTF-OIR continued to advise the ISF from consolidated bases regarding intelligence, operations, fire support, sustainment, and air support during operations conducted against ISIS during this quarter.[120] Coalition advisors coached the ISF remotely from Baghdad, including on the use of organic Iraqi capabilities, while Coalition troops stationed at al-Asad Air Base provided enabler support.[121] In Erbil, Coalition forces continued to encourage and enable security cooperation between the ISF and the Kurdish Peshmerga.[122]

CJTF-OIR reported that Coalition advisors remained engaged throughout ISF operations, but said that the ISF often conducted its own operational planning of activities against ISIS.[123] However, CJTF-OIR also said that the ISF still seeks Coalition support during some operations. Most often, the ISF needs support during "dynamic targeting" of ISIS, typically in urgent or unplanned situations.[124]

Additionally, the Coalition undertook numerous airstrikes targeting ISIS in Iraq, executing nearly 30 sorties in October and November. The data for December was not available as of the time of publication.[125] See Figure 4 for data on ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

U.S. Marines maintain an F/A-18C Hornet on the flight deck of the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz while conducting missions in support of OIR. (U.S. Navy photo)

Figure 4.

Coalition Airstrikes Targeting ISIS in Iraq and Syria, December 2019 through November 2020

Note: Data were not available for January and May 2020.

Sources: CJTF-OIR, press releases, "CJTF-OIR Strike Summary Report," 2/13/2020, 3/24/2020, 4/30/2020, 6/24/2020, 9/8/2020, 9/14/2020, 10/29/2020, 12/14/2020, and 1/6/2021.
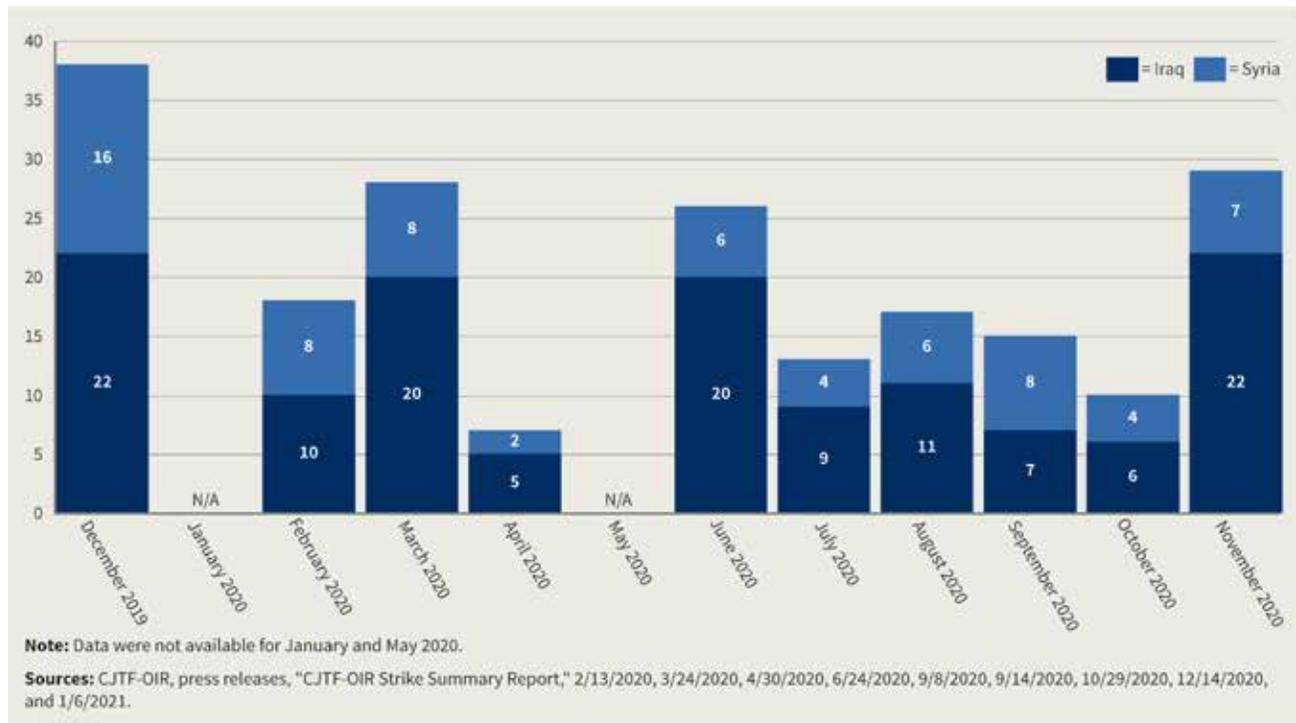
ISF Conducts Independent Operations, but Still Relies on Coalition for ISR and Air Support

CJTF-OIR reported that ISF operations against ISIS occurred throughout northern and western Iraq, primarily during daylight hours and independent of Coalition ground support.[126] The operations included ground clearance, static security operations, helicopter assault force operations, and interdictions, and frequently resulted in ISIS fighters killed, CJTF-OIR said.[127]

CJTF-OIR reported that the "Heroes of Iraq" campaign against ISIS concluded last quarter. CJTF-OIR said that during the campaign, which occurred throughout most of 2020, the ISF cleared hundreds of villages across thousands of square miles, destroying ISIS hideouts and killing or capturing ISIS fighters.[128] CJTF-OIR reported that the "Heroes" campaign was effective in finding ISIS bed-down locations and recovering or destroying ISIS weapons and ammunition.[129]

However, CJTF-OIR reported that it did not assess the Heroes of Iraq campaign separately from the ISF's other operations against ISIS or assess the individual Iraqi units that participated in the campaign.[130] CJTF-OIR reported that Heroes operations spanned across multiple regional operational commands and generally covered a larger area of operations than those conducted outside of the campaign. Heroes of Iraq operations were also marginally longer and involved more ISF elements than standard daily operations.[131]

This quarter, the ISF Deputy Commander directed "larger, longer, and more involved operations" that were not under the Heroes of Iraq campaign, CJTF-OIR said.[132] According to CJTF-OIR, the new operations vastly reduced the amount of ministerial coordination that was required during Heroes of Iraq. Furthermore, the operations also involved focusing on leadership effectiveness by replacing under-performing commanders and relocating numerous brigades to root out ineffectiveness and break corrupt relationships that previous leaders may have made with local populations.[133]

According to CJTF-OIR, operations carried out against ISIS during the quarter restricted ISIS's freedom of movement, disrupted the group's ability to access urban centers, and degraded ISIS leadership and resources. They also depleted ISIS manpower, forcing the group to rely on inexperienced fighters, CJTF-OIR said.[134]

As in previous quarters, the ISF conducted multiple operations against ISIS supported by its own intelligence and operational planning.[135] CJTF-OIR said that the ISF successfully executed operations against ISIS that incorporated Iraqi ISR, strikes, and ground operations, and showcased its ability to conduct ISR and airstrikes using F-16, Cessna AC/RC-208, and Su-25 aircraft.[136]

In one instance, the ISF successfully employed an armed ISR asset to find and kill a high-value ISIS fighter, which CJTF-OIR said was a sign of progress.[137] The ISF also incorporated Air Weapons Teams into regional clearance operations at the battalion level and below.[138]

However, CJTF-OIR reported that the ISF continued to request Coalition ISR and aerial strike support during operations against ISIS. Coalition advisors continued to encourage the Iraqi Air Force to conduct ISR sorties with organic assets, helping the ISF gain experience and confidence using their own capabilities.[139]

CTS Conducts More Operations Unilaterally

CJTF-OIR reported that the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) conducted approximately 172 unilateral operations against ISIS, 50 percent more than last quarter. The operations resulted in 68 detentions of ISIS suspects, a 50 percent increase in the number of ISIS suspects detained under warrant over last quarter.[140]

SELECTED KEY EVENTS, OCTOBER 1, 2020–DECEMBER 31, 2020

OCTOBER 9
The Iraqi government and the Kurdish Regional Government sign an agreement on reconstruction of the Sinjar region in Ninewa province, paving the way for displaced Yazidis to return home

OCTOBER 18
The Iraqi government and the UNDP sign new memorandum to combat corruption

OCT | NOV

OCTOBER 10
Iranian-aligned militias say that they will cease attacks against U.S. and Coalition forces with the condition that the United States announces a timeline to withdraw troops from Iraq

OCTOBER 21–28
ISIS launches its 7th global attack campaign, carrying out 29 attacks—fewer than during previous campaigns
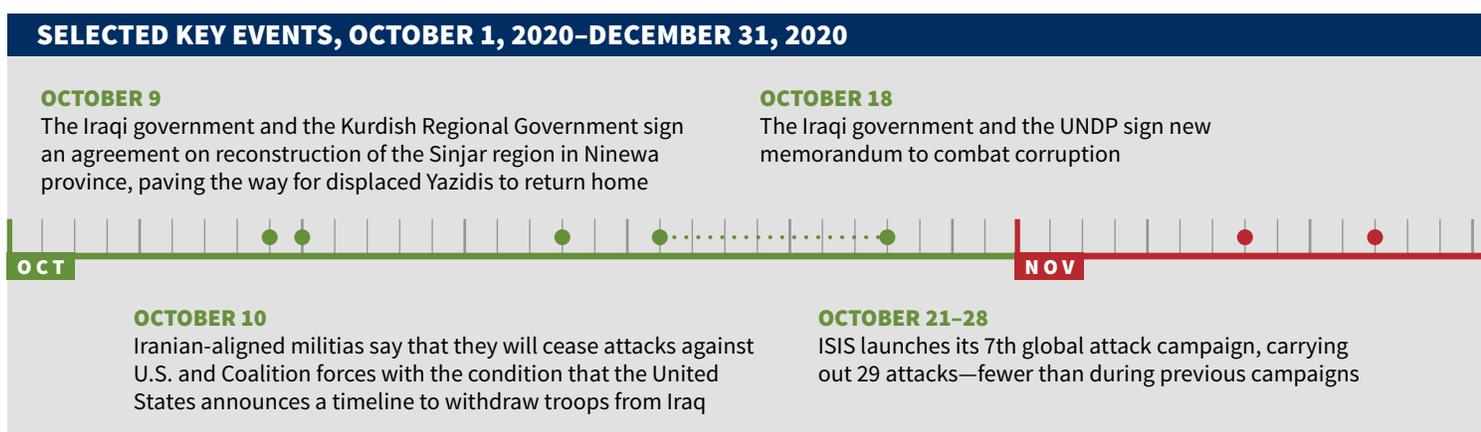
CJTF-OIR said that CTS operations continued to deny ISIS safe havens and freedom of maneuver throughout the Coalition's area of operations, and that the CTS is increasingly capable of conducting unilateral operations.[141] The CTS did not rely on Coalition rotary wing assets this quarter. Instead, the CTS relied on Iraqi Army Aviation support to carry out operations against ISIS.[142]

> **CJTF-OIR said that CTS operations continued to deny ISIS safe havens and freedom of maneuver throughout the Coalition's area of operations, and that the CTS is increasingly capable of conducting unilateral operations.**

Peshmerga Operations Against ISIS

Kurdish Peshmerga forces conducted operations against ISIS in northern Iraq this quarter. For instance, according to a media report, the Peshmerga launched a raid in Kirkuk in October to apprehend ISIS fighters who had claimed responsibility for killing three Kurdish farmers in an area of the province where gaps in security allow ISIS to operate.[143]

The operation occurred close to the "Kurdish Control Line," a demarcation that stretches across northern Iraqi provinces and divides territory secured by the ISF from territory secured by the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government.[144] Speaking to reporters in December, the director of the Kurdistan Coordination Center said that the threat from ISIS was "particularly strong" in some of the areas along the Kurdish Control Line that are claimed by both sides.[145]

Speaking to reporters in November, a Coalition spokesperson said that the ISF and the Peshmerga had "maintained a relentless rhythm of operations" to disrupt ISIS, enabled by Coalition support.[146] However, the two forces did not conduct joint operations against ISIS this quarter. Instead, ISF and Peshmerga personnel based at the joint coordination centers shared intelligence and coordinated ground movements.[147] The center's director said that the Coalition also shared intelligence, advised at the operational level, and provided military equipment to the Peshmerga.[148]

To address the gaps in security, Coalition forces took steps to enhance joint ISF-Peshmerga coordination centers in Baghdad and Erbil.[149] CJTF-OIR reported that the Peshmerga have three officers in the Baghdad coordination center and that the ISF has six officers in the Erbil center to coordinate security efforts against ISIS. In October, the ISF and the Peshmerga agreed to continue to coordinate from these centers.[150]

NOVEMBER 8
ISIS insurgents attack a tribal militia outpost southwest of Baghdad, killing 5 militiamen and 6 civilians

NOVEMBER 19
USCENTCOM announces plans to reduce the number of U.S. troops in Iraq to 2,500 by January 15, 2021. Prior to the announcement, there were 3,000 U.S. troops in Iraq

DEC

NOVEMBER 12
The Iraqi parliament approves an emergency deficit law allowing the government to borrow funds to pay public wages. Kurdish lawmakers boycott the vote, calling the Kurdish region's share of budget "unfair"

DECEMBER 20
Iranian-aligned militias launch 21 rockets at Baghdad's International Zone, striking U.S. Embassy buildings, in the largest rocket attack on the embassy since 2010

These joint coordination centers have enabled intelligence and operational design sharing for future operations, according to CJTF-OIR.[151] CJTF-OIR said that operational design sharing develops campaigns and operations to meet desired end states, with the goal of sharing intelligence and developing operations to jointly defeat ISIS.[152] Additionally, although a joint center in Kirkuk has not been formally opened, CJTF-OIR reported "evidence" of ISF-Peshmerga security coordination in Kirkuk.[153]

CJTF-OIR said that the goal of the Joint Operations Centers is to deny ISIS safe haven in disputed territory by sharing intelligence and coordinating operations on both sides of the Kurdistan Control Line. The ISF will retain command and control of operations south of the line, while the Peshmerga will retain command and control north of the line, CJTF-OIR said. Operations will be coordinated to prevent ISIS fighters from moving over the line as a means of avoiding the security forces.[154]

CJTF-OIR reported that the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs has 14 brigades primarily manning checkpoints to interdict ISIS movement along the Kurdish Control Line, including in Diyala, Kirkuk, and Ninewa provinces. Other Peshmerga forces are spread throughout the semi-autonomous Kurdish region to form an additional 14 brigades that include tanks and artillery.[155]

According to CJTF-OIR, the ISF and Peshmerga met in October to discuss operations across the Kurdish Control Line and established Diyala province as the first "area of interest" for a combined operation against ISIS.[156]

As previously noted by the DoD OIG, coordination between the ISF and the Peshmerga has been taking place for several years, yet it has not resulted in significant improvements in security in the disputed territory between areas secured by federal Iraq and those secured by the KRG. The DoD OIG notes that ISIS continues to exploit this territory and will likely do so until security forces are able to fill this gap.

U.S. Army representatives meet with Iraqi Security Forces and Peshmerga leadership. (U.S. Army Reserve photo)

PARTNER FORCE DEVELOPMENT IN IRAQ

One of the core areas where the ISF still requires Coalition training and capacity building is intelligence collection and fusing several sources of intelligence together to enable effective targeting.

Partner force development and building partner capacity programming became a smaller share of CJTF-OIR's mission in 2020 as the ISF took responsibility for training its own forces. Last quarter, CJTF-OIR reported that the ISF no longer required large-scale training from the Coalition.[157] This quarter, CJTF-OIR reported that the ISF demonstrated responsibility for conducting its own training and an increased ability to conduct unilateral counter-ISIS operations. However, CJTF-OIR said that the MAG no longer has personnel integrated into Iraqi training bases to assess the type, effectiveness, or frequency of ISF training.[158]

CJTF-OIR and OSC-I Seek to Improve ISF Intelligence Collection and Targeting Capabilities

One of the core areas where the ISF still requires Coalition training and capacity building is intelligence collection and fusion to enable effective targeting. In previous quarters, USCENTCOM stated that the ISF lacked capacity in its intelligence-driven targeting, resulting in Iraqi Air Force reticence to use their platforms in combat roles from April to September 2020. Meanwhile, CJTF-OIR reported last quarter that Iraqi ISR was "significantly" degraded.[159] This quarter, CJTF-OIR reported that there was no change to the degraded state of the ISF's technical intelligence collection or ISR, including aerial or ground-based systems.[160]

According to CJTF-OIR, the ISF is very capable of collecting and analyzing intelligence that supports targeting, especially at the operational command level. However, CJTF-OIR explained that ISF intelligence collection through theater-level ISR platforms remains a shortcoming.[161]

CJTF-OIR stated that the Iraqi Air Force's KA-350 aircraft in service is Iraq's most capable theater-level ISR platform, but it is comparatively less capable than Coalition assets.[162] CJTF-OIR explained that the expectations of Iraqi JOC-I leadership were determined by the clarity of full motion video feeds from ISR platforms that were displayed on the Enhanced Joint Operations Center screens. CJTF-OIR said that the systems onboard Iraqi KA-350 aircraft are of lower quality than Coalition systems and that the KA-350 is only able to fly a 4- to 5-hour sortie that results in 2 to 3 hours on station, while Coalition ISR systems are able to maintain 18 hours on station. Additionally, CJTF-OIR said there are limited KA-350 aircraft available in the ISF fleet, but they are used when available, many times without coordination with Coalition operations and intelligence advisor input. CJTF-OIR also said that Iraqi KA-350 crews recently have complained about susceptibility to "jamming" and spectrum interference that disrupts operations.[163]

OUSD(P) ISA also told the DoD OIG that the ISF has some outdated ISR equipment and lacks the training, planning processes, and sustainment resources necessary to integrate ISR capabilities consistently.[164] However, CJTF-OIR said that the ISF's ISR is much more capable at the tactical level, where operational commands coordinate directly with Iraqi Army Aviation Air Weapon Teams to use fixed and rotary winged aircraft to collect in advance of smaller ground operations.[165]

CJTF-OIR said that asset shortfalls aside, the Coalition continued to interface with the ISF during the quarter to improve its intelligence collection management and analysis.[166] CJTF-OIR reported that the ISF JOC-I Deputy Commander is very interested in renewing specific training opportunities for intelligence officers. CJTF-OIR said that in response to this expression of interest, the Coalition Intelligence Targeting Branch provided two training courses to the ISF in December.[167] The targeting branch provided the first course on ISR collection management to intelligence staff from the ISF's JOC-I and regional operational commands and included training on the ISR intelligence cycle and ISR collection planning, management, execution, and dissemination. CJTF-OIR reported that the second course trained ISF senior staff (Colonel and above) on the four pillars of joint fires: targeting, intelligence fusion, effects planning, and battle damage assessment.[168]

CJTF-OIR assessed that as a direct result of the collection management training the Coalition provided this quarter, the ISF is beginning to understand that effects are improved if intelligence collection is coordinated across the enterprise rather than executed in silos where intelligence requirements are generated and disseminated at the regional operational command level only. CJTF-OIR said one example of this improvement is a recent "intelligence preparation of the battlefield" report generated by ISF intelligence personnel ahead of an operation that involved multiple regional operational commands. The ISF gathered and coordinated pertinent operational intelligence and generated and presented a coordinated intelligence briefing to ISF operational commanders, according to CJTF-OIR.[169]

Additionally, OUSD(P) ISA reported that to assist the ISF with a persistent surveillance capability and enable the identification of threats against Iraqi sovereignty, CJTF-OIR procured Rapid Aerostat Initial Deployment towers with funds from CTEF and is in the process of providing them to the Iraqi Ministry of Defense (MoD). OUSD(P) ISA also said that through the DoS's foreign military sales program, OSC-I facilitated the training of 74 MoD intelligence personnel to operate and maintain the towers.[170]

USCENTCOM reported that through the DoS's foreign military financing (FMF) program, OSC-I provided capabilities to the ISF that increased their capacity for intelligence fusion and precision targeting, including intelligence management systems, unmanned capabilities, and a forensics laboratory.[171] The unmanned capabilities OSC-I provided to the ISF included 18 RQ-20 Puma and 16 ScanEagle tactical unmanned aerial vehicles that were delivered prior to this quarter.[172]

ISF Demonstrates the Ability to Integrate Mortars into Maneuvers, but Fire Support Gaps Remain

CJTF-OIR reported that the ISF is capable of planning and conducting joint operations and remains able to conduct regular search and clearance operations.[173] CJTF-OIR noted that through routine operations under single-operational commands and periodic operations spanning multiple regional commands, the ISF is able to deny ISIS terrain from which they have historically operated.[174]

CJTF-OIR reported that ISF units used organic fire support assets, mostly to shape operations and often a day or so before ground maneuver units moved on targets.[175] CJTF-

The ISF is beginning to understand that effects are improved if intelligence collection is coordinated across the enterprise rather than executed in silos where intelligence requirements are generated and disseminated at the regional operational command-level only.

OIR said that each iteration served to increase ISF confidence that it has an "operationally viable and indigenous counter-ISIS capability."[176] CJTF-OIR reported that MAG fire support advisors continue to work with their Iraqi counterparts in the JOC-I on a daily basis and have observed that their Iraqi counterparts are capable of employing their own fire support when directed. For example, CJTF-OIR said the ISF showed adequate capabilities in conducting 11 airstrikes using fixed and rotary wing aircraft this quarter.[177] CJTF-OIR said that the MAG fire support team embeds in each planning meeting for future ISF major operations in order to advise on the integration of fire support.[178]

CJTF-OIR told the DoD OIG that gaps still exist in the ISF's surface-to-surface fire support operations this quarter that require "more work for integration."[179] However, CJTF-OIR did note that the ISF successfully used mortars in support of one ground clearance operation to shape the battlespace prior to bridging efforts to cross a river.[180] CJTF-OIR noted that although this is an incremental change, in their assessment the ISF did demonstrate the ability to establish a position with multiple mortar tubes set-up in "well-developed mortar pits" and provided fire support for multi-day operations.[181] CJTF-OIR said that dialogue continues with key Iraqi artillery leaders to try to advance the ISF's ability to execute surface-to-surface fires and that another training seminar regarding artillery is currently in the planning phase.[182]

Iraqi F-16s Absent from Coalition Air Tasking Order, Conduct Four Nontraining Sorties During Quarter

CJTF-OIR reported that there has been no fundamental change in the ISF's air capabilities since the previous quarter. According to CJTF-OIR, the Iraqi Air Force continues to deliver ISR sorties with both their KA-350 and AC/RC-208 aircraft in support of ISF objectives and demonstrated the capability to conduct deliberate aerial interdiction missions with their F-16 and Su-25 fighters.[183] CJTF-OIR also stated, as in previous quarters, that the Iraqi Air Force did not conduct close air support, tactical reconnaissance, or counter air missions during the quarter, nor has it demonstrated a change in its ability to perform these types of missions.[184]

USCENTCOM reported that 12 additional U.S. contractors returned to Iraq to support the Iraqi Air Force's F-16 program, bringing the total number of contractors supporting the program to 85 as of December 22.

USCENTCOM reported that 12 additional U.S. contractors returned to Iraq to support the Iraqi Air Force's F-16 program, bringing the total number of contractors supporting the program to 85 as of December 22. In early 2020, a combination of regional threats and the impact of COVID-19 prevented contractors from directly supporting Iraq's F-16s at Balad Air Base, which, according to USCENTCOM, caused Iraqi pilots to lack confidence that their aircraft would be adequately supported should maintenance or technical difficulties arise.[185] Last quarter, USCENTCOM stated that U.S. contractors began to return, allowing Iraq's F-16s to rejoin air tasking order-detailed combat missions on September 1, marking the first flown by the Iraqi Air Force since April 2020.[186]

This quarter, USCENTCOM reported that 75 percent of the Iraqi Air Force's F-16s were fully mission capable or partially mission capable. However, USCENTCOM said that because of a lack of dedicated Coalition air advisor support and the lack of secure communications at Balad Air Base, Iraq's F-16s were not placed on the Coalition's air tasking order this quarter.[187]

Iraqi Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcons conduct a training mission over Iraq. (U.S. Air Force photo)

USCENTCOM explained that when Coalition air advisors were located at Balad Air Base, they coordinated with the Combined Air Operations Center in Qatar to add Iraqi F-16s for strikes. USCENTCOM said that this coordination was lost in January 2020, when Coalition Air Advisors were removed from Balad, resulting in the Iraqi F-16s not being included in the Coalition's tasking order for strikes.[188]

Despite this, the security spokesperson for the Iraqi Prime Minister's office reported that Iraqi F-16s conducted strikes on ISIS targets on November 7.[189] USCENTCOM also reported that the Iraqi F-16s conducted two strikes during the quarter, utilizing GBU-12 laser-guided bombs with assistance from the Coalition Force Strike Cell located at the JOC-I in Baghdad. In total, USCENTCOM reported that of 271 sorties conducted by Iraqi F-16s this quarter, 267 were dedicated to training. USCENTCOM added that the Iraqi Air Force averages four F-16 training sorties per day, but the goal is to achieve eight training sorties per day with continued contractor support.[190]

USCENTCOM stated that it is not clear who has approval authority for Iraqi Air Force F-16 strikes, with authority likely shifting among the Iraqi Air Force Command, the JOC-I, and the prime minister. Additionally, USCENTCOM said that the Iraqi Air Force does not produce a U.S.-style air tasking order due to security concerns and that Iraqi missions are "scheduled as required."[191] USCENTCOM could not say when Coalition air advisor support and secure communications would return to Balad Air Base, given this is CJTF-OIR's responsibility.[192] USCENTCOM also reported that OSC-I realigned $110 million of FMF funding to support operations, life support, and security at Balad Air Base for calendar year 2021 that will enable continued counterterrorism operations, but that FMF funding does not support the Coalition air advisors at the base.[193]

CJTF-OIR, however, noted that the Iraqi Air Force decreased its reliance on Coalition forces to locate, target, and strike ISIS bed down locations this quarter.[194] Additionally, CJTF-OIR reported that the Iraqi Air Force, with assistance from Czech contractors, returned two

L-159 aircraft to flight status.[195] CJTF-OIR explained that the Czech-made L-159s have only recently returned to flying status after an extended grounding and that pilots will need to regain proficiency. CJTF-OIR added that the L-159 is capable of performing as a light attack platform using air-to-ground weapons.[196]

Meanwhile, CJTF-OIR reported—as it did last quarter—that the Iraqi Army Aviation Command continued to execute counter-ISIS operations across the ISF's operational commands, producing "tangible results."[197] CJTF-OIR said this included almost daily operations by ISF Air Weapons Teams, or attack helicopters, in delivering support to ground troops and striking targets of opportunity. CJTF-OIR also reported that ISF rotary-wing aircraft routinely conducted the full spectrum of combat support taskings, from the movement of personnel and materiel to casualty evacuation.[198]

OSC-I Works with Iraq's Security Ministries to Tackle Corruption and Reform the Security Sector

OUSD(P) ISA reported that the ISF still faces challenges at the institutional level, which the OSC-I is working to address.[199] The U.S. Government established OSC-I in 2011 to manage security cooperation between the United States and Iraq after the conclusion of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Based at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, OSC-I operates under Chief of Mission authority; it receives personnel, as well as broad policy and prioritization guidance from USCENTCOM, conducts defense institution building and security cooperation and is intended to serve as the primary vehicle for U.S. security cooperation with Iraq when OIR concludes.[200]

According to USCENTCOM, OSC-I executed a number of activities this quarter that directly focus on long-term security sector reform and support defense institution building. USCENTCOM said these activities include security assistance, workshops, stakeholder conferences, and attending ISF committee meetings.[201]

Specifically, USCENTCOM said OSC-I's Security Sector Reform Group coordinated the first 4 in a series of 12 readiness workshops facilitated by the Institute for Security Governance, tailored to meet the needs of the Iraqi MoD's Readiness Office and focused on "transparent, objective, and public measures of readiness."[202] USCENTCOM explained that the MoD Readiness Office is responsible for measuring the strategic readiness of the Iraqi military and assessing, based on integrated reporting by the ISF's five service commands, whether Iraqi forces are able to execute the tasks assigned to them by the Iraq's National Military Strategy.[203] USCENTCOM said that it is too early to evaluate the effectiveness of the MoD Readiness Office and once all the workshops are delivered evaluation can begin. However, USCENTCOM did note that the Iraqis demonstrated an advanced level of engagement and preparedness with the subject matter and referenced lessons learned from OSC-I during subsequent workshops with NATO Mission-Iraq (NMI).[204] According to USCENTCOM, OSC-I also officially began a series of dialogues between the Security Sector Reform Group and the MoD's newly formed Security Reform Committee.[205]

USCENTCOM reported that addressing corruption within security institutions is also a priority for Prime Minister al-Kadhimi's cabinet. In December 2020, the Iraqi government affirmed its commitment to addressing corruption by signing a new memorandum of

understanding with the United Nations Development Programme in support of a reform plan to combat corruption in Iraq. USCENTCOM said that corruption in Iraq's security institutions often takes place due to a lack of bureaucratic and administrative oversight. The most notable is the "ghost soldier" phenomenon, where soldiers exist only on paper and their pay is effectively stolen, resulting in the loss of hundreds of millions of dollars every month, according to USCENTCOM.[206]

USCENTCOM reported that to improve administrative oversight, OSC-I, in conjunction with the European Union Advisory Mission-Iraq and the NMI, has put in place multi-year human resource management system procurement and delivery programs for the Iraqi MoD, the CTS, and the Iraqi Ministry of Interior's Border Guards. USCENTCOM said that the human resource management system will move the ISF administrative functions from localized paper-based systems to a national web-based system that will track promotions, retirements, legal actions, recruitment, skills, and the transfer of personnel, as well as reduce corruption.[207] OUSD(P) ISA also stated that OSC-I is working with the U.S. Army Communications–Electronics Command to deliver the system, which is funded through FMF.[208] USCENTCOM reported that this multi-phased program is expected to be complete in Fiscal Year 2022.[209]

Additionally, USCENTCOM reported that OSC-I organized the first in a series of anti-corruption virtual stakeholder meetings for international organizations active in Iraq's anti-corruption space to advertise and align the anti-corruption activities of organizations active both within and on the periphery of the ISF. According to USCENTCOM, the attendees included the World Bank, NMI, the UN Office on Drugs & Crime, the EU Advisory Mission-Iraq, the UN Development Programme, USAID, the Defense Institute of International Legal Studies, and the DoD's Institute for Security Governance. USCENTCOM stated that although the meeting was designed as a one-off event, participants requested a series of future anti-corruption stakeholder meetings with focused agendas.[210]

USCENTCOM told the DoD OIG that OSC-I also commissioned the DoD's Defense Security Cooperation University to deliver a virtual "Foreign Military Sales Executive Course" to members of the acquisition community from Iraq's MoD, MoI, CTS, and Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs.[211] USCENTCOM said the course, which occurred in December 2020, was designed to highlight the Iraqis' roles and responsibilities in the foreign military sales process and to expose them to international norms regarding transparent, objective procurement.[212]

USCENTCOM added that those who attended the course will receive further education via a follow-up "Anti-Corruption Table Top Exercise" delivered by the Defense Institute of International Legal Studies. The follow-up exercise will give participants an understanding of public procurement concepts coupled with the ability to identify the red flags of possible fraud and corruption in accordance with international norms, according to USCENTCOM.[213]

The DoS reported that U.S. Government personnel did not conduct enhanced end-use monitoring of U.S.-supplied military equipment during the quarter due to the security concerns, the COVID-19 pandemic, restricted movement of OSC-I personnel, and reduction of OSC-I personnel at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.[214] The CTS provided 70 percent of

the required accountability documentation to OSC-I, while the Iraqi MoD and Ministry of Interior provided none.[215] However, the DoS reported that it is not aware of any evidence that the Iraqi government conducted third-party transfer of U.S.-supplied equipment.[216]

Lastly, OUSD(P) ISA reported that the Iraqi Air Defense Command, Iraqi Air Force, and Iraqi Navy rely on contracted support to conduct maintenance and that OSC-I is working with all three entities to strengthen Iraq's indigenous maintenance capabilities. According to OUSD(P) ISA, OSC-I is emphasizing the need for incorporating mentorship and training requirements into maintenance support contractors' statements of work.[217]

ROLE OF THIRD PARTIES IN IRAQ

Threat From Iranian-aligned Militias Reemerges as Ceasefire Frays

The DIA reported that despite a reduction in attacks this quarter, Iranian-aligned militias still pose a high threat to U.S. interests in Iraq.

The DIA reported that despite a reduction in attacks this quarter, Iranian-aligned militias still pose a high threat to U.S. interests in Iraq. The DIA cited ongoing public warnings and the militias' ability to surge attacks against U.S. facilities and U.S.-contracted logistic convoys, as was demonstrated last quarter.[218] According to USCENTCOM and press reporting, the spike in attacks last quarter ceased following a rocket attack in Baghdad on September 28 that killed five children and two women and sparked widespread condemnation.[219] Shia militia leaders announced a unilateral 40-day ceasefire on October 10, which the DIA called a "temporary operational pause" in accordance with Iranian guidance and contingent on firm progress toward a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq.[220]

The DIA reported, however, that the pause in attacks appeared to be fraying as of mid-November, citing an attack on Baghdad's International Zone using probable 122mm rockets and several IED attacks on a U.S.-contracted logistics convoy in southern Iraq.[221] USCENTCOM said that although the indirect fire attack on November 17 targeting the U.S. Embassy was publicly claimed online by a group called "Ashab al-Kahf," the post was deleted within a day. USCENTCOM noted that a number of Iranian-aligned militias made public statements condemning the attack.[222] The DIA explained that Iranian-aligned militias continue using front groups to claim attacks, probably to provide plausible deniability and disassociate the attacks from militias affiliated with the Popular Mobilization Committee (PMC), which is an official element of Iraq's security apparatus.[223] According to USCENTCOM, the September 28 attack was also not publicly attributed to any group.[224]

Another indirect fire attack targeted the U.S. Embassy on December 20, according to USCENTCOM.[225] General McKenzie, who had visited Iraq 12 hours prior to the attack, described it as the "biggest attack" on the International Zone in Baghdad since 2010, noting that 20 rockets were launched in the attack.[226]

CJTF-OIR and USCENTCOM reported that militia groups affected the OIR mission this quarter by diverting ISR assets away from the counter-ISIS campaign in order to support Coalition force protection.[227] USCENTCOM explained that each airborne asset or ISR sortie that is directed to provide force protection against Iranian and Iranian-aligned militia threats is an asset that is not available to support the ISF and counter-ISIS activities.[228] CJTF-OIR

added that though the actual force protection operations are carried out by the ISF, they lack ISR resources to keep over watch of emerging security situations, including the 1-year anniversary of the "October Revolution" demonstrations in Baghdad, or in response to imminent attack threats against U.S. and Coalition bases.[229]

CJTF-OIR said that sometimes the ISF request ISR support and other times CJTF-OIR will pull assets from intelligence collection missions to mitigate credible or imminent threats to Coalition forces.[230] CJTF-OIR reported that militia groups also threaten civilian personnel supporting CJTF-OIR with kidnapping, assassination, and other forms of intimidation to gain knowledge of current operations and disrupt support to the Coalition.[231] However, CJTF-OIR said that militia groups or the PMF did not directly interfere with or obstruct counter-ISIS activity by Coalition forces this quarter.[232] The DIA assessed that militia attacks will likely increase through the early part of next quarter.[233]

Iraqi Prime Minister Warns of "Decisive Confrontation" with Militias as Tensions Resume

Last quarter, following the rise in militia attacks, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo threatened to close the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad unless the Iraqi government took action to strengthen security for U.S. personnel and facilities.[234] While additional attacks have occurred since the ultimatum and press reports indicate that the DoS temporarily reduced staff at the U.S. Embassy in anticipation of possible violence on the 1-year anniversary of the death of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps–Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani and PMC Chief of Staff Abu Madhi al-Muhandis, the Embassy remains open.[235]

The DoS and the DIA reported that Iraqi Prime Minister al-Kadhimi took steps to improve security in the International Zone this quarter, including deploying armored vehicles and new security personnel in order to limit traffic into the zone and create a safe space from which the Iraqi government can make decisions and mitigate risks to foreign diplomatic posts like the U.S. Embassy.[236] Independent analysts and the DIA have stated the prime minister and members of ISF are vulnerable to intimidation and attacks by the militias, following efforts to curb militia influence, including the June CTS raid, which resulted in the arrest of members of Kata'ib Hezbollah.[237] The DoS said that the U.S. Embassy supported the Iraqi government's efforts to strengthen security in the International Zone and is prepared to provide further technical and logistical assistance as needed.[238]

The DIA told the DoD OIG that Prime Minister al-Kadhimi continues to take an incremental approach in asserting authority over the PMC and associated Shia militias in the PMF while remaining careful to avoid a direct confrontation.[239] According to the DIA, the majority of Shia militias in Iraq continue to largely ignore the 2016 PMC Law, which mandated that armed militias must be regulated in a fashion similar to Iraq's other security forces and act under the Iraqi government's direct control.[240] This quarter, the DIA said that the prime minister focused his efforts on curbing militia access to government positions and contracts, as well as taking limited steps to reduce the presence of unauthorized militants in the International Zone and Baghdad International Airport.[241]

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Additionally, since the July announcement of the prime minister's anti-corruption campaign targeting Iraq's border ports of entry, the DIA said it had not observed widespread changes to militia disposition on the Iraq-Syria border. According to the DIA, Iranian-aligned militias maintain dozens of facilities along the border, which almost certainly hamper Baghdad's efforts to remove them from the region.[242] The DIA assessed that most ISF elements remain reluctant to directly confront the militias and despite the ongoing friction between the ISF and hardline militias, elements of the PMC continued to coordinate with the ISF on counter-ISIS operations in western and northern Iraq this quarter.[243]

The DIA assessed that without a political bloc of his own in Iraq's Council of Representatives, Prime Minister al-Kadhimi lacks sufficient backing to pursue a more aggressive approach toward the militias and probably is further constrained by militia threats against him and his advisers.[244] Nonetheless, press reporting indicates that the prime minister may be escalating his campaign against the militias following the arrest of an Asaib Ahl al-Haq member on December 25 who is suspected of being involved in the December 20 attack on the International Zone.[245] While Asaib Ahl al-Haq militiamen publicly threatened the prime minister in response, media reporting indicated that he warned "outlaw" militias that his government was "ready for a decisive confrontation if necessary."[246]

DIPLOMACY AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Since the territorial defeat of ISIS in 2017, the U.S. Government has increased its efforts to stabilize liberated areas and support Iraq as it "continues to develop as a sovereign, stable, and self-reliant country."[247] The 2018 Integrated Country Strategy for Iraq outlines several objectives for the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, including strengthening civilian-responsive governance, strengthening the rule of law, and promoting reconciliation among all ethnic and sectarian groups.[248] U.S. bilateral assistance to Iraq focuses on democracy and governance, economic reform, and support to vulnerable populations, in addition to humanitarian assistance and support to the Iraqi security sector.[249]

Antigovernment Protests Continue; Are Met with Violence

During the quarter, Iraqis continued to express dissatisfaction with the Iraqi government. The DoS reported that activists continued to demand free and fair elections and accountability for corruption and violence.[250] According to media reports, the activists have called on the government to improve economic development, basic services, and employment opportunities.[251] According to the World Bank, one in four young Iraqis are unemployed.[252] Since Mustafa al-Kadhimi became prime minister, he has promised to include the protesters' demands in his government reform program; however, the protesters have observed little progressed toward meeting their demands.[253]

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In October, protestors gathered in Baghdad and major cities in southern Iraq to mark the anniversary of an October 2019 demonstration that sparked months of protests nationwide.[254] Turnout this year was much lower than last year, with no more than a few thousand demonstrators gathering in Baghdad.[255] Ongoing threats of militia violence, infiltration of protest locations by established political parties and their militias, and the impact of Iraq's COVID-19 outbreak suppressed participation, the DoS said.[256]

As with previous demonstrations, the Iraqi government responded to protester violence during the October 2020 protests with force. Police used water cannons and tear gas to prevent demonstrators from breeching barricades, blocking them from reaching Iraqi government buildings. The confrontations resulted in at least 39 police and demonstrators injured.[257]

Similarly, during protests in early November in Basrah, provincial governor Assad al-Idani ordered the ISF to end the ongoing protests in the city. Police used tear gas and batons and fired live ammunition in the air to disperse protesters, the DoS reported.[258] One protestor died after being shot by a police officer.[259] At the time, Prime Minister al-Kadhimi was touring Basrah's oil fields and ports, where protestors confronted him at each stop.[260]

Militias also continued to target protestors with threats, abductions, and violence, the DoS reported.[261] On November 27 in Nasiriyah, at least eight antigovernment protesters died during clashes with supporters of Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.[262] Some activist contacts reported to the DoS that the deployment of the ISF near the Nasiriyah protest site following the attacks served to deter further militia violence against protesters.[263]

Following the November clashes, human rights actors reported an increase in targeted killings and kidnappings, which they believe are part of a deliberate campaign of intimidation and terror designed to silence moderates seeking political office in the 2021 national elections.[264]

The DoS reported that the protest movement has lost political momentum since the anniversary of the October 2019 demonstrations. DoS contacts in the activist community reported during the quarter that government actions to reform the political system, investigate killings and kidnappings of protesters, and restrain militias did not go far enough. The activists dismissed the prime minister's pledges to seek accountability for the deaths of protesters and activists as public relations statements rather than a commitment to tangible actions.[265] The DoS reported that threats, abductions, and violence by militias against activists, combined with the government's lack of capacity or will to hold perpetrators accountable, has created what one Iraqi researcher has termed a culture of "fear and impunity."[266]

Iraqi Government Takes Steps to Address Violence Against Demonstrators

The Iraqi government's response to protests during the quarter demonstrated the incremental, yet incomplete, progress that Prime Minister al-Kadhimi has made to address violence against demonstrators. For example, during the 1-year anniversary of the October 2019 protests, the Iraqi government exhibited more restraint than during the demonstrations last year. Prime Minister al-Kadhimi ordered the ISF to deploy at the key entry points to the International Zone in Baghdad without lethal weapons. This action, the DoS said, was consistent with the prime minister's continued crackdown on undisciplined actions within ISF ranks and may have prevented an escalation of violence. Prime Minister al-Kadhimi and his chief advisors also chaired ministerial security council, police, and joint operations command meetings to discuss security measures to protect protesters while ensuring that protests remained peaceful. The DoS reported that while the ISF fired water cannons and tear gas at protesters to prevent them from crossing a bridge to the International Zone, injuries were much lower than in 2019.[267]

In addition, the DoS reported that the prime minister took welcome steps during the quarter to address deadly and violent crime, including the execution-style murder of eight civilians in Salah ad Din province in October and the eight people reportedly killed during November 27 protests in Nasiriya.[268] In practice, however, his efforts to pursue full accountability have often fallen short, the DoS said. The prime minister announced the establishment of an investigation committee into the killings of protestors, but, according to the DoS, the membership of the committee is not transparent; the committee has not released detailed information on its progress; and an initiative to pay compensation to victims' family members has foundered. Arrests from the committee's investigations would normally result from a warrant issued by the Iraqi Higher Judicial Council and then executed by the Ministry of Interior or the CTS, depending on the level and sensitivity of the arrest.[269] During the quarter, however, there were no major arrests or prosecutions of individuals responsible for violence against protesters.[270]

Militias and government officials are, according to the DoS, using arrest warrants in defamation cases to intimidate, silence, and in some instances "flush out" activists and journalists who were hiding.[271] The use of such "weaponized" arrest warrants by militias and government officials to silence and intimidate their critics is not new, the DoS said, but recent efforts to use this judicial process to draw their opponents out of hiding is a new and worrisome development.[272] The DoS said Iraqi leaders should be urged to oppose adoption of a proposed "Cybercrime Law," which would effectively stifle freedom of expression, while strengthening the existing legal framework to protect journalists and bloggers from intimidation. The U.S. Embassy in Baghdad expressed concern about this potential legislation a year ago when it was first introduced. However, the issue went quiet in the Council of Representatives and was only recently reintroduced for discussion.[273]

According to the DoS, Prime Minister al-Kadhimi assigned new police and intelligence leadership in Basrah, launching "Operation Sincere Promise," aimed at confiscating weapons and tackling tribal violence and organized crime. The prime minister acted to reassert Iraqi government control over the border areas by repositioning the PMF away from the border. These actions to establish federal control and combat corruption resulted in a 20 percent recoupment in revenue within 3 months, such as occurred in Zurbatiya. Similar border security and counter corruption efforts were launched along Iraq's border with Syria and at Basrah province's Salamcha border crossing.[274]

Iraqi Government Acts to Address Deepening Economic Crisis

Iraq faces a financial collapse that, according to some analysts, has the potential to bring down the government.

One source of popular distrust in the Iraqi government is the country's worsening financial situation. Iraq faces a financial collapse that, according to some analysts, has the potential to bring down the government.[275] Iraqis have been frustrated by delays in salary payments and the continued poor quality of public services, the DoS reported.[276]

During the quarter, the Iraqi government required approximately $5 billion per month to pay public sector salaries and pensions, plus $2 billion to cover essential services and operating costs.[277] However, its monthly revenues from oil exports, which make up 90 percent of all Iraqi revenues, was approximately $3.5 billion per month.[278] To cover its

monthly deficits, the Central Bank of Iraq has been spending its diminishing reserves.[279] The International Monetary Fund estimated that Iraq's real GDP growth likely contracted by 11 percent in 2020.[280]

The Iraqi government has taken limited steps to address the financial crisis. In October, the prime minister and his team issued a white paper on economic reforms that proposes a roadmap for resolving Iraq's financial and economic problems. However, the white paper proposes that the Iraqi parliament approve austerity reforms, which are politically unpopular and less likely to be implemented.[281] The U.S. Government believes the white paper is a very positive step toward economic reform in Iraq, the DoS said, and that the Iraqi government needs to implement it.[282]

During the quarter, Iraq took steps to bridge its short-term liquidity gap to cover public sector wages and pensions coming due in January 2021.[283] In November, the Iraqi parliament approved a law allowing the Iraqi government to borrow $10 billion, an amount sufficient to pay overdue public sector salaries and pensions through the end of 2020.[284] During the quarter, the Iraqi government negotiated a deal to sell crude oil to China's ZhenHua Oil Company. Under the agreement, finalized in January, ZhenHua agreed to prepay nearly $2 billion to Iraq in exchange for 1 year of crude oil deliveries, the first time Iraq has been prepaid for oil sales.[285] Media sources also reported that Iraq will receive the funding with zero interest, and a premium over the daily oil price. ZhenHua Oil is part of a state-owned defense company, China North Industries Group Corporation.[286]

On December 21, Iraq's Council of Ministers approved a draft 2021 budget that must be approved by the Iraqi parliament. The budget, due to earlier political criticism, does not include unpopular economic reforms but does increase the Iraqi budget deficit. As reported by the DoS, the draft budget included spending of $113.2 billion, which would produce a $48.9 billion deficit. The draft budget assumed revenues from 3.25 million barrels of oil per day, including 250,000 barrels per day from the Kurdistan region, priced at $42 per barrel.[287] To compare the oil revenue assumption, for December, oil exports averaged 2.85 million barrels per day priced at $47.7 per barrel.[288] To cover the deficit, the Iraqi government would need to draw down its reserves, sell national bonds, obtain loans from state-owned banks, and receive assistance from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.[289]

Iraqi People Face Higher Prices and Diminishing Services

To address the public sector salary crisis, the draft budget incorporated a 22 percent devaluation of the Iraqi dinar that officially took effect on December 22.[290] Even before the official devaluation, the value of the dinar had declined in reaction to media reports.[291] The devaluation immediately resulted in price increases on almost all products, most of which are imported. At the same time, Iraq's inability to transfer funds to Iran to pay for imported electricity and gas to generate electricity led Iran to cut off these exports, limiting the availability of electricity to many Iraqis. Iraqi officials have said that much of their inability to pay Iran for electricity and gas imports results from Iraqi compliance with U.S. sanctions against Iran, including the blacklisting of its banking system.[292] On December 29, media reported that Iran had agreed to resume gas and electricity exports to Iraq after Iraq agreed to pay $6 billion in unpaid bills. An agreement was reportedly reached during a meeting

between Iran's Electricity Minister Reza Ardakanian and Iraq's Energy Minister Majid Mahdi Hantoush.[293] According to an Islamic Republic News Agency report on December 30, Iran is opening a euro account in Baghdad that will allow Iraq to pay its debts to Iran for gas and electricity imports while avoiding U.S. banking sanctions.[294]

The currency devaluation has also produced a significant cost-of-living increase for citizens throughout Iraq, including the Iraqi Kurdistan region. U.S. Embassy contacts reported prices of food staples have jumped between 25 and 30 percent throughout the country. Some local shop owners have responded by raising prices to cover their high supply costs, while others have closed their businesses.[295] Residents of Iraqi Kurdistan were already suffering from the loss of steady income due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the halt in public salary payments. While every resident's purchasing power declined overnight by 22 percent, KRG civil servants, who make up 60 percent of the region's workforce, were already receiving reduced salaries at a less frequent rate.[296] The ongoing budget dispute between the Iraqi government and the KRG has made the de facto salary decrease even starker. The DoS reported that the economic stress devaluation placed on nearly all Iraqis is likely to add to further rounds of protests throughout Iraq.[297]

New Anticorruption Task Force Makes Arrests

The DoS reported that Prime Minister al-Kadhimi's anticorruption task force, formed during the previous quarter, arrested several well-connected Iraqi politicians and business figures for corruption this quarter. As of the end of the quarter, the defendants were being held awaiting trial.[298] Media sources reported that the former governor of Ninewa province, who was accused of embezzling several million dollars, including aid designated for persons displaced by ISIS, was among those arrested.[299]

The DoS reported that Prime Minister al-Kadhimi's anticorruption task force, formed during the previous quarter, arrested several well-connected Iraqi politicians and business figures for corruption during this quarter.

However, corruption remained pervasive in the Iraqi government. On October 27, Baghdad Mayor Manhal al-Haboubi's resigned after less than 2 months in office, citing personal medical reasons. This did not surprise Iraqi political observers, the DoS said, as it was widely believed that al-Haboubi resigned because he refused to engage in corrupt contracting practices with Iraq's political parties. Rumors circulating in Baghdad suggested Mayor al-Haboubi was under intense pressure to sell Baghdad municipal properties to parties below market value. The DoS further reported that others suggested that al-Haboubi refused to grant contracts to members of parliament affiliated with cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, and that al-Haboubi came under fire from parties after citing their corruption as the main source of Baghdad's deteriorating infrastructure in a recent report to the prime minister about seasonal flooding in the capital.[300]

The DoS reported that this quarter, the U.S. Government held preliminary discussions with Iraqi customs authorities on how to support the prime minister's drive towards customs automation, an important element of his anticorruption efforts. The DoS also continued to support e-government initiatives such as an online single window for business registration.[301] In addition, the DoS reported that the DoJ is currently assessing a proposal to provide technical assistance to Iraqi anticorruption mechanisms through its International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP). On November 30, the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and the American Chamber of Commerce-Iraq hosted a roundtable on corruption with U.S. companies to gather information for the DoJ's ICITAP assessment team.[302]

National Elections Postponed

In July 2020, Prime Minister al-Kadhimi announced plans to hold general elections on June 6, 2021, an accelerated timeline designed to address protester demands for reform.[303] In October, Iraq's parliament approved a new election law necessary to prepare for future elections, but the legislation did not formalize the early date.[304] In mid-January, following weeks of concerns expressed by DoS contacts, Iraq's council of ministers agreed to postpone the elections until October 10. A statement from the prime minister highlighted the need for extra time to permit the most free, fair, and, consequently, credible elections possible.[305]

The DoS reported that significant hurdles remain before Iraq will have the elections infrastructure required to conduct elections, including training of elections workers, registration of voters, distribution of biometric identification, and the Iraqi parliament's approval of legislation to fill vacancies on Iraq's Federal Supreme Court, the body that would certify elections results but currently lacks the constitutionally required quorum to do so. Key milestones include increasing the biometric registration rate for voters; contracting with a reputable international company to examine election software; funding Iraq's electoral commission; public outreach and voter education; and passage of a law to fill critical vacancies on Iraq's Federal Supreme Court, which certifies election results.[306]

On November 20, the Iraqi government submitted a request to the UN Security Council for UN election observation support for the June elections. The DoS reported that the request reflected a consensus among a broad range of Iraqi officials on the need for a strong UN-led observation mission that capitalizes on the UN's experience supporting elections in Iraq.[307] The UN's Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs identified four scenarios for potential elections observation support. The Iraqi government is expected to issue a supplemental letter to the UN Security Council identifying the scenario it prefers, but Russia, China, and Iran-backed entities are already conducting coordinated messaging campaigns against some of the prospective activities.[308]

According to the DoS, several marathon sessions of the Iraqi parliament secured agreement on electoral boundary limits as well as numbers of seats per electoral district. President Barham Salih officially signed Iraq's new elections law on November 5. However, a law settling the procedure by which Supreme Court vacancies are filled had not been completed by the end of the quarter.[309]

USAID Provides Training and Legal Support to Iraqi Election Activities

Since October 2018, USAID has provided support through the Iraqi Provincial Elections Activity to support transparent and fair elections, an important step in the democratic process and a contributor to national stability.[310] The Iraqi Provincial Elections Activity supports Iraq's electoral process by facilitating citizen understanding and participation in the electoral process; supporting technical knowledge and planning on the part of the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC); and by encouraging voter participation, especially by IDPs and minorities.[311]

The program is implemented by the Consortium for Electoral and Political Process Strengthening, which include the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES).[312] According to USAID, the IFES is currently the main provider of technical advice on the electoral system and legal analyses of proposed amendments to the Iraq system of representation and the boundaries of electoral districts.[313] USAID reported that it provided the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq an expected $10 million contribution.[314] In the lead up to Iraq's national election, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq will provide elections support in coordination with the IFES.[315] USAID reported this quarter, the IFES conducted a series of rule-of-law trainings for the IHEC Board of Commissioners on the electoral system, electoral district boundary delimitation, voter registration, strategic communications, and IHEC regulations.[316] In addition, the IRI provided technical assistance through workshops and individual consultations to 10 Iraqi civil society organizations and 44 individuals.[317] The IRI and Iraqi civil society partner organizations also launched several coordinated social media efforts that garnered more than 1.7 million views, reactions, and interactions during this quarter.[318]

USAID reported that COVID-19-related movement restrictions in Baghdad, and the prohibition of in-person events due to COVID-19-related health concerns, prevented direct training and significantly limited IFES planned activities with the IHEC.[319] According to USAID, The IFES continued to provide technical assistance using virtual communication platforms, holding weekly meetings with the IHEC chairman, and conducting online training sessions.[320] USAID said that it is coordinating with the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad political section and the DoS Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor on all election activities to ensure that there are no overlaps in elections assistance provided to Iraq through other U.S. Government mechanisms.[321]

Protests in Kurdistan Add to Regional Unrest

The DoS reported that demonstrations in Iraqi Kurdistan grew during the quarter. The protests, including some organized by professional syndicates, expanded due largely to the KRG's inability to pay salaries and the public's attribution of that failure to mismanagement and corruption by KRG leaders. Demonstrators broke into and set fire to political party offices at times prompting a lethal response from security guards and KRG security officials. The DoS reported that some KRG officials said they believed that a "foreign hand" is behind the demonstrations and that some demonstrators fired on security forces.[322]

The DoS reported that demonstrations in Kurdistan grew during the quarter.

One media outlet reported in early December that at least seven people were killed in Iraqi Kurdistan during protests by government workers who were demanding payment of their salaries. Hundreds of protesters who had not received their monthly government pay checks demonstrated in Sulaymaniyah city and neighboring towns. Six protesters died in Sulaymaniyah province when local security forces fired live ammunition to break up the crowd; a security officer also died following clashes with the protesters. Protesters reportedly set fire to government buildings and political party headquarters.[323]

The DoS reported that the KRG has arrested journalists and barred them from covering protests during the quarter.[324] One media outlet reported it and several other news outlets received warnings not to broadcast violent scenes in the Kurdistan region.[325] The KRG has also shuttered offices of the opposition-owned NRT news outlet. The KRG often claims that certain journalists or outlets foment unrest and sometimes alleges a connection to foreign agitators.[326]

U.S. Businesses Seeking Opportunities in Iraqi Kurdistan Face Many Challenges

The DoS Integrated Country Strategy for Iraq states that the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and the Consulate General in Erbil will work to promote U.S. firms to operate and invest in Iraq to help strengthen its economy.[327] According to the DoS, its staff in Iraq are actively helping American companies navigate economic markets and overcome obstacles to doing business in Iraq. As a result of the consulate's engagement, the KRG Prime Minister's Office formed an interagency task force in mid-October to resolve business disputes for U.S. companies.[328]

The task force will need to overcome the challenges described in the 2020 DoS Investment Climate Report for Iraq. Namely, businesses face "bureaucratic challenges" and "opaque" government rulemaking that "lends itself to arbitrary application."[329] The DoS reported that "foreign investors can expect to contend with corruption in many forms, at all levels" and that "moving goods into…the country continues to be difficult, and bribery of or extortion by port officials is commonplace."[330]

In remarks to U.S. and Kurdish business leaders this quarter, Prime Minister Barzani said the KRG would proceed on "reducing red tape to ensure that foreign investors are able to complete necessary procedures more quickly and more easily," "digitizing important aspects of our government," and "clamping down on corruption."[331]

During and after an early October visit by David Copley, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iraq, the U.S. Consulate General in Erbil heard a series of complaints from U.S. companies about unreasonable KRG practices. The consulate said it connected companies with complaints to the task force, which committed to raise concerns directly with relevant ministries. It said that long-term results would "likely require new, streamlined regulations," but that entrenched authorities "will likely continue to be an obstacle…despite direction from above."[332]

The KRG Deals with PKK Violence and Iraq-Syria Border Security Concerns

The threat of internal and external terrorist attacks by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, has a destabilizing impact on Iraq. The DoS said that this leads to border security concerns and political tensions between the Iraqi government and the KRG.[333] The PKK's decades-long insurgency against Turkey has largely been based in Sulaymaniyah province.[334] Recently, the PKK has become more active in Dahuk and Ninewa provinces, where the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) dominates.[335] The KRG position on security matters usually represents the views of the KDP.[336]

During the quarter, violence between the KRG and the PKK escalated. In October, the KRG accused the PKK of assassinating a senior Peshmerga officer, and the PKK sabotaged a Turkish pipeline that brings KRG oil to market, according to media reports.[337] In early November, the PKK carried out attacks on KRG forces in Dahuk, as reported by London-based media.[338]

On December 14, a KDP-affiliated Peshmerga lieutenant was killed in a clash with PKK forces in Dahuk province, according to KRG-linked media and the U.S. Consulate General in Erbil. Although the DoS offered its public condolences to the family of the slain Peshmerga officer, SDF commander General Mazloum blamed the KDP for the clash. On November 12 and 15, the PKK attacked KDP-linked facilities in SDF-governed areas of Syria according to the media.[339]

KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani said that on December 16, PKK fighters attempted to cross from Syria into Iraq, but KRG security forces stopped them. Subsequently a large YPG force used heavy weapons against a nearby Peshmerga base. The Peshmerga forces stopped the attack.[340] The incidents reportedly occurred near the main Iraq-Syria border crossing for humanitarian aid, commercial goods, and military materiel.[341]

The SDF's leadership recently stated that it had been working with PKK forces in northeastern Syria and that those forces could be withdrawn gradually.[342] During the quarter, Turkey's military stepped up its attacks on the remaining PKK forces in Iraq, forcing the PKK to retreat further into KDP territory, increasing tensions.[343]

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STABILIZATION

Since the territorial defeat of ISIS in 2017, it has been the policy of the U.S. Government to accelerate restoration of essential services in liberated areas that suffered devastation from the ISIS occupation. In addition, the United States provides assistance to 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.[344]

UNDP Funding Facility for Stabilization Extended

In November, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) announced a 3-year extension of the Funding Facility for Stabilization (FFS).[345] The FFS is a 28-donor, multilateral program that, in support of the Coalition, aims to stabilize areas liberated from ISIS by restoring damaged or destroyed essential services, and by providing conditions for safe and voluntary returns of IDPs.[346] As of the end of the quarter, the United States remained the largest donor to the FFS with a total contribution of $419.5 million.[347]

According to the UNDP, the 3-year extension of the FFS requires $660 million in funding to cover the remaining priority needs of areas liberated from ISIS.[348] USAID said that the remaining priority areas are the cities of Sinjar, Mosul, and Hawijah; Diyala province; and the Bayji-Hatra corridor.[349] In these areas, voluntary return of displaced persons is low as

security threats and a lack of essential services make return conditions severe.[350] The FFS will continue to prioritize western Anbar province and the town of Rutbah, where returnees face a lack of essential infrastructure and services due to the challenge of implementing programs in remote areas.[351] USAID reported that while the FFS objectives remain largely unchanged, the FFS will also place renewed emphasis on gender equality, human rights, and supporting durable solutions—safe and dignified voluntary returns, local integration, and resettlement—for those displaced for an extended period.[352]

USAID reported that over the past 2 years, it has focused its funding through the FFS on meeting underfunded needs in Anbar province and in northern Iraq, including support for religious and ethnic minority communities, with more than 1,000 funded projects totaling approximately $614 million.[353] USAID said that it will continue to fund programs through the FFS that seek to ensure the lasting defeat of ISIS by restoring essential services that ISIS damaged or destroyed in order to create the conditions for the safe and durable return of Iraqi IDPs.[354]

USAID Increases Support to Stabilization and Religious and Ethnic Minority Programming in Iraq

On December 22, USAID announced an additional obligation of $16.3 million to stabilization, including programs that support religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq.[355] The funding will increase USAID contributions to programs supporting religious and ethnic minority communities to $389 million.[356] According to USAID, the additional funding will help continue existing youth cohesion and livelihoods programming.[357] USAID's Shared Future program received an additional $4.9 million, bringing the total award to $17.7 million.[358] The Shared Future program works with youth and community and religious leaders to support the durable return of IDPs from the Ninewa Plains.[359]

The new funding announced by USAID also included an $11.4 million obligation to the FFS.[360] According to USAID, the new funding will focus on restoring essential services to Sinjar in support of the Sinjar Agreement, a recent effort by the Iraqi government and the KRG to resolve longstanding political and security challenges, and to foster the revival of Sinjar and the safe and voluntary return of IDPs.[361] In addition to supporting political and security aspects of the Sinjar agreement, USAID said that it will continue to support the rehabilitation of damaged or destroyed public infrastructure in Sinjar province to create conditions that promote the return of Yazidis and other IDPs from these communities.[362]

Table 1 details ongoing stabilization activities in Iraq supported by the DoS and USAID.

Table 1.

DoS and USAID-funded Stabilization Activities in Iraq

Project Name/Duration/Budget	
Funding Facility for Stabilization (FFS) and the Iraq Crisis Response and Resiliency Program (ICRRP) July 2015–December 2023 $500 million	• The 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: responds to the water crisis in Basrah in 2019 through an allocation of $5 million to rehabilitate seven water treatment plan activities.
Shared Future June 2018–September 2023 $17.8 million	• Promotes the durable return for internally displaced persons (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.
Iraq Community Resilience Initiative Duration: June 2018–February 2022 $92.2 million	• 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.
Safe Return August 2018–September 2021 $7.2 million	• Aims to reintegrate internally displaced persons (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 through local Iraqi partners. Safe Return Centers provide survivors with comprehensive medical, mental health, and psycho-social services, as well as assistance with livelihood recovery and legal support. USAID funding also supports the Smile of Hope torture treatment center in Mosul. • Assists survivors of human rights violations to pursue justice against their ISIS perpetrators, and has trained community-based volunteers on advocacy and instituting a community-based reporting system in their communities.
Supporting the Return of Displaced Populations in Ninewa Plain and Western Ninewa September 2018–September 2022 $27.5 million	• 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 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.
Building Community Resilience in Ninewa Post-ISIS October 2018–September 2021 $5 million	• 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.

Project Name/Duration/Budget	
Durable Communities and Economic Opportunities September 2019–September 2024 $125 million	• Seeks to build resilient, adaptive communities to advance the economic well-being 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 enterprise development.
Transitional Assistance to Internally Displaced Populations in Erbil, Iraq October 2019–March 2022 $6.8 million	• Provides cash assistance to support the internally displaced populations from Ninewa province in protracted displacement in Erbil and provides displaced persons 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.
Strengthening the Ankawa Humanitarian Committee (AHC) to Respond October 2020–September 2022 $2.5 million	• Builds the capacity of the AHC 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.

Sources: USAID ME Bureau; DoS Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs.

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

In October 2016, the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq declared a disaster in Iraq due to the ongoing complex emergency and humanitarian crisis ISIS caused in provinces in northern Iraq. Many of the approximately 1.2 million IDPs in Iraq have been displaced for more than 3 years and will likely face significant challenges returning home. The U.S. Government funds shelter and settlement support, essential healthcare, critical health and protection services, emergency food assistance, multipurpose cash assistance, water, sanitation, and hygiene to vulnerable populations across areas of Iraq affected by conflict.[363]

Iraqi Government Initiates Rapid Closures of IDP Camps

In mid-October, Iraq's Ministry of Displacement and Migration renewed efforts to close all remaining IDP camps in areas controlled by the Iraqi government.[364] The DoS reported that on October 15, humanitarian NGOs and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees learned of the closure of three IDP camps in Baghdad and one in Karbala. IDPs in those camps were given 2 days to decide whether to return to their areas of origin, move to another camp, or integrate with the local community.[365]

USAID reported that as of December 8, the Iraqi government closed 15 camps and reclassified the Habbaniya Tourist City and Zayona camps in Anbar and Baghdad provinces as informal sites.[366] (See Figure 5 on page 47.) DoS PRM and USAID reported that as of December 10, more than 34,000 individuals had been affected by the IDP camp closures in non-Kurdish areas of federal Iraq.[367]

The U.S. Embassy in Baghdad has supported the UN's position to engage the Iraqi government on the timing and implementation of camp closures, rather than to focus on the decision to close camps. However, the embassy emphasized to the Iraqi government that uncoordinated and disorganized camp closures could create further humanitarian problems,

especially for marginalized populations, as well as programmatic challenges for U.S. Government implementing partners who support durable solutions for IDPs. The embassy communicated that the closures should be linked to Iraqi government and UN planning for a transition from humanitarian to durable solutions programming.[368] DoS PRM said that the U.S. Government has emphasized to the Iraqi government that any move to close IDP camps should be consistent with the Principled Returns Framework the Iraqi government agreed to with the United Nations, and that any IDP returns or movements should be voluntary, safe, informed, and dignified.[369]

During the quarter, international organizations reported that more than 90 percent of households that left IDP camps since October identified camp consolidation, camp closure,

Figure 5.

IDP Camp Closures in Iraq, as of November 2020

Source: OCHA, as of November 2020.
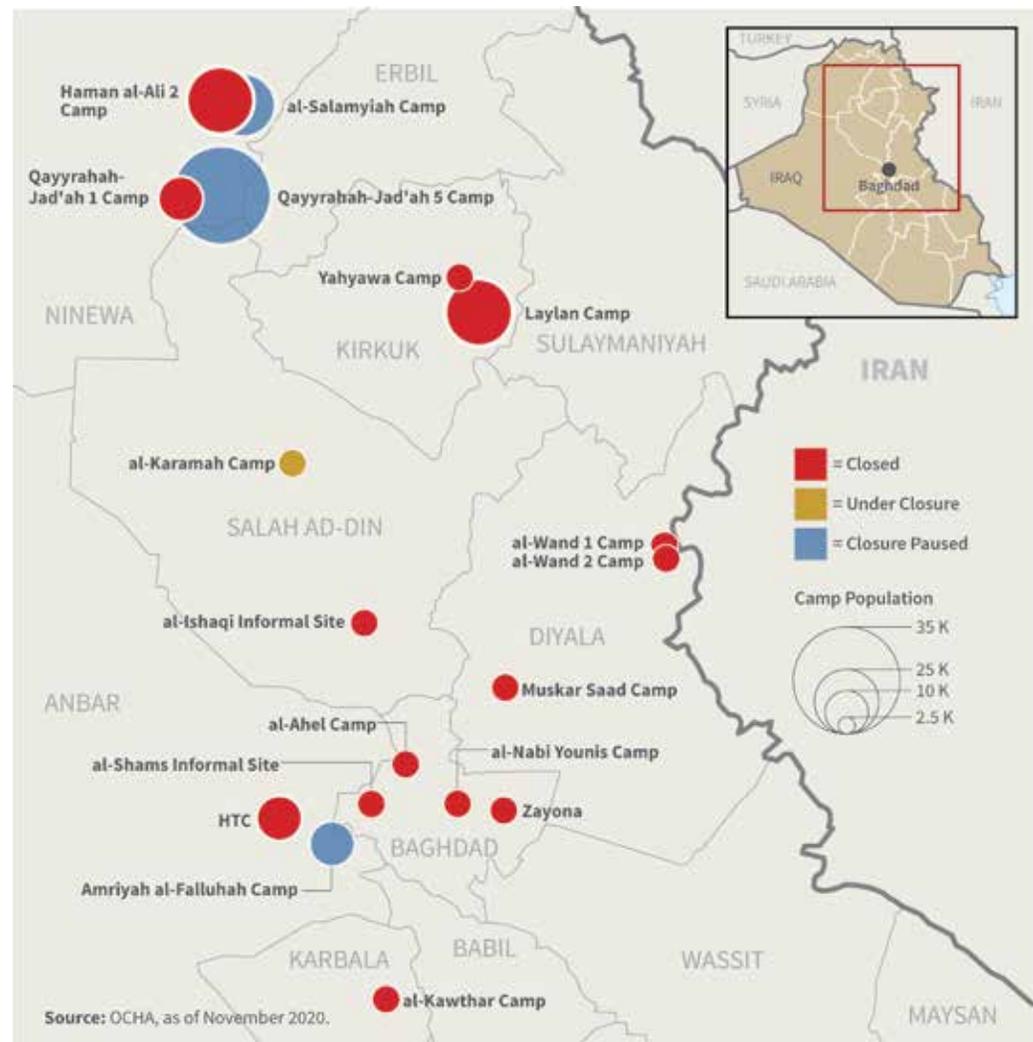
or forced return as a reason for their departure.[370] According to the DoS PRM-funded International Organization for Migration (IOM) Displacement Tracking Matrix, about 70 percent of the individuals who departed camps have relocated in or near their areas of origin. Many face challenges in finding suitable and safe housing. Approximately 30 percent have not located housing as of December 20, although IOM believes more housing will be found over time.[371]

DoS PRM reported that many of those who left camps have gone to urban areas in their districts of origin. Some former camps have turned into de facto informal settlements, with former camp residents remaining in the immediate vicinity without the benefit of many camp services they formerly received.[372]

USAID reported that, following successful advocacy by donors and the wider humanitarian community, the Iraqi government paused the closure of Amriyah al-Fallujah camp in Anbar province and Jed'dah 5 and Salamiyah camps in Ninewa province that together host an estimated 31,000 individuals.[373] (See Figure 5 on page 47.) The Sulaymaniyah camp later closed in mid-January 2021.[374] In addition, DoS PRM and USAID reported that approximately 25 IDP camps in Iraqi Kurdistan that host an estimated population of more than 186,000 individuals will remain open.[375] According to DoS PRM and USAID, the Iraqi government reportedly plans to close all but one camp in federal Iraq by the end of January.[376]

According to DoS PRM and USAID, humanitarian organizations have reported that many IDPs remain unable to return to their areas of origin due to poor security, lack of social cohesion, and absence of basic services and shelter, placing populations at high risk of secondary displacement.[377] USAID reported that for some IDPs, the lack of required documentation to travel within Iraq is another significant obstacle to return.[378] In addition, amid camp closure efforts, humanitarian implementers have also raised concerns that the increased presence of security forces correlated with reported harassment of IDPs.[379]

DoS PRM reported that its partner organizations are in the process of modifying their programs to move from in-camp settings to areas where IDPs have moved. At the same time, many U.S. Government partners continue to provide services around closed camps that have become informal settlements. The UN's Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster, the UNHCR, and the IOM are working on a proposal for humanitarian response in informal settlements with large numbers of IDPs.[380]

USAID reported that during the quarter, implementers supported by the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID BHA) also adjusted programs the sudden camp closures impacted.[381] According to USAID, BHA implementers will continue to provide camp management and protection services in recently reclassified informal sites, conduct hygiene promotion activities, and distribute nonfood items.[382] In addition, USAID BHA implementers are completing rapid needs assessments with IDPs and recently displaced individuals in Ninewa and Salah al-Din provinces and provided mobile money transfers and cash vouchers to support households departing IDP camps.[383]

U.S. Government humanitarian entities, USAID BHA and DoS PRM, continue to provide a consistent U.S. Government position on the camp closures and to ensure a coordinated

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IRAQ: QUARTERLY FOCUS ON HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

ANBAR, NINEWA, KIRKUK

IDPs leaving closed camps face returning to war-damaged home districts with limited basic services and may be stigmatized and rejected by their communities. The United Nations reported that as a result, several households returning to Anbar province found themselves being displaced to secondary locations. School buildings have also been severely damaged, posing a safety and security hazard to returning children. In Kirkuk province, the United Nations found that IDPs are reluctant to return to rural areas without compensation and security. In mid-December, the governor of Ninewa province announced that housing options for returning IDPs were limited and included bringing their own tents or relying on aid agencies.

SULAYMANIYAH, DAHUK

In early December, demonstrations broke out in Saraa Square in Sulaymaniyah city over unpaid public sector wages, leading to violent clashes between protesters and security forces. At least 2 people were killed in the exchanges and more than 25 were injured. By December 9, protests had spread to the Shiladze district in Dahuk province, where hundreds of demonstrators came to demand their delayed salaries. KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani placed the blame on the Iraqi government and called upon Iraqi leaders to fulfill their financial obligations.
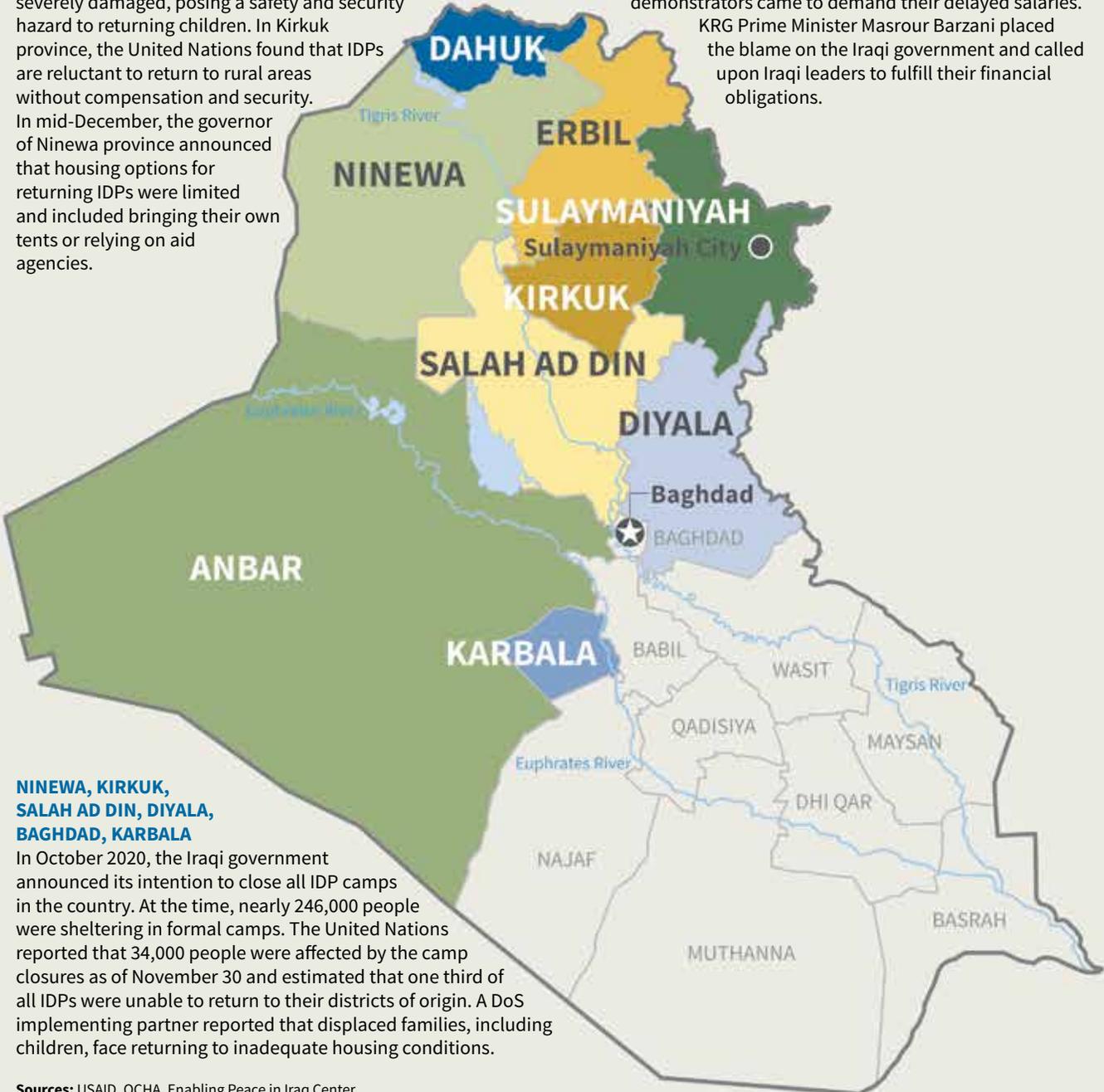
NINEWA, KIRKUK, SALAH AD DIN, DIYALA, BAGHDAD, KARBALA

In October 2020, the Iraqi government announced its intention to close all IDP camps in the country. At the time, nearly 246,000 people were sheltering in formal camps. The United Nations reported that 34,000 people were affected by the camp closures as of November 30 and estimated that one third of all IDPs were unable to return to their districts of origin. A DoS implementing partner reported that displaced families, including children, face returning to inadequate housing conditions.

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

and non-duplicative response.[384] USAID BHA's humanitarian response remains focused on IDPs, and programming will continue in the near term to support either camp-based populations or locations with known large numbers of IDPs.[385]

COVID-19 Overwhelms Iraq's Response to the Pandemic

The World Health Organization reported that as of the end of the quarter, Iraq had a cumulative total of more than 590,000 positive cases of COVID-19, an increase of more than 64 percent compared to the end of the previous quarter.[386] Iraq's COVID-19 mortality rate, approximately 2.2 percent, is a low rate that can be attributed in part to Iraq's young population, the DoS reported.[387]

COVID-19 infections increased as the Iraqi government relaxed containment measures this quarter.[388] According to the DoS, KRG officials bowed to substantial political and economic pressure to relax COVID-19 quarantine restrictions, which contributed to Iraqi Kurdistan's high death rate, which is above the overall Iraq average.[389]

At the same time, the Iraqi government took several measures on December 22 to curb the spread of the virus, including closing its land borders (except for trade) and banning travel to or from the United Kingdom, South Africa, Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, Iran, and Japan.[390] In addition, the Iraqi government ordered that restaurants and shopping malls close for 2 weeks beginning December 24 and proposed a partial lockdown during the New Year's holiday.[391]

On December 22, media reported that the Iraqi government had ordered 1.5 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, slated for delivery in early 2021. Military troops and the elderly are prioritized to receive these vaccines.[392]

According to Oxfam International, a network of global organizations fighting poverty, COVID-19 presents four types of crisis in Iraq: health, economic, socio-political and security. Iraq is a fragile state with 4.1 million people still in need of humanitarian assistance, and the pandemic is likely to exacerbate existing socio-economic vulnerabilities in an already volatile and politically unstable environment.[393] The UNHCR documented a rise in domestic and gender-based violence among displaced populations during the COVID-19 pandemic, as lost or suspended livelihoods place additional pressure on displaced families.[394]

The DoS, USAID Continue COVID-19 Response Efforts

USAID reported that USAID BHA has a number of COVID-specific awards active throughout Iraq to distribute hygiene products, provide emergency food assistance to more than 100,000 displaced Iraqis and other vulnerable population groups in the country, rehabilitate water and sanitation infrastructure, provide direct cash assistance, support primary care facilities and health workers, and conduct additional educational outreach.[395]

During the quarter, USAID-funded COVID-19 isolation rooms were completed and medical equipment was supplied to nine Iraqi provinces.[396] In October, the first USAID-funded COVID-19 isolation ward opened in Basrah, followed by facilities in the cities of

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Babil, Dhi Qar, Dahuk, Karbala, Kirkuk, Maysan, Najaf, and Ninewa.[397] In addition, U.S. Government partners have provided support to nearly 30 health facilities in these provinces, including strengthening capacity for COVID-19 screening and triage.[398] The isolation wards will serve as a community population of more than 9.8 million people, USAID said.[399] The isolation wards will serve as a location to respond to an increased need for gender-based violence prevention and response during the pandemic, including increased need for access to psychosocial support services.[400] In addition, USAID reported that the FFS began rehabilitating the East Mosul Medical Fluids Factory in Ninewa with USAID funding.[401]

In addition, DoS PRM reported that this quarter U.S. Government partners responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by training medical professionals on screening, identification, triage, and treatment of suspected cases; strengthening disease surveillance systems; implementing risk communication and community engagement activities; and providing critical medicines, medical equipment, and other supplies. To respond to food security needs, U.S. Government partners have instituted cash assistance programs to supplement emergency food assistance programming. Despite ongoing challenges related to security clearances and COVID-19 movement restrictions, DoS PRM said that its partners continued to provide vaccination services in all IDP and refugee camps in Iraq.[402]

According to DoS PRM, one of its partners based in Dahuk province broadcast locally produced Department of Health educational audio messages about COVID-19 preventive measures, hand hygiene, social distancing, coughing and sneezing etiquette, how and when to seek medical care, and debunked myths and misleading information through daily radio programs in Arabic and Kurdish (which covered Domiz district, two refugee camps, and their surrounding neighborhoods). Additionally, DoS PRM-funded programs provide training and capacity building to health care workers to better assess and address COVID-19 symptoms, and to mitigate the spread of the disease through isolation and other preventive measures.[403]

USAID said that its implementers are adapting programs to be COVID-19 sensitive, including by following social distancing recommendations and ensuring staff have adequate personal protective equipment (PPE).[404] However, USAID reported that COVID-19-related supply shortages and containment measures, specifically movement restrictions, inadequate testing capacity, and insufficient PPE have complicated response activities.[405] In addition, USAID reported that COVID-19 response efforts are being hindered by shortages of PPE and infection prevention and control measures in health care facilities, and that multiple implementers have reported difficulty obtaining approvals for transferring medical commodities.[406]

DoS PRM reported that due to restrictions on gatherings, its implementing partners were largely unable to provide group services, such as awareness-raising sessions, informal education, livelihood training, and group therapy. One-on-one medical appointments, counseling, and legal assistance are continuing to the extent possible. Due to the closure of all schools, all education programming remains on hold.[407]

DoS PRM reported that a reduction from four to two direct-hire staff continues to impact DoS PRM's ability to monitor and implement its refugee resettlement program within Iraq. COVID-19-related movement restrictions also hampered DoS PRM's third-party

DoS PRM reported that due to restrictions on gatherings, its implementing partners were largely unable to provide group services, such as awareness-raising sessions, informal education, livelihood training, and group therapy.

monitoring contractors and prevented two DoS PRM local staff members from carrying out in-person monitoring activities. Under normal conditions, third-party monitors would be able to perform monitoring visits for all DoS PRM programming in Iraq. Since early March 2020, however, third-party monitors countrywide have been unable to conduct planned monitoring visits due to travel and other COVID-19-related restrictions implemented by the Iraqi government and Kurdish authorities.[408]

Access Letters Problem Winds Down

Until its cancellation by the Iraqi government in November 2019, the national access letter authorization process was the mechanism that authorized NGOs conducting humanitarian activities in Iraq to move freely between provinces.[409] Issuance of access letters for NGOs and humanitarian organizations improved during the quarter. According to DoS PRM, by December its partner organizations reported they were largely receiving access authorization letters, although some area-specific blockages continued. OCHA informed donors in December that the Department of NGOs had been formally authorized by the Office of the Prime Minister to administer the access letter application process. OCHA reported that some humanitarian partners had difficulty securing Iraqi visas for international staff members; however, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had undertaken efforts to relieve the backlog in visa applications.[410]

DoS PRM Maintains Strong Working Relationship with Iraqi Government, UN Organizations

DoS PRM reported working closely with the UN's Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq on IDP matters, participating in the Humanitarian Country Team, and engaging regularly with UN partners including the UNHCR, the IOM, UNICEF, and other UN agencies on policies and programs aimed at reducing long-term displacement. During the quarter, DoS PRM advocated with the Iraqi government regarding IDP camp closures and ensuring voluntary, safe, and dignified IDP returns; access by humanitarian organizations to the field and the establishment of an efficient system for approval of movement requests; cross-border access for humanitarian staff and supplies to northeastern Syria; returns of Iraqis from northeastern Syria that would not result in increased internal displacement within Iraq; on the provision of necessary civil documentation to IDPs; and security improvements in areas of concern, including in areas with significant minority populations.[411]

During the quarter, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Matthew Tueller, accompanied by DoS PRM staff, met with the Iraqi Minister of Migration and Displacement to discuss a wide range of issues, including IDP camp closures, humanitarian partners' access and the impact on humanitarian assistance, and IDP returns from northeastern Syria. The Ambassador engaged the Iraqi government widely on issues surrounding camp closures and sustainable returns and took part in a December 2020 consultative meeting with the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Displacement and Migration, and Planning, in concert with fellow ambassadors. In addition, DoS PRM consulted frequently with fellow donors during the quarter, coordinating positions on outreach to the Iraqi government, and UN engagement.[412]

EVENTS IN SYRIA

ACTIONS CONDUCTED AGAINST ISIS IN SYRIA

The SDF Less Reliant on Coalition Support During Partnered Operations

The SDF maintained its pace of operations during the quarter, successfully conducting raids and targeted captures of ISIS operators.[413] CJTF-OIR reported that the SDF also demonstrated "minimal" reliance on Coalition forces.[414] However, CJTF-OIR reported that while it continued to reduce the number of accompanied operations it conducted with the SDF, most operations were still partnered with Coalition forces. The number of SDF partnered operations were slightly higher and the number of unilateral SDF operations slightly lower compared to the previous quarter.[415]

According to CJTF-OIR, in the period between October 1 and December 9, 2020, the SDF conducted 34 operations against ISIS in the Eastern Syria Security Area where the Coalition operates. Of those operations, 27 were partnered, yielding 37 "jackpot" detainees and 50 additional detainees. The SDF conducted seven operations unilaterally, yielding

U.S. Army Soldiers during a convoy in Syria. (U.S. Army photo)

seven jackpot detainees and two additional detainees.[416] In the previous quarter, the SDF conducted 33 operations against ISIS, 24 of them partnered and 9 unilateral.[417]

CJTF-OIR said that during the quarter, there were also several "noteworthy" seizures of explosives and related materials, including the recovery in one operation of 10 explosively formed projectiles (shaped charges designed to penetrate armor), 10 propane tanks, and 10 rolls of detonating cord. In addition, the SDF destroyed approximately 200 pounds of homemade explosives. CJTF-OIR said that in an operation targeting bomb-makers, the SDF captured 22 detainees, with 13 of them testing positive for explosives.[418]

Under Phase IV of the OIR campaign, CJTF-OIR seeks to enable partner forces to operate independently against ISIS.[419] CJTF-OIR reported that Coalition advisor teams continued to train the SDF and conduct mission planning, rehearsals, and pre-combat checks, but limited their support to partner force commanders during operations to remote advising from command centers.[420] Only special operations forces accompanied the SDF on targeted operations, or supported an operation from a nearby mission support site.[421]

CJTF-OIR partners with several SDF elements, including the Internal Security Forces, the Provisional/Regional Internal Security Forces, the Commandos, and the Kurdish Anti-Terror Forces.[422] However, with no air assets of its own, the SDF continues to rely on Coalition forces for all air support. CJTF-OIR said Coalition forces fly all counter-ISIS ISR assets and missions in support of the SDF in Syrian airspace.[423]

Coalition forces conducted 19 airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syria from September through November 2020, according to CJTF-OIR. These included 33 kinetic engagements, which denied ISIS fighters use of terrain in at least 11 instances.[424] CJTF-OIR defines an airstrike as one or more weapons strikes on a geographical target, which could mean a single or multiple aircraft firing a single or multiple weapons against a building, a group of buildings, or a compound.[425] CJTF-OIR reported that during the same period, it completed reviews of 40 unintentional civilian casualty reports dating back to November 2018.[426] Of those, one report was deemed credible, with 12 unintentional deaths.[427] CJTF-OIR said that as of December 1, it was still investigating 135 reports of unintentional civilian casualties.[428] See Figure 4 for data on Coalition airstrike trends.

Coalition forces conducted 19 airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syria from September through November 2020.

SELECTED KEY EVENTS, OCTOBER 1, 2020–DECEMBER 31, 2020

OCTOBER 5
The SNES announces an acceleration of its program facilitating returns of Syrian residents from the al-Hol camp

OCTOBER 28
President Erdogan of Turkey warns that Turkish forces may re-enter northeastern Syria if Syrian Kurdish forces do not withdraw from border region

NOVEMBER 18
An ISIS ambush in Dayr az Zawr province kills a Syrian Arab Army brigadier general and as many as nine Syrian Army soldiers

OCT　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　**NOV**

OCTOBER 15
The SNES announces a release of hundreds of ISIS detainees in SDF detention who have "no blood on their hands"

NOVEMBER 12
ISIS kills 21 pro-Syrian regime forces in an attack in Hamah province

Coalition Helps the SDF Protect Oil Infrastructure

During the quarter, Coalition forces also conducted partnered patrols with SDF Critical Petroleum Infrastructure (CPI) guard forces throughout northeastern Syria.[429] CJTF-OIR began training a CPI guard force to protect critical petroleum sites in the first half of 2020, following the consolidation of Coalition forces in northeastern Syria and a Coalition refocus on protecting oil infrastructure from ISIS recapture.[430] In June 2020, CJTF-OIR reported that 50 to 60 percent of the force had been trained. In September, the force was still being developed.[431] According to CJTF-OIR, during the quarter, the CPI guards displayed greater initiative and competence by leading patrols, initiating civil engagements, and facilitating security at critical petroleum sites, and they no longer required guidance to accomplish assigned tasks.[432]

CJTF-OIR said that CPI guards were continuing to make progress in "effectively and autonomously" patrolling and securing various areas in northeastern Syria, and were increasingly motivated and eager to work with Coalition forces.[433] According to CJTF-OIR, this consistent engagement and patrolling with CPI guards resulted in reduced attacks on oil infrastructure while also improving relationships between Coalition forces, CPI guards, and the local population.[434] CJTF-OIR reported that while ISIS seeks to attack oil infrastructure to secure revenue, its capability is sufficiently degraded so that it avoids direct confrontation with forces posted at critical petroleum infrastructure sites.[435]

Regime-backed Forces Step up Fight Against ISIS

The DIA reported that Russia continued to conduct strikes against ISIS across Syria this quarter in support of the Syrian regime's counterterrorism efforts.[436] USEUCOM reported that Turkey also conducted raids against ISIS and improved its security presence along its borders with Iraq and Syria, which reduced ISIS's ability to conduct attacks within and from Turkey.[437] In response to an increase in ISIS attacks against them, pro-regime and Russian forces conducted operations against ISIS in eastern Hamah and Homs provinces.[438] The DIA said that in November, pro-regime forces, which often included Iranian-backed forces, were preparing for clearing operations in eastern Hamah province, the first such operation in Hamah province in 2020.[439]

> **The DIA reported that Russia continued to conduct strikes against ISIS across Syria this quarter in support of the Syrian regime's counterterrorism efforts.**

DECEMBER 10
The SDF reaches agreement with Russia and the Syrian regime to establish Russian military posts near Ayn Issa and ease tensions between the SDF and Turkish-backed forces

DECEMBER 30
ISIS ambushes a bus convoy carrying regime and pro-regime troops in Dayr az Zawr province, killing up to 39 in its highest profile attack of the year

D E C

NOVEMBER 25
Heavy exchanges of fire between Kurdish and Turkish-backed fighters occur t in northeastern Syria, killing at least 18 Turkish-backed fighters and wounding several civilians

DECEMBER 22–28
A local Dayr az Zawr official dies in a car bomb attack, one in a series of likely ISIS attacks targeting government and military leaders in SDF operating areas

THE COMPLEX OPERATING ENVIRONMENT OF NORTHEASTERN SYRIA

= Syrian Regime
= Russia
= Turkey
= U.S./Coalition

Since the October 2019 Turkish incursion into Syria, Coalition forces have operated only along the eastern flank of northeast Syria. Syrian regime and Russian forces now operate in northern areas that Coalition forces left.

The SDF operates across northeastern Syria.

During the quarter, Ayn Issa became a flashpoint, as Turkish-backed forces tried to push the SDF further back.

TURKEY

Tigris River

Qamishli

Kobane
Jarabulus

Ras al-Ayn

Khabur River

Tal Abyad

Tel Tamer

Hasakah

Manbij

Ayn Issa

M4 Highway (Semi-closed)

IRAQ

Belikh

Ash Shaddadi

Raqqah

M4 Alternative Road

al-Tabqa

Euphrates River

= Turkish-supported Opposition
= SDF
= Syrian Army
= U.S. and Partner Forces
= Areas of ISIS Activity this Quarter
= Major Roads

Dayr az Zawr

Mayadin

TURKEY

SYRIA

IRAQ

Damascus

JORDAN

al-Bukamal

0   50   100 km

At Tanf

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

Sources: Institute for the Study of War, "Syria Situation Report, December 16, 2020–January 7, 2021," 1/10/2021; Congressional Research Service, "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response," 7/27/2020.

Actions taken by Syrian regime forces and their allies against ISIS appeared to be in response to increased ISIS attacks against them this quarter, particularly those that occurred in the difficult terrain of the central Syrian Desert. However, as noted earlier in this report, ISIS exploits the desert terrain to find sanctuary.[440] Research and monitoring groups reported that despite counter-ISIS operations and strikes conducted by Russian and pro-regime forces, ISIS remained capable of carrying out sophisticated attacks against regime and pro-regime forces during the quarter.[441]

According to the DIA, Iran remains committed to countering ISIS by providing lethal aid and advisory support to its partners and proxies in both Iraq and Syria.[442] The DIA said that Iran is likely continuing to work with its pro-regime allies in combatting the ISIS threat as a way to shore up the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and undermine the justification for U.S. forces to remain in Syria.[443] The DIA said that Iran has continued to maintain a presence in former ISIS territory in eastern Syria in part to protect its logistics routes and also to degrade ISIS's operational capabilities.[444] As the ISIS threat diminishes in Syria, Iran is prioritizing other goals, including pushing the United States out of the region and cementing its influence in the country, the DIA said.[445]

The SDF Continues Efforts to Quell Popular Unrest in the MERV

USCENTCOM reported that despite ongoing Arab grievances and a worsening economy in northeastern Syria, the SDF and the SNES remain capable of maintaining stability.[446] USCENTCOM said that the Syrian regime and its partners continued efforts to exploit grievances against the SDF to garner support among the local population in the MERV, but so far, no significant tribal elements have switched their allegiance.[447] CJTF-OIR reported that the increase in humanitarian aid access through the Iraq-Syria border was received positively by locals in the region.[448]

Arab populations in northeastern Syria have long demanded greater representation in SDF and SDC military and civil institutions, where they often do not have as much influence as their Kurdish counterparts, USCENTCOM said.[449] Local populations in Dayr az Zawr province east of the Euphrates also complain of inadequate security, while ISIS and other

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NORTHEAST SYRIA MILITARY AND CIVIL ENTITIES DEFINITIONS

SDF: Syrian Democratic Forces, the multiethnic partner force for the D-ISIS campaign in Syria.

SNES (aka SANES): Self-administration of North and East Syria, the SDF-aligned civilian administrative government for SDF-held Syria.

InSF (aka Asayish): SDF-aligned Internal Security Forces for SDF-held Syria.

SDC: Syrian Democratic Council, the SDF's political wing.

PYD: Democratic Union Party, a Syrian Kurdish political party founded in 2004 whose members founded the SDC.

YPG: People's Protection Units, the PYD-aligned Syrian Kurdish militia that forms the core, backbone, and command structure of the SDF.

YPJ: Women's Protection Units, an all-female militia closely affiliated with the YPG.

PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization.

Sources: DoS, responses to DoS OIG request for information, 12/22/2020 and 1/6/2021.

actors conduct attacks against SDF members, and tribal and civil leaders.[450] OUSD(P) ISA said that "continued efforts by malign actors to stoke tensions," by targeting Arab military and civilian officials in Dayr az Zawr, did not deter the SDF from its ISIS fight.[451]

USCENTCOM reported that the SDF and the SNES made limited efforts this quarter to address grievances by reorganizing some government structures to increase tribal representation and by hosting eight sessions with local populations to "generate dialogue between constituencies and improve transparency."[452] The SNES also agreed to a key Arab demand to accelerate the return of Syrians residing in the al-Hol camp to their communities in Dayr az Zawr and Raqqah provinces.[453]

Coalition Continues to Help the SDF Ease Overcrowding, Shore Up Security at Detention Facilities

The SDF holds some 10,000 captured ISIS fighters in detention in northeastern Syria, among them approximately 8,000 Iraqis and Syrians and 2,000 foreign fighters.[454] All but one of the SDF's facilities are previously existing buildings—such as schools or warehouses—that were turned into detention centers after the territorial defeat of ISIS. CJTF-OIR continued to provide funding, equipment, and training to help the SDF enhance security and capacity in these facilities, as well as ease overcrowding and improve conditions for detainees.[455]

In addition, OUSD(P) ISA reported that the DoD continues to work with other U.S. Government departments and agencies to facilitate the repatriation of ISIS foreign nationals to their countries of origin.[456] U.S. officials have warned for more than a year that the thousands of ISIS fighters in detention and families in IDP camps in Syria pose a threat to the OIR campaign to defeat ISIS, and that the only viable solution is that their countries of origin take them back.[457]

Children and women residing in the al-Hol camp in Syria. (VOA photo)

CJTF-OIR is also working with partners on developing a process for the SDF to transfer youths from adult detention facilities, OUSD(P) ISA reported.[458] The DoS reported that the SDF already operates one youth center for adolescent boys, where they receive humanitarian assistance, education or job skills training, and psychosocial support.[459] A location for a second youth center has been identified, and a Coalition partner is providing funding and issuing a construction contract.[460]

OUSD(P) ISA said that the facility will be focused on youth education and de-radicalization programs aimed at reducing exposure to exploitation.[461] The DoS said the SDF granted NGOs access to minors being held in four SDF detention centers and, with Coalition support, continue to press for increased access to juveniles in detention and their eventual transfer to dedicated youth facilities.[462]

PARTNER FORCE DEVELOPMENT IN SYRIA

CJTF-OIR Advisors Continue to Work with the SDF to Develop Organic Training Capabilities

CJTF-OIR reported that SDF counter-ISIS capabilities are "trending positively," with improvements in most aspects of conducting counterterrorism raids, including an increased capability to plan and conduct unilateral counter-ISIS operations this quarter.[463] CJTF-OIR stated that recent counter-IED training by Coalition forces has increased the number of SDF explosive ordnance disposal technicians available to deal with IEDs.[464] CJTF-OIR also said that recent divestment of weapons has hardened SDF checkpoints and provided increased capabilities at the security points in northeast Syria.[465]

As reported last quarter, CJTF-OIR reiterated that Coalition forces provide support to the SDF primarily through advising and divesting equipment.[466] CJTF-OIR stated that Coalition forces are developing the SDF and other local partners primarily as counterterrorism forces.[467] According to CJTF-OIR, one way Coalition forces continue to advise the SDF is by training the SDF on the development of training plans and programs of instruction. CJTF-OIR said that the intent is for partner forces to grow their organic training capabilities and maintain long-term, sustainable training pipelines.[468]

This quarter, CJTF-OIR reported that in addition to counter-IED training, Coalition forces provided hands-on training to the SDF on detention operations, target reconnaissance, and the use of mobile command and control systems. CJTF-OIR said that it also provided training on biometric systems to the Provincial Internal Security Forces.[469]

CJTF-OIR assessed, however, that the SDF still needs to improve coordination and intelligence sharing among SDF elements.[470] CJTF-OIR said that the SDF continues to rely heavily on human intelligence networks for intelligence collection because the SDF lacks organic ISR capabilities. However, CJTF-OIR reported that once the SDF receives targeting intelligence, they are able to effectively interpret it, take action, and coordinate with Coalition forces. CJTF-OIR also said that there has been an overall positive trend in the SDF's time-sensitive target planning capabilities.[471]

CJTF-OIR reported that SDF counter-ISIS capabilities are "trending positively," with improvements in most aspects of conducting counterterrorism raids, including an increased capability to plan and conduct unilateral counter-ISIS operations this quarter.

ROLE OF THIRD PARTIES IN SYRIA

Russians Commit Fewer Violations of Deconfliction Protocols

In September, following increasingly antagonistic encounters with Russian forces during patrols, CJTF-OIR deployed a mechanized infantry unit outfitted with M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicles into eastern Syria. CJTF-OIR said that the mechanized assets enhanced the Coalition's force protection, preserved freedom of movement, and demonstrated the U.S. willingness and ability to project force when required.[472]

OUSD(P) ISA reported that while Russian forces continued to violate established deconfliction protocols in northeast Syria this quarter, there was "a noticeable decrease in the regularity and severity of those violations" following the deployment of the additional force protection assets.[473] CJTF-OIR reported that Russian violations of deconfliction protocols during the quarter dropped to the lowest level since the current protocols were established in December 2019.[474]

CJTF-OIR said that the few violations that occurred were minor patrol composition violations that did not pose a threat to Coalition forces.[475] CJTF-OIR maintains daily contact with Russian counterparts to deconflict air and ground operations, OUSD(P) ISA reported.[476] CJTF-OIR further reported that Russian military activity in northeastern Syria decreased during the quarter as Russian forces focused more on fighting opposition forces in Idlib province in northwestern Syria.[477]

USCENTCOM said that while Russian attempts to gain access to oilfields in northeastern Syria also appeared to have decreased this quarter, Russian forces continued to operate near Rumalyn and al-Qhataniya in northeastern Hasakah province—the scene of a dramatic confrontation between Coalition and Russian forces in August 2020.[478] USCENTCOM assessed that these are "indicators of attempts by Russia to expand its influence in northeastern Syria."[479] USCENTCOM reported that Russian forces also continued their attempts to establish military posts near Malikiyah, in the same district, but were unsuccessful due to resistance from residents in nearby villages.[480]

The DIA reported that Russia and pro-regime forces continue to pressure U.S. forces in the area while engaging with the SDF and the local population.[481] CJTF-OIR reported that Russian and pro-regime forces activity did not impact local support for Coalition and SDF forces.[482]

Tensions Escalate Between the SDF and Turkish-aligned Forces in Border Region

Tensions reignited this quarter between the SDF and Turkish forces operating in Syria along with Syrian militias allied with Turkey, resulting in renewed exchanges of artillery fire and IED attacks around the northern town of Ayn Issa, the DIA reported.[483] Turkey views the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which constitutes the main fighting force of the SDF, as an extension of the PKK, which has been waging a longtime violent insurgency inside Turkey.[484]

In September, following increasingly antagonistic encounters with Russian forces during patrols, CJTF-OIR deployed a mechanized infantry unit outfitted with M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicles into eastern Syria.

In October 2020, Turkey reiterated threats to launch another military incursion into Syria if the SDF does not withdraw its forces from areas of northern Syria that border Turkey.[485] The DIA reported that despite the escalation and heated Turkish rhetoric, it had not seen any recent indication of Turkey preparing for a major military operation in northeastern Syria.[486] However, on several occasions in November and December, Turkish-supported opposition groups advanced on SDF-held areas near Ayn Issa, according to reporting from NGOs , the media, Turkish-supported opposition groups, and the SDF. The SDF ultimately repelled the advances and retook towns that the Turkish-supported forces had seized.[487]

In December, the SDF reached a deal with Russia for Russian forces to set up new posts around the town of Ayn Issa, which was meant to help prevent further escalation, according to media reports.[488] USCENTCOM said that in the context of Turkey's threat of attack, Russia will likely continue to pressure the SDF and the SNES to acquiesce to demands from the Syrian regime in exchange for protection from Turkey. In addition, USCENTCOM assessed that the increase in activity has pulled some of the SDF's focus toward the area where Turkish forces are operating and away from defeat-ISIS operations.[489]

> **According to the DIA, although Iranian leaders were wary of escalating tensions with the United States before the U.S. presidential transition, Iran likely continues to develop plans for operations against U.S. positions across the region, including in Syria.**

Iran and Iranian-backed Militias in Syria Remain an Enduring Threat to Coalition and Partner Forces

According to the DIA, although Iranian leaders were wary of escalating tensions with the United States before the U.S. presidential transition, Iran likely continues to develop plans for operations against U.S. positions across the region, including in Syria. The DIA assessed that Iranian-affiliated forces probably retain the ability to attack U.S. interests and partners in Syria with little warning. The DIA noted that Iran has attempted to recruit local Syrians to collect intelligence on U.S. and Coalition forces in Syria, and could attempt to leverage these individuals to conduct attacks on its behalf. The DIA said Iran may also seek to conduct or encourage limited, deniable attacks against U.S. forces in response to perceived support to strikes on regional Iranian-affiliated targets and to pressure the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria.[490]

Meanwhile, public reporting indicated that Iran increased its recruiting of local men in eastern Dayr az Zawr province to augment existing foreign fighter militias it has deployed to Syria in support of the Syrian regime.[491] In particular, Iran appears to be recruiting eastern Syrian men into the so-called "Baqir Brigade," or Liwa al-Baqir, a predominately Syrian Shia militia which independent analysts believe Iran was founded in the early years of the Syrian conflict.[492]

According to the Long War Journal, an online digest that tracks extremist groups, the Baqir Brigade vowed in April 2018 to use military force to evict U.S. forces from Syria and is suspected to have on at least two occasions—in June 2017 near Tanf and in February 2018 in Dayr az Zawr—participated in attacks on U.S. positions.[493] Independent analysts have noted that the Baqir Brigade, along with other Iranian-backed Shia militias, has taken control of several towns along the southern bank of the Euphrates River between Mayadin and al-Bukamal and diminished Syrian regime authority in the area.[494] Other analysts have noted the militia's recruitment of tribal fighters from Hasakah and Aleppo, expanding the group's influence into the two provinces.[495]

DIPLOMACY AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

During the quarter, Joel Rayburn, the DoS Special Envoy for Syria at the time, described the situation in the country as "one of the most dangerous crises in the world in both geostrategic and humanitarian terms."[496] This quarter, the U.S. strategic objectives in Syria remained the enduring defeat of ISIS, al-Qaeda, and their affiliates; the withdrawal of Iranian forces and proxies; and a political resolution of the Syrian conflict as per United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 (UNSCR 2254). These objectives are consistent with the shared goals of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, and the security needs of the U.S. Government's regional partners, according to the DoS.[497]

Obstacles to the U.S. Government's strategic goals include a repressive Syrian regime unwilling to negotiate to accommodate the aspirations of the Syrian people, the interference of malign actors—Russia, Iran, and violent extremist organizations—and limited influence with the Syrian regime. In addition, lack of funding and the need to work through partners impedes progress.[498]

The DoS said that any favorable resolution of the conflict requires that the Syrian regime not be a state sponsor of terrorism; not allow Syria to be a safe harbor for terrorism; and that it must sever its relationships with Iranian forces and Iranian-aligned militias. In addition, Syria must surrender its chemical weapons stockpiles and eliminate those programs; and create conditions for the safe and voluntary return of refugees and IDPs to their homes.[499] These conditions must be met, the DoS said, before normal diplomatic or economic relations with the Syrian regime can be established.[500]

Syria Constitutional Committee Meets for Fourth Time

In November, the Syrian regime, opposition leaders, and other political actors met in Geneva for the fourth meeting of the Syrian Constitutional Committee. Established in 2019 under the auspices of the United Nations, the committee seeks to draft a new constitution in accordance with UNSCR 2254.[501] The DoS said that the committee's meetings help to support a Syrian-led political process and an end to the conflict in Syria, with a resultant positive impact on the OIR mission.[502]

This fourth round of talks sought to develop a list of "National Principles."[503] At the conclusion of the session, the Syrian regime presented their National Principles document, which rejected all forms of terrorism; defined Syria's national identity; and called for support for the Syrian Arab Army. The opposition's document stressed the territorial integrity of Syria; the need to uphold basic human rights; and the safe and voluntary return of refugees.[504]

According to the DoS, this session lacked substantive discussion on Syria's constitution and no major breakthroughs occurred.[505] Speaking at the conclusion of the talks on December 4, UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen acknowledged the slow progress of the committee, noting that there are many differences between the two sides and some "tense moments" during the discussions.[506] At the conclusion of the December meeting, Special Envoy Pedersen announced that the sides agreed to a fifth round of talks in late January. The meeting will focus on the basic principles of the constitution.[507]

Stabilization Activities Hampered by Funding Limits

The DoS reported that President Trump's FY 2021 budget request did not include stabilization funding for Syria. The DoS reported that as of the end of the quarter, it was waiting for a decision by the Trump administration on the use of FY 2020 funds earmarked for Syria stabilization programming. Due to this funding limit, stabilization projects managed by the DoS Near East Affairs Assistance Coordination (DoS NEA AC) significantly reduced programming to preserve limited funding, although low-level programming continues across all lines of effort. However, during the previous quarter, the U.S. Government funded and conducted a $1.8 million local governance project to restore drinking water to about 300,000 people in Hasakah City, in northeast Syria.[508] The project's implementer worked with the civil councils to repair water stations, electrical grids, and pipelines linking Suwar Canal to Hasakah City to provide a consistent, clean water supply, the DoS said.[509]

Some previously funded activities under this project were put on hold during the quarter while the DoS waited for additional funding, including those that supported Raqqah Civil Council, the Democratic Civilian Administration of Tabqa, Al Jazeera Civil Council, and the Dayr az Zawr Civil Council. The pause placed additional fiscal strain on civil councils as they work to address the COVID-19 pandemic.[510] The paused projects included support to the emergency first responders, waste management, rehabilitation of irrigation, sanitation and water systems, community engagement, mentorship and training programs for local authorities, media and other outreach activities to connect the local councils to their constituents, and public health awareness campaigns, the DoS said.[511]

Rehabilitation of Shaddadi Desalination Plant will provide a sustainable water supply to an estimated 9,000 beneficiaries in al-Shaddadi. (USAID photo)

Intra-Kurdish Dialogue Progress Slow but Steady

From March to October, delegates from the Kurdish National Council and the Kurdish National Unity Parties met as part of a U.S. Government- and SDF-brokered effort to decrease tensions between these rival political parties and encourage greater understanding and practical cooperation.[512] Support for the intra-Kurdish dialogue aims to increase political inclusivity in northeast Syria, enhance stability in northeast Syria in ways conducive to the Syrian political process, and foster conditions for the northeast Syrians to have a greater say in the Syrian political process.[513]

The DoS reported that in June, the parties agreed on a binding joint political vision and publicly affirmed their commitment to continue negotiations with the aim of signing a comprehensive agreement.[514] Since that time, progress has been slow but steady, according to the DoS.[515] In December, Deputy Special Representative David Brownstein met with both delegations and agreed to resume formal dialogue sessions in February, following a 3-month pause, the DoS reported.[516]

The intra-Kurdish dialogue addresses community complaints about governance in northeast Syria which, if left unanswered, could create vulnerabilities that ISIS or other extremist groups could exploit to gain followers and destabilize the region. The dialogue is also part of a larger effort to manage Turkey's continued opposition to the Coalition's partnership with the SDF.[517]

The DoS Concerned by Reports of Violence, Human Rights Abuses in Turkish-controlled Areas

Security across Turkish-supported opposition (TSO)-held areas of northeast Syria varied during the quarter. While some areas, such as Tel Abyad in Raqqah province, were relatively stable, the DoS said it received reports of TSO infighting in Turkish-controlled areas, which led to inadequate security along the M4 highway, a critical route for NGO and humanitarian access in Syria.[518] In particular, TSO-instigated violence near Ayn Issa in Raqqah province threatened to block ground transportation between eastern Syria and the cities of Manbij, Tabqa, and Raqqah, where U.S. stabilization programs continue.[519]

The DoS said it was deeply concerned by reports that TSO groups committed human rights abuses and violations of the law of armed conflict in northeast Syria.[520] The U.S. Government continued to raise this matter with the Turkish government, the Syrian Interim Government, the nominal Syrian opposition "government" in exile, and TSO groups, and to press for investigations of these allegations and accountability for those responsible.[521]

The DoS said that it received multiple reports of killings, torture, kidnapping, extortion, arbitrary detentions, and denial of water access to half a million civilians in TSO-held areas. Infighting between TSO factions also led to a worsening security situation in northern Syria and resulted in civilian deaths. The SDF, the SNES, and civil society organizations in northeast Syria, particularly those representing women and Yazidi minorities, frequently call for U.S. Government sanctions on specific TSO groups accused of human rights abuses. These alleged abuses include seizing civilian property, preventing the return of displaced

From March to October, delegates from the Kurdish National Council and the Kurdish National Unity Parties met as part of a U.S. Government- and SDF-brokered effort to decrease tensions between these rival political parties and encourage greater understanding and practical cooperation.

persons to their homes, threatening Kurdish civilians, kidnapping, forced marriage, sexual violence, extortion, and murder. The United States has not sanctioned any TSO groups.[522]

In response to DoS engagements on the matter, Turkish officials informed the U.S. Government that they take this matter seriously and support investigations of the allegations by the Syrian opposition. The DoS reported that the outcomes of its engagements on the matter "have not been fully satisfying."[523] The DoS said that it "will continue to follow these concerning allegations closely and remain engaged."[524]

The DoS said it was also concerned about multiple reports of violence targeting Kurds, Yazidis, and Christians that kept them from returning safely to their homes in areas controlled by TSO groups. According to the DoS, more than 70,000 civilians remain displaced due to Turkey's incursion into northeast Syria in October 2019. In some cases, IDPs are prevented from returning home by TSO members who block civilians' returns at checkpoints or force locals to pay to live in their own homes. Some cannot return because TSO members and their families now occupy the original inhabitants' homes. The continued reports of TSO groups' sectarian attacks on local populations, including Yezidis in Afrin and Christians in Ras al-Ayn, also discourages IDP returns. The DoS said that this quarter, the U.S. Government pressed the Turkish government, the Syrian Interim Government, and the SDF on the right of all displaced Syrians to return home.[525]

The DoS also raised concern over "alarming" reports of terrorist attacks in Turkish-controlled areas of northern Syria, including car-bomb attacks that caused dozens of civilian deaths, including Turkish civilians at the border. While no group has claimed responsibility, the DoS reported that Turkish officials frequently claim that PKK-affiliated groups conduct most of these attacks, and regularly raise these concerns with U.S. officials.[526]

United Nations, Coalition Continue Efforts to Address Child Fighters and Detainees

During the quarter, the SDF continued to work bilaterally with the United Nations pursuant to the July 2019 child soldier demobilization action plan. In August 2020, the SNES established a civil complaints mechanism to enable parents to work with the SDF and the SDC in order to request the release of conscripted children, the DoS said.[527] The United Nations confirmed that the mechanism is active and has facilitated the release of at least 15 children to date; the SDF demobilized an additional 114 children from its ranks in 2020. Children the SDF recently demobilized have been returned to their families, the DoS reported.[528]

The United Nations also reported that the SDF successfully screened out more than 900 children seeking to join the SDF, and that SDF-associated internal security groups screened out an additional 1,000 children.[529] The United Nations and the SDF continued bilateral cooperation on the action plan, including establishing mechanisms for age-screening and demobilization. The SDF also continued withdrawing from schools per its July 2020 commitment to end its military use of schools.[530] This quarter, the SDF withdrew from 4 schools in Dayr az Zawr, bringing the total number of schools vacated to 18. The United

The DoS also raised concern over "alarming" reports of terrorist attacks in Turkish-controlled areas of northern Syria, including car-bomb attacks that caused dozens of civilian deaths, including Turkish civilians at the border.

Nations confirmed the SDF has handed the schools over to the relevant local councils' education committees.[531]

The DoS reported that the Coalition supports the SDF in their work to humanely detain individuals held for involvement with ISIS, including ongoing SDF efforts to segregate minors from adults in detention facilities and facilitate NGO access to the minors in detention. The SDF operates one youth center for adolescent boys and has identified a site for building a second center with Coalition support. The Coalition has also advocated for increased NGO access to juveniles in detention; NGOs have visited four SDF detention centers housing minors to conduct assessments on the minors and initiate humanitarian support. The United Nations and the SDF remain engaged bilaterally to facilitate continued humanitarian access to minors in detention and their eventual transfer to dedicated youth facilities.[532]

Lack of Funding Hurts Stabilization, Tribal Reconciliation Efforts in Dayr az Zawr

The largely Kurdish-led SDF and the SNES have struggled to govern Dayr az Zawr's competing Arab tribal communities and to provide sufficient services to manage the province's recovery from the Syrian conflict, the DoS said. According to the DoS, at times the SDF has taken a heavy-handed approach but is "increasingly aware that it needs a more inclusive strategy" to keep these communities, which are largely Arab and are themselves divided along tribal and clan lines, on its side, an effort that is complicated by resource challenges exacerbated by the worsening Syrian economy.[533]

The DoS said that a lack of funding remains a serious challenge to U.S. Government stabilization and essential services programming in Dayr az Zawr. The SNES officials continue to plead for additional Coalition support in the health, education, livelihood, water, and electricity sectors to keep the peace and allow residents of Dayr az Zawr to maintain trust in local institutions instead of turning to ISIS, Iran, or the Syrian regime for support, the DoS reported. All three malign actors have made persistent efforts in recent months to buy off certain tribal communities to sow instability.[534]

The SDC's efforts to expedite voluntary Syrian departures from al-Hol, modify the education curriculum, and restructure the Dayr az Zawr Civil and Military Councils to be more representative and responsive were intended to address concerns of the population, the DoS said. While the situation remains under control for now, additional Coalition investment, particularly on the stabilization side, will remain essential for reconciliation in the near term.[535]

Repatriation of Third-country Nationals, Iraqis, and Foreign Terrorist Fighters Remains Uneven

The DoS reported that during the quarter, some countries of origin (previous residence) or nationality (citizenship) contacted the SDF directly to arrange for repatriation for their nationals, while many remained reluctant to repatriate at all. The DoS said that repatriations

The DoS reported that the Coalition supports the SDF in their work to humanely detain individuals held for involvement with ISIS, including ongoing SDF efforts to segregate minors from adults in detention facilities and facilitate NGO access to the minors in detention.

of citizens of Germany, Finland, Canada, Uzbekistan, Russia, Albania, Ukraine, and Bosnia were reported in the media this quarter.[536]

Some Iraqi residents of the al-Hol displaced persons camp have registered for repatriation to Iraq, but the Iraqi government is not acting on these requests.

Some Iraqi residents of the al-Hol camp have registered for repatriation to Iraq, but the Iraqi government is not acting on these requests.[537] The U.S. Government and international NGOs continued to press the Iraqi government to arrange an effective mechanism, including appropriate vetting systems related to security and humanitarian concerns, for voluntary Iraqi repatriations.[538]

FTF countries of origin showed varying willingness to repatriate their nationals from Syria. Some countries proactively repatriated fighters and associated family members, while others remained reluctant to do so.[539] Earlier this year, Italy repatriated a foreign terrorist fighter and her children. In December, Germany and Finland jointly repatriated 23 women and children from the al-Hol camp, Bosnia repatriated 25 women and children, Uzbekistan 98 women and children, Belgium 1 child, Russia 19 children, and Ukraine repatriated 7 children and 2 women. During the quarter, Russia repatriated about 75 children, Canada repatriated 1 child, and Albania repatriated 5 women and children.[540]

The DoS said it prioritizes repatriation to countries of origin and continued to engage allies and local partners on options to return their citizens.[541] The DoS said it also prioritizes repatriation of FTFs and their associated family members from northeast Syria, and that it plans to continue working with allies and local partners to advance this priority. The United States has repatriated all American citizens facing criminal charges for their involvement with ISIS.[542]

The DoS GEC Launches Rapid Response Capability Program

This quarter, the DoS Global Engagement Center (GEC) reported that the Defeat-ISIS Rapid Response Capability program is ongoing in Iraq and Syria.[543] According to the DoS GEC, the program supports the National Security Council's approved Defeat-ISIS Resiliency Framework, which is an annex to the President's Defeat-ISIS Integrated Strategic Plan.[544] The Defeat-ISIS Rapid Response Capability program is a $900,000 cooperative agreement grant that allows the DoS to respond rapidly to events through local actors best positioned to refute terrorist propaganda. The DoS Counter Terrorism office works with editorialists and other members of the media known and respected within the region, the DoS GEC said.[545] The program launched in September and helped to amplify local criticism of the legitimacy of ISIS' current leader, Amir al-Mawla.[546]

The DoS GEC reported obstacles in implementing the Defeat-ISIS Rapid Response Capability program to reach vulnerable populations inside Syria, including the COVID-19 pandemic, ISIS threats to local partners, and U.S. sanctions that limited the implementing partner's ability to conduct business with vetted local organizations.[547]

This first iteration was successful in reaching key target audiences in Iraq, and the DoS GEC is currently assessing the effectiveness of amplified messaging to shift behaviors and perceptions of target audiences away from ISIS.[548]

Al-Hol: The Challenge of Leaving—and Staying

After the Coalition's removal of ISIS from its last territorial hold in Baghouz in March 2019, much of the population from Baghouz traveled to al-Hol camp in northeastern Syria and the camp's population swelled by 680 percent, to more than 70,000 people.[549] Most of the new arrivals were women and children who had been living in ISIS-controlled territory. As of this quarter, more than 62,000 people still live at the camp.[550] According to OCHA, 96 percent of the camp's population are women and children.[551] DoS PRM reported that more than 50 percent of the camp's population are under the age of 12 and approximately 25 percent of the total population are children under the age of five.[552]

While al-Hol is an IDP camp and residents are civilians who have not been charged with any crime, some residents are suspected family members of ISIS fighters and are loyal to ISIS. There continue to be sporadic incidents of violence within the camp, including reports of ISIS supporters attempting to enforce ISIS interpretations of Islamic law, clashing with camp officials, or targeting other residents for cooperating with the authorities.[553]

CHALLENGES TO RETURN

SNES officials announced this quarter that they planned to enable the departure of all Syrians wishing to leave al-Hol.[554] According to the DoS, the SNES announced that it has eliminated the requirement that Syrians in the camp obtain tribal sponsorship from their communities before being permitted to leave the camp.[555] Before departing from al-Hol, Syrian IDPs must complete an interview with camp administration, be photographed, and be vetted and approved for departure by security services.[556]

The DoS said that "reintegration of returnees to communities in liberated areas helps cement gains made in the OIR campaign."[557] The DoS reported that the Syrian release initiatives were a positive development and have been managed responsibly by the SNES authorities.[558] During the quarter, 853 Syrians returned to Dayr az Zawr province using this procedure, 708 Syrians departed for Raqqah, and 65 Syrians departed for Hasakah.[559]

However, there are several obstacles to return for Syrians at al-Hol, including lack of legal documentation for many IDPs.[560] In addition, approximately half of the Syrian IDPs in al-Hol are from Syrian regime-controlled areas and there is no mechanism in place for Syrians who want to return to areas not administered by the SNES.[561]

The DoD OIG notes that there are also questions about whether the SDF has the ability to ensure their vetting process prevents the return of any former ISIS affiliates to violent extremism once back in their Syrian communities. An SDF leader told the media that Syrians in the camp with familial ties to ISIS were included among those being released.[562] Ambassador James Jeffrey said in December after his retirement, that ISIS-affiliated women at al-Hol engaged in "violence, intimidation and indoctrination" in the camp.[563] The DIA reported that the SDF has "a limited capacity" to vet IDPs before their departures.[564] While the SNES does not run its own reintegration process in communities of return, the DoS reported it welcomed the inclusion of NGOs in the reintegration process to provide services such as psychosocial support, livelihoods training, and education support programing—as included in various Coalition stabilization efforts—to facilitate successful IDP reintegration.[565]

Meanwhile, despite U.S. Government advocacy with the Iraqi government to repatriate the approximately 30,000 Iraqis at al-Hol, obstacles remain.[566] While Iraqis currently do not have a formal mechanism to return to Iraq, the camp administration instituted a policy this quarter to allow Iraqi residents who feel their lives are being threatened to apply for permission to leave the camp to live elsewhere in northeast

Syria.[567] There were reports of small numbers of Iraqis from al-Hol being smuggled to the Iraqi border, where they turned themselves into the military. After vetting by the ISF, they were reportedly allowed to return to areas of origin while they received tribal and family sponsorship.[568]

Approximately 9,000 foreign nationals reside in a separate annex of the camp, 6,400 of whom are children. The foreign annex is separated from the Syrian and Iraqi camp population. Foreign nationals continue to be repatriated on a case-by-case basis.[569]

SECURITY INCIDENTS REMAIN OF CONCERN

The DoS reported that the humanitarian community remained concerned about security and humanitarian conditions in the camp, although U.S. Government support to the SDF to provide necessary security and SDF-NGO coordination on security continued.[570] The DoS reported that the number of security incidents inside the camp was about the same as last quarter. Several murders—including 13 during the quarter—and attempted murders have occurred, often targeting Iraqis and individuals perceived to be affiliated with the camp administration or security services.[571] Reflecting a concerning trend, most of those being killed have some degree of perceived affiliation with camp leadership, the camp administration, or the security services.[572]

DoS PRM reported that Iraqis in particular have been targeted, with both the head of the Iraqi Council—a resident-led council inside the camp—and a former member of the council being murdered.[573] On December 3, both the Iraqi and Syrian councils in the camp announced that they would suspend all activities. In contrast, incidents of vandalism and attacks on humanitarian distribution sites have decreased significantly in comparison to the first part of the year.[574]

Some women suspected of affiliation with ISIS reside among the population at al-Hol and appear to have been involved in some of the attacks.[575] U.S. Ambassador James Jeffrey, former special envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, said in a December speech after his retirement that ISIS-affiliated women at al-Hol engaged in "violence, intimidation and indoctrination" in the camp.[576] The DIA reported that while some ISIS-affiliated women in IDP camps have disavowed the group, others remain committed to ISIS, and attempt to indoctrinate minors and enforce ISIS's morality standards in parts of the camp.[577]

USCENTCOM has stated that IDP and refugee populations in Iraq and Syria are subject to indoctrination by ISIS supporters in the camps, which adds urgency to the need to find ways to reintegrate or repatriate camp residents.[578] In November, General McKenzie said that ISIS indoctrination in IDP camps was "an alarming development with potentially dangerous generational implications," as children in the camps may grow up radicalized if opportunities for return and reintegration are not available.[579]

Consistent security incidents at al-Hol indicate a need for increased camp policing, the DoS said.[580] According to the DoS, SDF-affiliated security forces provide external security at al-Hol. The DoS-funded NGO that manages the camp provides reports of security incidents in the camp to the SNES Camp Administration, which refers them to SDF-affiliated law enforcement and security entities for investigation.[581] DoS PRM stated that it is the position of both DoS PRM and the humanitarian organizations operating at the camp that instigators, perpetrators of violent attacks, and individuals who pose a threat to themselves or others in the camp should be dealt with through law enforcement channels and, if deemed necessary, removed from the camp and moved to a detention facility.[582]

Al-Hol: The Challenge of Leaving—and Staying

(continued from previous page)

COVID-19 AND HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

According to a USAID implementing partner, shortages of water and electricity across the camp make it challenging for people to implement best hygiene practices.[583] The first cases of COVID-19 at al-Hol were detected in August, and as of the end of the quarter 13 cases had been reported.[584] While reported COVID-19 infections remained low compared to other parts of the world, any greater outbreak could have disproportionately negative impacts on the al-Hol population, which is often malnourished and has limited access to medical services.[585]

DoS PRM reported that humanitarian actors and the camp administration continued to coordinate on COVID-19 mitigation measures. The DoS said that, due in part to ongoing advocacy by the Syria Transition Assistance Response Team (START), communication and coordination between the humanitarian community and local authorities improved compared to previous quarters.[586]

Due to COVID-19 mitigation measures, however, humanitarian access and assistance at the camp continues to be restricted to life-saving humanitarian assistance such as food, water, sanitation, health care, and shelter.[587] Most group activities, such as education, remained suspended or significantly curtailed. Restrictions on the number of humanitarian aid workers who could be at the camp at a time has slowed access to the camp.[588]

STABILIZATION

The U.S. Government continues to fund a wide portfolio of stabilization programming in Syria. These programs prioritize activities in areas not held by the Syrian regime and help ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS, prevent the return of ISIS or other violent extremist organizations, and contribute to the restoration of daily life to help IDPs to return home safely.[589] The DoS reported that stabilization assistance is key to preventing an ISIS resurgence in northeast Syria. Stabilization assistance also serves as a "counterweight" against the destabilizing influence of Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime in the area.[590]

The DoS and USAID face many challenges in implementing stabilization programming in Syria. The agencies operate with a limited budget following the March 2018 Presidential freeze of stabilization assistance for Syria.[591] In addition, continued insecurity along the line of control between TSO-controlled and SDF-controlled parts of northeast Syria also remains a destabilizing factor for the region.[592] Sporadic attacks by ISIS in lower Dayr az Zawr province add yet another threat that has impeded implementation of some stabilization projects, according to USAID. Finally, the presence of Iranian, Russian, and Syrian regime forces presents another destabilizing factor in northeast Syria that impedes USAID's programming.[593]

State and USAID Stabilization Programs Continue Under Limited Funding

The DoS reported that Syria stabilization programming continued through this quarter. However, the DoS NEA AC office reduced some activities to preserve limited funding, including certain activities under ongoing projects supporting education, independent

media, vocational training, and essential service support to local councils, including emergency first responders.[594]

DoS NEA projects that support essential service provision and emergency first responders through local councils continued throughout the quarter in non-regime held areas. In-person capacity-building training and mentoring activities resumed. The DoS said this assistance serves as a "bulwark" against the Syrian regime and extremists who seek to exploit vacuums in security and service.[595]

During the quarter, the DoS NEA AC's Community Security Program supported training for hundreds of internal security officers in Raqqah, Hasakah, and Dayr az Zawr provinces with courses on community policing principles and skills.[596] Also this quarter, the program concluded street light rehabilitation and traffic infrastructure rehabilitation in Raqqah and Dayr az Zawr provinces.[597]

This quarter, DoS NEA AC and USAID notified Congress of their intent to provide $5 million to support the COVID response in northeast Syria through existing stabilization mechanisms. The notifications cleared Congress in early December and programming began.[598]

Programming supported by the DoS Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor and Office of Global Criminal Justice increased as the two offices began programming their allocation of FY 2019 funding. This programming will support transitional justice, reconciliation, civil society, and accountability efforts, including accountability for ISIS crimes. Given the increasing earmarks for these offices' programs in the legislation in recent years, the DoS Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor plans to continue and, in some cases, increase their programming levels, DoS NEA AC reported.[599]

This quarter, the DoS reported that some Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS partners provided funds for the U.S. Government to expend on stabilization programs. Global Affairs Canada contributed $3,850,000 to support independent media activities in northeast Syria and a European partner contributed 500,000 euros to equip the points of entry into northeast Syria with supplies to screen for COVID-19 and mitigate risk at crossings, In addition, facilitated by the American Institute in Taiwan, the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States contributed $500,000 to support education activities in northeast Syria.[600] When asked how outcomes were tracked, DoS NEA AC said successes were often not tracked on a quarterly basis, and that many outcomes represented an "impact over the life of the program."[601]

The USAID Middle East Bureau (USAID ME) Bureau currently manages five stabilization activities in northeast Syria through the Southern Syria Assistance Platform, which focus on restoring essential services (e.g., a desalination plant and a hospital), supporting agricultural markets, and providing livelihoods training.[602] USAID ME Bureau also manages two active stabilization projects in northeast Syria through the Syria Transition Assistance Response Team (START), both focused on agricultural livelihoods and food security supporting rehabilitation of economic infrastructure and improved crop production and marketing.[603] In Dayr az Zawr province, USAID ME Bureau manages an essential services program, which reported establishing an oxygen bottling facility to

Table 2.

DoS and USAID-funded Stabilization Activities in Syria

Project Name	
Syria Livelihoods Program	• Began implementation of three "quick win" vocational training, income-generation, and capacity building activities in the communities of Hajin, Tabqa, and Malikiyah.
	• Started in-depth sector assessments and community profiles to support the design of activities in future quarters, which are intended to restore livelihoods and mitigate the current economic crisis gripping northeast Syria.
	• Distributed wheat, lentil, and barley seeds and fertilizer to 800 farmers in Hasakah governorate in preparation for the wheat sowing season.
	• Completed rehabilitation work on one irrigation canal in Dayr az Zawr and two bakery rehabilitations (one in Suwar and one in Ali, Dayr az Zawr).
	• Completed planning and requirements assessments for rehabilitation of six additional bakeries (five in Hasakah, and one in Dayr az Zawr provinces).
Syria Essential Services Program	• Rehabilitated the Shaddadi Desalination Plant, which pumps and treats 740 cubic meters of potable water a day, providing roughly 90,000 residents with water.
Skills Training for Conflict-Affected Vulnerable Communities Accountability and Research Team	• Finalized selection of beneficiaries to participate in vocational training courses in two cities in Hasakah province.
Restoring Livelihoods Through Agricultural Revitalization	• Completed several research projects to better inform USAID ME Bureau project and activity design and implementation, including analyses of the impact of shocks and pressures on the 2019–2020 cereal crop cycle in northeast Syria and the impact of Syrian pound depreciation in northeast Syria.
	• Distributed vouchers for vegetable seeds, fertilizers, and drip irrigation kits to farmers in Raqqa, Manbij, and Dayr az Zawr. Training activities for farmers were postponed due to COVID-19 lockdown.
	• Completed approval and planning and vendor selection for its next round of vouchers for livestock that will happen in FY 2021 Q2.

Sources: USAID ME Bureau, response to USAID OIG request for information, 12/11/2020.

supply the region's healthcare infrastructure with medical-grade oxygen.[604] Table 2 details stabilization activities that took place during the quarter.

USAID reported that stabilization programs monitor activities closely and report against a number of performance indicators to ensure effective performance management, and report on progress against programs' intended results and objectives.[605] Separately, USAID's Accountability and Research Team activity independently monitors the implementation of USAID ME Bureau's activities in Syria to verify activities are taking place or have been completed, and whether or not interventions are effective and meeting stabilization program objectives and activity results, as well as contributing to gender, inclusion, environmental, and sustainability objectives.[606]

USAID reported that USAID Syria Southern Assistance Platform stabilization activities will cease in March 2021 absent additional funding.[607] USAID START stabilization activities have funding available to continue implementing agricultural livelihoods and food security programs through summer 2021, according to USAID.[608]

Economic Hardships Felt in Syrian Regime and SDF-held Area

The DoS reported that economic hardships experienced in regime-held areas of Syria were also felt in SDF-held areas and included the devaluation of the Syrian pound, scarcity of medicine, rising food prices, lack of economic opportunities, and communities' inability to rebuild. These hardships undermine military gains against ISIS. DoS NEA AC's local Syrian staff cited the currency crash and economic crisis in Syria as one source of the refusal of some hawala offices (used by the U.S. Government to transfer project funding into Syria) to exchange Syrian pounds.[609]

Local partners reported higher prices of commodities, thereby raising the overall cost of projects. In some cases, equipment and inputs remained unavailable locally. Due to the inflation in wheat and flour prices, some mills have stopped buying flour, thereby compounding local food shortages, the DoS reported.[610]

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

The U.S. Government, through USAID and the DoS, leverages all possible channels to deliver aid to those in need in Syria, including the United Nations, international and non-governmental organizations, and local Syrian organizations.[611] Humanitarian funding supports the provision of emergency food, health, livelihoods, shelter, and water, sanitation, and hygiene services for IDPs and other vulnerable populations in Syria, and Syrian refugees in the region. Since the start of the crisis in 2012, the U.S. Government has provided more than $12 billion in humanitarian assistance to help Syrians in need.[612]

WFP food distribution in Dayr az Zawr province. (WFP/Taha Hussain photo)

Economic Crisis Increases Food Prices and Hunger

Prominent humanitarian developments in Syria this quarter included continued economic deterioration and resultant food insecurity countrywide.[613] The DoS and USAID reported that humanitarian conditions in Syria continued to deteriorate as a result of the economic crisis and the depreciation of the Syrian pound.[614] The currency's steep depreciation has diminished household purchasing power and engendered record-high food prices—the price of basic food items increased by approximately 229 percent from September 2019 to September 2020, and remains nearly 22 times higher than pre-crisis levels, according to the UN World Food Programme (WFP).[615] In northwest Syria, malnutrition is particularly pronounced—the United Nations has documented a 5 percent increase in child stunting and that 37 percent of displaced mothers are malnourished.[616]

Table 3.

Funding to Syrian Humanitarian Response, FY 2012–2019

USAID BHA	$6,153,700,050
DoS PRM	$6,050,511,437
TOTAL	**$12,204,211,487**

Source: USAID BHA.

Additional $720 Million in Humanitarian Funding Allocated by USAID and the DoS

During the UN General Assembly on September 24, USAID's Acting Administrator announced $720 million in additional funding for the Syria crisis. This quarter, USAID reported that of the total amount, approximately $419 million was allocated through USAID BHA and approximately $301 million was allocated through DoS PRM.[617] The funding is intended to support the provision of emergency food, health, livelihood, shelter, and water, sanitation, and hygiene assistance for IDPs and other vulnerable populations in Syria, as well as Syrian refugees in the region including Jordan, Turkey, Egypt and Lebanon.[618]

Conflict in Northwest Syria Leaves Children and Aid Workers Dead and Injured

USAID reported that because of hostilities this quarter, some implementers have temporarily suspended humanitarian activities until security conditions improve.[619] Violence in northwest Syria this quarter increased security risks for USAID implementers. This included reported Syrian regime and Russian airstrikes around the M4 and M5 highways, intense shelling between parties to the conflict including nonstate armed groups, and IED attacks, resulting in dozens of civilian casualties, including children and aid workers.[620]

In October and November, conflict between warring parties resulted in deaths and injuries among humanitarian workers and other civilians in northwest Syria.[621] In late October, NGOs reported that airstrikes in Idlib province struck an area close to a displacement camp and injured at least five civilians, including three children. The United Nations also continued to report IED attacks in the region, including an October 6 vehicle-borne IED attack in Aleppo province's al-Bab city that killed at least 18 civilians, including 5 children, and injured at least 62 others, including 11 children and three local NGO staff. Conflict continued in early November, with artillery shelling of multiple communities in Idlib's Ariha district on

SYRIA: QUARTERLY FOCUS ON HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

IDLIB AND ALEPPO

In northwest Syria, COVID-19 deaths tripled in November and December 2020. Despite a spike in infection rates, the mortality rate of COVID-19 in northwest Syria (1.5 percent) is comparable to that of the United States (1.7 percent). Ten percent of COVID-19 infections in northwest Syria are in IDP and refugee camps, where 28 percent of test results are positive.

HASAKAH

In northeast Syria, COVID-19 has led to reduced household income. Daily waged labor, the most common source of income for families in the region, decreased in 70 percent of communities since the pandemic began. The United Nations reports that nearly half of households in northeast Syria have lost one or more sources of income due to COVID-19, which in turn increases food insecurity.
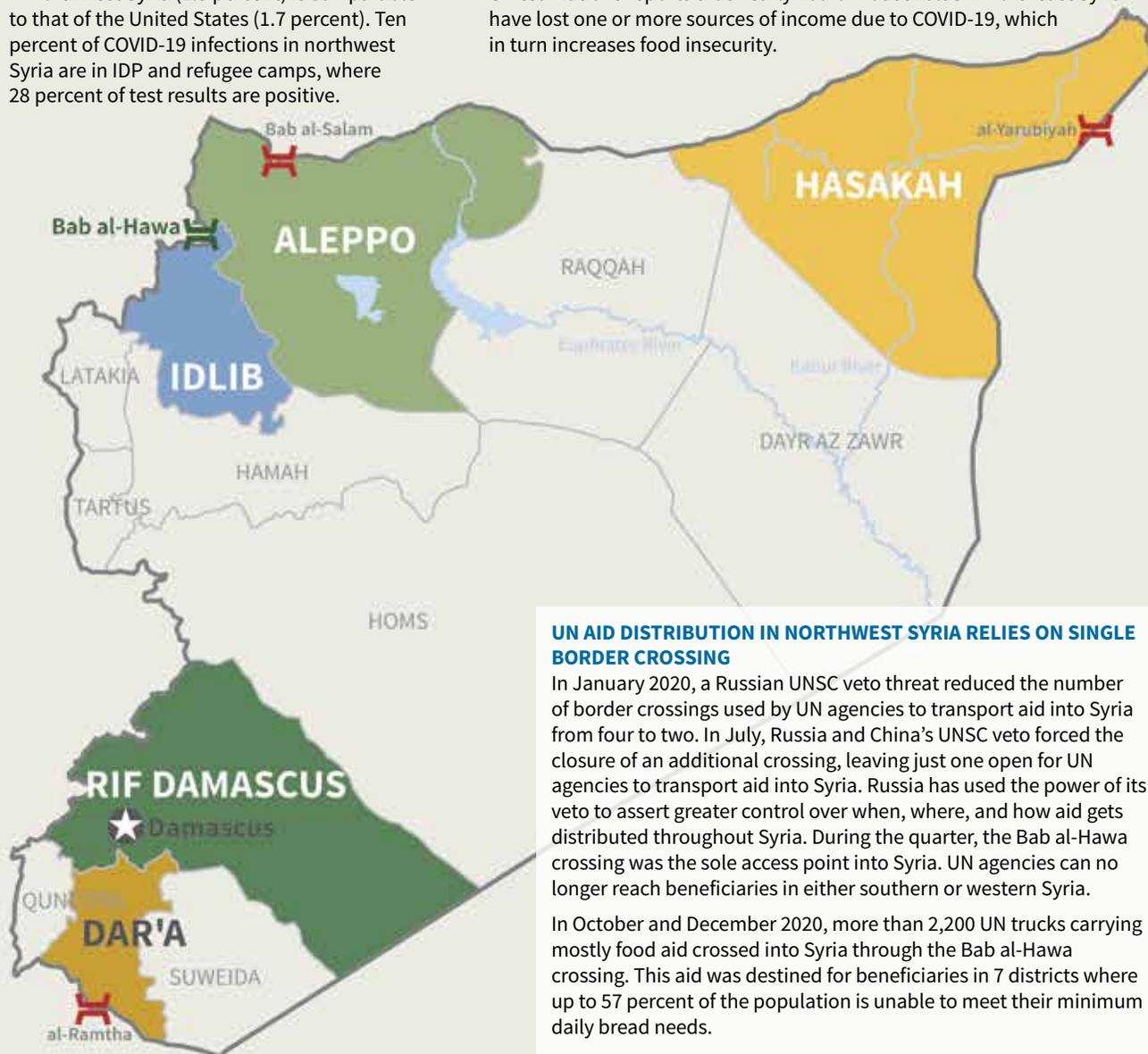
UN AID DISTRIBUTION IN NORTHWEST SYRIA RELIES ON SINGLE BORDER CROSSING

In January 2020, a Russian UNSC veto threat reduced the number of border crossings used by UN agencies to transport aid into Syria from four to two. In July, Russia and China's UNSC veto forced the closure of an additional crossing, leaving just one open for UN agencies to transport aid into Syria. Russia has used the power of its veto to assert greater control over when, where, and how aid gets distributed throughout Syria. During the quarter, the Bab al-Hawa crossing was the sole access point into Syria. UN agencies can no longer reach beneficiaries in either southern or western Syria.

In October and December 2020, more than 2,200 UN trucks carrying mostly food aid crossed into Syria through the Bab al-Hawa crossing. This aid was destined for beneficiaries in 7 districts where up to 57 percent of the population is unable to meet their minimum daily bread needs.

DAR'A

In areas of southwest Syria previously held by the Free Syrian Army, including Dar'a, the availability of doctors is 1/20th that of Damascus. NGOs reported that Syrians frequently have to pay bribes to receive healthcare, a problem not unique to this quarter.

DAMASCUS

A high concentration of COVID-19 cases in Syria appears to be in Damascus and its surrounding rural areas. To respond to the increase in COVID-19 deaths, funeral workers are working through the night and are digging mass graves.

Sources: Physicians for Human Rights, New York Times, Johns Hopkins University, OCHA, South Turkey Food Security Cluster, Human Rights Watch.

November 4, killing at least 8 civilians, including 4 children and 2 local NGO workers, and injuring at least 13 others, according to the United Nations.[622]

COVID-19: Implementing Partners and Syrian Regional Authorities Adapt to COVID-19 Spike

During the quarter, COVID-19 cases in Syria increased more than 300 percent compared to September, bringing the total number of confirmed cases to 37,340.[623] However, NGOs reported that the actual number of cases might be much higher due to limited COVID-19 testing capacity.[624]

The largest concentration of COVID-19 cases is in northwest Syria. (See Figure 6.) Due to a lack of organized independent data collection the true number of COVID-19 infections in Syria is likely much higher than reported.[625] According to the United Nations, only 50 percent of hospitals across Syria are fully functioning, while 25 percent are only partially functioning, due to shortage of equipment, medicine, and staff, as well as damage to facilities by Syrian regime and Russian forces.[626]

In northwest Syria, due in part to USAID and DoS PRM efforts, COVID-19 testing capacity has increased 400 percent, resulting in around 800 COVID-19 tests daily. USAID and the DoS supported the United Nations and three NGOs in their COVID-19 health response by establishing primary health care services in locations lacking proper health infrastructure.[627] In addition to scaling up or establishing new COVID-19-specific programs, USAID and DoS PRM implementing partners continued to adapt program activities in Syria to address COVID-19-related concerns, incorporating complementary water, sanitation, and hygiene and health activities, including social distancing in distribution protocols, and disseminating public health and prevention messaging.[628]

In northeast Syria, local authorities have responded by implementing curfews, bans on large gatherings, and basic preventative measures for educational and administrative buildings, among other measures.[629] USAID BHA supported 12 implementers that provided critically needed safe drinking water to communities in northern Syria.[630] In addition, USAID implementers focused on providing clean water and cleaning supplies for handwashing, sanitization, and cleaning to help slow the spread of COVID-19.[631]

In addition to scaling up or establishing new COVID-19-specific programs, USAID and DoS implementers adapted program activities in Syria to address COVID-19-related concerns by incorporating complementary water, sanitation, and health activities, including social distancing in distribution protocols, and disseminating public health and prevention messaging.[632] DoS PRM programs also adapted to address increasing protection challenges as a result of COVID-related restrictions, including children's access to education, access to mental health and psychosocial support, and access to livelihoods.[633] USAID BHA reported that implementers faced staffing challenges because of the risk of exposure to COVID-19. USAID BHA reported that it adjusted its own staffing in response to USAID, DoS, and embassy travel restrictions related to COVID-19. Some staff assigned to field roles on USAID's Syria Disaster Assistance Response Team have been covering these roles remotely rather than traveling to the U.S. Embassy in Amman or the Consulate General in Adana.[634]

During the quarter, COVID-19 cases in Syria increased more than 300 percent compared to September, bringing the total number of confirmed cases to 37,340.

Figure 6.

COVID-19 Cases and Deaths in Syria, as of December 31, 2020

Source: USAID BHA.
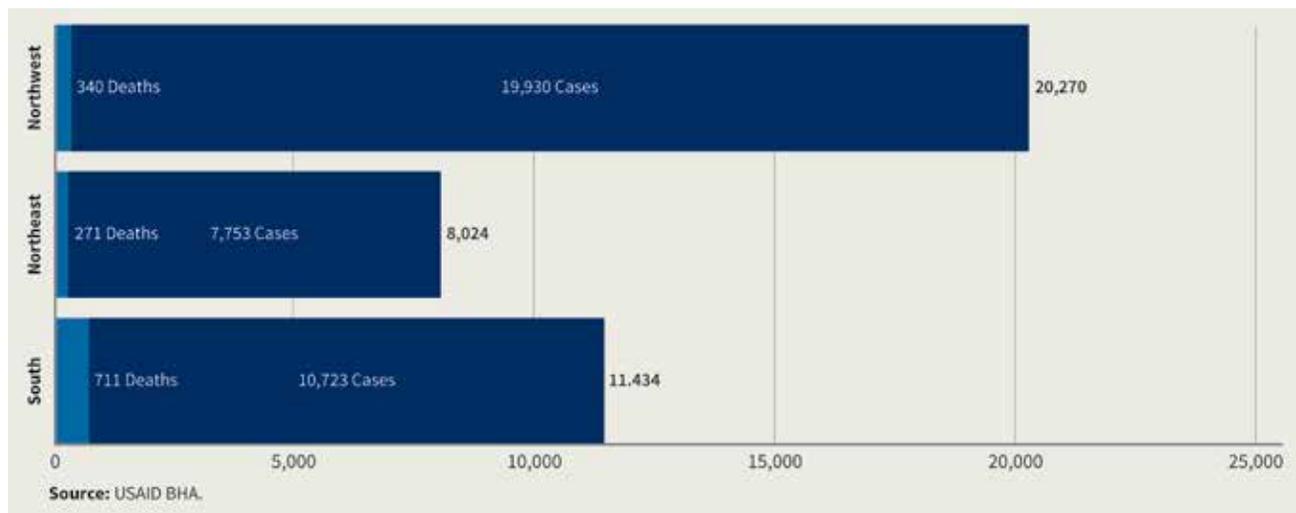
During the quarter, the DoS and USAID also expanded stabilization programming efforts to address COVID-19, funded through $5 million in supplemental COVID-19 resources that were notified to Congress during the fourth quarter of FY 2020.[635] With this funding, START funded a food security and livelihoods-focused activity and made one new award near the end of the quarter to provide technical assistance, both to address the economic impact of COVID-19.[636]

USAID ME Bureau reported that it made new award modifications related to COVID-19, intended to rehabilitate healthcare facilities, increase the supply of medical grade oxygen, strengthen coordination among health NGOs, and increase local technical capacity to respond to COVID-19.[637] With this funding, the DoS also supports independent media outlets that provide factual information on the pandemic to the Syrian people and supports efforts to ensure schools have the materials to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This includes water, sanitation, health facilities, and desk dividers, and rehabilitating critical water infrastructure to ensure that communities have adequate water supplies for the basic sanitation protocols necessary to keep their families safe.[638]

USAID and the DoS reported that partners implementing COVID-19 programs experience the challenges faced by all humanitarian actors in Syria, including threats to aid worker safety and exposure to COVID-19. There are no specific threats to COVID-19 programs that are not faced by other humanitarian programs.[639]

COVID-19 Pandemic Escalates Food Insecurity

According to the World Food Programme, the impacts of COVID-19 will result in a further deterioration of food security within the coming months.[640] Because of a steady devaluation of Syrian currency and slowing agricultural production due to COVID-19

restrictions, food security in Syria is at its lowest point since 2011.[641] USAID believes this will expedite malnutrition rates amongst Syrian youth and expecting mothers, resulting in intergenerational health deficiencies.[642] According to the United Nations, the risk of death due to malnutrition doubled between January and October 2020.[643] The organization also reported that COVID-19 infection may render mothers unable to properly breastfeed their newborns, resulting in more food insecurity for families suffering from the pandemic.[644]

In response to the food crisis, USAID supports 2 UN agencies and 15 NGOs to provide emergency food assistance to Syrians in need and Syrian refugees in neighboring countries.[645] These partners provide monthly food assistance to almost 6 million Syrians either within Syria or in refugee camps.[646]

SUPPORT TO MISSION

The U.S. Embassy in Baghdad has been on Ordered Departure since March, and the number of current in-country personnel is constantly adjusted according to threat levels and mission priorities, the DoS said. The ordered departure continues due to the ongoing impact of COVID-19 and security conditions. The recent adjustments to in-country staffing levels are temporary and reversible, consistent with the existing Ordered Departure status.[647]

Figure 7.

Total DoD War-Related Appropriations and Obligations from September 11, 2001, through September 30, 2020

$1.677 Trillion Appropriated, $1.624 Trillion Obligated

- = Appropriations
- = Afghanistan (OEF/OFS): $815.7 Billion
- = Iraq (OIF/OND/Post-OND Activities/OIR): $780 Billion
- = Noble Eagle: $28 Billion

Note: Obligations shown by year of appropriation. Excludes classified programs and non-war OCO appropriations.
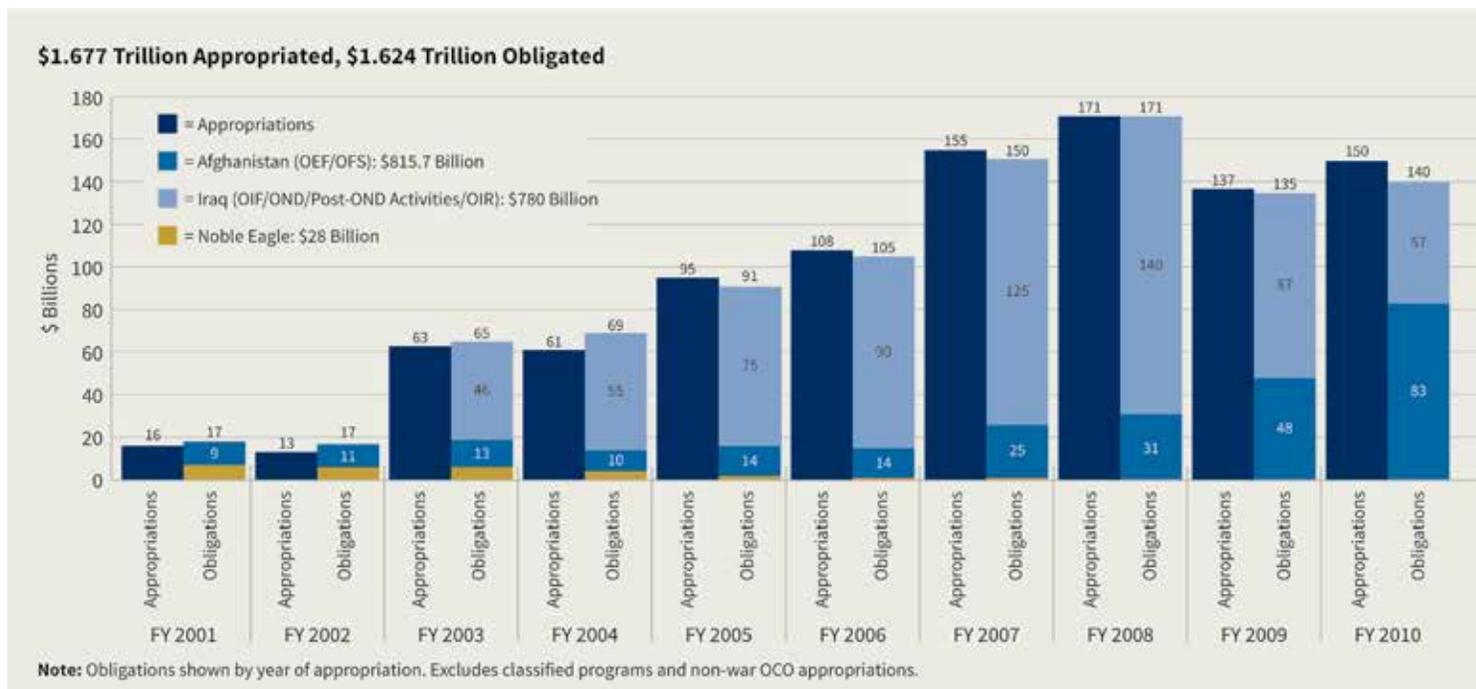
Congress Approves FY 2021 Appropriations with Slight Reduction in OCO Funding

On December 27, 2020, President Trump signed the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 into law. The legislation, which funds the federal government through FY 2021, provides the DoD with a total of $740.5 billion, which includes $671.5 billion in base funding and $69 billion in OCO funding. Compared to the FY 2020 enacted appropriations, this is a $4.6 billion increase in base funding and a $2 billion decrease in OCO funding.[648] (See Figure 7.)

The DoD's OCO appropriation for FY 2021 includes $710 million for the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund, a decrease from the $1.2 billion appropriated for this fund in FY 2020. This funding provides assistance including training, equipment, logistics support, stipends, and infrastructure to regular and irregular foreign forces engaged in the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, as well as Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and Tunisia.[649]

The FY 2021 appropriation for the DoS, USAID, and related agencies is $58.3 billion, which includes $8 billion in OCO funding. This represents a $3.2 billion increase from the FY 2020 appropriation of $55.1 billion. OCO funds appropriated to the DoS and USAID are designated primarily for peacekeeping operations, the Foreign Military Financing program, migration and refugee assistance, international disaster assistance, and the Worldwide Security Protection program, which funds efforts to protect DoS life and property in hazardous environments such as Iraq.[650]

This quarter, the DoD Comptroller released the DoD's congressionally mandated Cost of War report, which details the DoD's spending on overseas contingency operations in Iraq, Syria,

	Appropriations	Obligations
FY 2011	148 (42 / 97)	139
FY 2012	103 (11)	101 (90)
FY 2013	77 (2)	77 (75)
FY 2014	71 (2)	62 (60)
FY 2015	53 (7)	52 (45)
FY 2016	44	44 (38)
FY 2017	51 (7)	46 (39)
FY 2018	52 (7)	48 (40)
FY 2019	56 (10)	48 (38)
FY 2020	56 (9)	40 (40)

Source: DoD Comptroller.

and Afghanistan through September 30, 2020. According to this report, the DoD has spent $1.62 trillion in support of contingency operations since September 11, 2001. The total cost of operations in Iraq over that time (including operations in Syria) was $780 billion, of which $49.4 billion has been obligated in support of OIR since that operation began in 2014.[651]

The DoD Comptroller reported that the DoD obligated $8.9 billion for OIR during FY 2020, which was 24 percent less than the $11.8 billion spent on OIR in FY 2019. The DoD Comptroller reported that average monthly spending on all OCOs during this quarter was $5.4 billion, of which $1 billion was in support of OIR. According to the Cost of War report, these obligations cover all expenses related to the conflicts, including war-related operational costs, support for deployed troops, and transportation of personnel and equipment.[652]

New Consulate Compound in Erbil Moves Forward

The DoS reported that construction on the Erbil New Consulate Compound project continued during the quarter and is currently planned for substantial completion in December 2022. While there have been no work stoppages due to COVID-19, there have been extended periods of workforce reductions due to infected workers and quarantine of exposed workers from contact tracing and travel. The contractor has incurred costs for keeping these workers in a standby mode, as well as additional shipping costs, and other miscellaneous COVID-19 costs (COVID-19 testing, lost work wages, delayed visa renewals). The cost impact thus far is $1.6 million, and the contractor has submitted additional Requests for Equitable Adjustment totaling $1.7 million.[653]

OVERSIGHT ACTIVITIES

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 October 1 through December 31, 2020.

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 November 2020, the Joint Planning Group held its 52nd meeting, conducted virtually because of coronavirus disease–2019 (COVID-19) precautions. Guest speaker U.S. Air Force Brig. Gen. Stephen F. Jost, Deputy Director for Joint Strategic Planning, Joint Chiefs of Staff, spoke on his previous experience as Chief of Staff for Combined Joint Task Force–OIR.
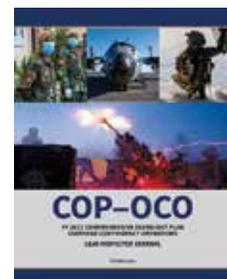
FY 2021 Comprehensive Oversight Plan for Overseas Contingency Operations

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.

Based on DoD Force Health Protection Guidance, the DoD OIG determined when to re-initiate travel to overseas locations and augment overseas offices on a case-by-case basis. DoD OIG oversight and investigative staff increased their presence in Kuwait and Qatar, maintained their presence in Germany, and opened an office in Bahrain during the quarter. The DoS OIG and USAID OIG also monitored local conditions to determine when to resume overseas oversight operations. Prior to the pandemic, oversight staff from the Lead IG agencies were also stationed in Iraq, Egypt, and Germany. Oversight teams from these offices and from offices in the United States would travel to locations in the region to conduct fieldwork for their projects.

The Lead IG agencies and their partner agencies completed nine reports related to OIR during the quarter. These reports examined various activities that support OIR, including tactical signals intelligence processing, U.S. Agency for Global Media journalistic standards and principles, foreign assistance tracking and reporting, the DoS's post security program review process, and USAID's Journey to Self-Reliance initiative.

As of December 31, 2020, 27 projects related to OIR were ongoing and 14 projects related to OIR were planned.

Final Reports by Lead IG Agencies

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

Evaluation of the Army's Tactical Signal Intelligence Payload Program

DoDIG-2021-005; November 5, 2020

The DoD OIG evaluated whether the Theater Support Activity's tactical signals intelligence processing is sufficient to satisfy priority intelligence requirements. The report is classified.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

Targeted Inspection of the U.S. Agency for Global Media: Journalistic Standards and Principles

ISP-IB-21-06; December 28, 2020

The DoS OIG conducted this inspection to assess how the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) and its five broadcasting entities complied with the statutory requirements of

the U.S. International Broadcasting Act of 1994 that relate to journalistic professionalism, independence, and integrity. The USAGM is authorized to direct and supervise U.S. Government-funded civilian international broadcasting. The USAGM oversees two Federal broadcast entities, Voice of America and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, and three private, non-profit broadcast entities, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks.

The DoS OIG found that the USAGM and its five networks had developed guidance documents that turned the broad standards and principles of the U.S. International Broadcasting Act of 1994 into detailed, codified journalistic practices and ethical behaviors that could be communicated trained, monitored, and enforced. The DoS OIG found that the USAGM and network leadership generally modeled journalistic standards and independence, communicated the importance of such standards and independence, and took the protection of these standards seriously.

The DoS OIG made four recommendations. The USAGM management did not provide formal written comments in response to the report. When it transmitted a draft of the report to the USAGM, the DoS OIG advised that if formal written comments were not provided, the DoS OIG would conclude that the USAGM management concurred with the recommendations. Because the USAGM management provided no comments, the DoS OIG considered all four recommendations resolved, pending further action, at the time the report was issued.

Review of Department of State Foreign Assistance Tracking Capabilities
ISP-I-21-09; December 28, 2020

The DoS OIG conducted this review to determine what progress the DoS had made in improving its ability to track and report on foreign assistance in a follow up to a 2017 DoS OIG report, "Compliance Follow-up Review: Department of State Is Still Unable to Accurately Track and Report on Foreign Assistance Funds"; assess the sufficiency of the DoS's proposed solutions; and determine the effects of any shortcomings in the DoS's ability to track foreign assistance funding.

The DoS OIG found that the DoS had taken several steps to improve its ability to track foreign assistance funds since the issuance of the 2017 report, including having developed a plan to begin collecting more detailed data for each accounting transaction involving foreign assistance funds. Despite the plan to collect more detailed data, the DoS OIG found that the DoS did not assess the full range of potential effects its changes would have on the DoS bureaus that manage foreign assistance, nor did it identify sufficient measures to mitigate such effects. Moreover, the DoS OIG found that the DoS did not adequately communicate and train bureaus on how to implement its proposed changes to improve foreign assistance tracking.

The DoS OIG made three recommendations, all to the DoS Office of Foreign Assistance, the lead entity for the DoS's Foreign Assistance Data Review working group. The Office of Foreign Assistance concurred with all three recommendations and the DoS OIG considered all three recommendations resolved, pending further action, at the time the report was issued.

Management Assistance Report: The Bureau of Diplomatic Security Did Not Always Conduct Post Security Program Reviews Within Required Timeframes

AUD-SI-21-03; December 3, 2020

The DoS Bureau of Diplomatic Security (DS), the law enforcement and security bureau of the DoS, created the Post Security Program Review (PSPR) process in 2008 as a mechanism to "ensure that posts competently manage life safety, emergency preparedness, and information security programs with full mission support and participation, sufficient resources, and appropriate management controls." The DS High Threat Programs Directorate conducts PSPRs for the DoS's 36 overseas posts designated as "high-threat, high-risk," including posts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The DS International Programs Directorate conducts PSPRs for the DoS's non-high threat, high risk posts.

During an audit of the PSPR process, the DoS OIG found that DS did not always conduct PSPRs within required timeframes as set forth in the DoS policy. Specifically, during FYs 2016 through February 2020, the High Threat Programs Directorate did not conduct PSPRs within the required timeframe for 22 of 27 high-threat, high-risk posts. With respect to non-threat, high-risk posts, the DoS OIG found that the DS International Programs Directorate did not conduct PSPRs within the required timeframes for 84 of 222 of posts.

The DoS OIG made two recommendations and DS concurred with both. The DoS OIG considered both recommendations resolved pending further action at the time the report was issued.

Management Assistance Report: The Bureau of Diplomatic Security's Compliance Process Related to Post Security Program Reviews Needs Improvement

AUD-SI-21-04; December 1, 2020

During an audit of the PSPR process, the DoS OIG found that although DS had designed a compliance process to assess overseas posts' resolution of recommendations made to address security deficiencies, the PSPR compliance process needed improvement. The DoS OIG found DS officials did not always maintain documentation describing corrective actions taken by RSOs in response to PSPR recommendations, that security officials at overseas posts did not always provide compliance responses within the required 45 days, and that DS officials did not always track when compliance responses were due or have a formal process in place to follow up on overdue responses.

The DoS OIG made three recommendations. DS concurred with all three. The DoS OIG considered all three recommendations resolved pending further action at the time the report was issued.

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

USAID Updated Guidance to Address Inconsistent Use of Journey to Self-Reliance Metrics and Misalignment of Missions' Budgets

9-000-21-002-P; December 23, 2020

USAID OIG conducted this performance audit to determine the extent that USAID incorporated self-reliance metrics into development programming strategies at selected missions, and whether USAID developed budgets that aligned with Journey to Self-Reliance strategies.

Under the Journey to Self-Reliance approach, USAID compiled a set of metrics intended to quantitatively provide an annual snapshot of each partner country's capacity and commitment to solving its own development challenges.

As part of the Journey to Self-Reliance approach, USAID implemented two new budgeting processes for missions that were designed to improve alignment between Journey to Self-Reliance Country Strategies and budgets. However, because of challenges in implementing these processes, the budgets in the three pilot missions did not fully align to the Journey to Self-Reliance approach. To address these issues, USAID updated policy to clarify roles and responsibilities for producing budget scenarios and updated Mission Resource Request guidance to help deconflict differing instructions.

USAID OIG made no recommendations, because USAID issued updated guidance to address the inconsistent use of metrics in Country Strategies as well as to address issues identified in the production of Country Strategy budget scenarios and Mission Resource Requests.

Financial Audit of Oxfam GB Under Multiple USAID Awards

3-000-21-007-R; November 16, 2020

Oxfam GB contracted with the independent certified public accounting firm Gelman, Rosenberg & Freedman to audit the fund accountability statement for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2018, to evaluate Oxfam GB's internal controls; and to determine whether Oxfam GB complied with award terms and applicable laws and regulations. Oxfam BG expenditures of U.S. Government financial assistance included an award in Iraq.

The audit covered USAID-funded total expenditures of $24,884,731 for the fiscal year ended March 31, 2018. The accounting firm concluded that the fund accountability statement presented fairly, in all material respects, costs incurred and reimbursed by USAID for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2018; there were nine significant deficiencies in internal control; and there was an instance of material noncompliance involving employee timesheets. The accounting firm did not identify any questioned costs. Upon receiving the contracted audit firm's report, USAID OIG made one recommendation to the USAID Office of Acquisition and Assistance's Cost, Audit and Support Division to verify that Oxfam GB corrects the instance of material noncompliance. USAID OIG did not make a recommendation for the significant deficiencies noted in the report, but suggested that USAID's Office of Acquisition and Assistance, Cost, Audit and Support Division determine if the recipient addressed the issues noted.

Financial Audit of Norwegian People's Aid Under Multiple USAID Agreements

3-000-21-005-R; October 30, 2020

Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) contracted with the independent certified public accounting firm Gelman, Rosenberg & Freedman to audit the fund accountability statement for the fiscal year ending December 31, 2016, to evaluate NPA's internal controls; and to determine whether NPA complied with award terms and applicable laws and regulations. NPA expenditures of U.S. Government financial assistance included an award in Iraq.

The accounting firm performed a financial audit that covered total USAID expenditures of $5,239,022 for the fiscal year ending December 31, 2016. The accounting firm concluded that the fund accountability statement presented fairly, in all material respects, costs incurred and reimbursed by USAID and pass-through entities for the year ended December 31, 2016, in accordance with the terms of the agreement and in conformity with the accrual basis of accounting except for plant and equipment that is expensed when purchased; the audit firm identified total direct questioned costs of $18,754 ($10,555 ineligible, $8,199 unsupported) and indirect questioned costs of $1,303 ($916 ineligible and $387 unsupported) applicable to USAID. The accounting firm identified $50,815 in total questioned costs applicable to the DoS. NPA had three significant deficiencies in internal control regarding payroll related issues and U.S. Government regulations on terrorism, and journal entries. There were two instances of material noncompliance related to payroll related issues and U.S. Government regulations on terrorism.

Upon receiving the contracted accounting firm's report, since the questioned costs did not meet USAID OIG's established threshold of $25,000 for making a recommendation, USAID OIG did not make a recommendation. However, USAID OIG suggested that USAID's Office of Acquisition and Assistance, Cost, Audit and Support Division determine whether the $18,754 in questioned costs should be recovered. USAID OIG did not make a recommendation for the three significant deficiencies noted in the report, but suggested USAID determine if the recipient addressed the issues noted. USAID OIG made one recommendation to USAID to verify that NPA corrects the two instances of material noncompliance.

Life Saving Humanitarian Assistance to Vulnerable Populations in Syria

3-000-21-004-R; October 29, 2020

The International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) contracted with the independent certified public accounting firm BDO Jordan to audit fund accountability statements for USAID Grant AID-OFDA-A-17-00024 for the fiscal year ending December 31, 2018; to evaluate ICMC's internal controls; and to determine whether ICMC complied with award terms and applicable laws and regulations.

The accounting firm examined incurred costs of $1,670,166 and concluded the fund accountability statement presented fairly. Program revenues, costs incurred and reimbursed, and commodities directly procured by USAID incurred under the award for the period audited in accordance with the terms of the agreement and in conformity with the modified cash basis of accounting, except for $1,441 in total questioned costs ($1,226 ineligible and $215 unsupported). Since the questioned costs did not meet USAID OIG's

established threshold of $25,000 for making a recommendation, USAID OIG did not make a recommendation. However, USAID OIG suggested that the USAID Office of Acquisition and Assistance's Cost, Audit and Support Division determine whether the $1,441 in questioned costs should be recovered.

ONGOING OVERSIGHT ACTIVITIES

As of December 31, 2020, the Lead IG agencies and their partner agencies had 27 ongoing projects related to OIR. Figure 8 describes the ongoing projects by strategic oversight area.

Tables 4 and 5, 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 COVID-19. 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 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 audit to determine whether the military services 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.

- 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.

- The **GAO** is determining the DoD's requirements for friendly force identification associated with close air support; to what extent has the DoD identified initiatives to enhance friendly force identification capabilities for close air support missions and ensured the capabilities are interoperable; and to what extent has the DoD evaluated the training for forces integrating and delivering close air support.

GOVERNANCE, HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE, AND DEVELOPMENT

- **USAID OIG** is conducting an audit to determine what corrective actions a Syria response implementer has taken to remedy internal control weaknesses and known gaps identified by USAID OIG investigations.

Figure 8.

Ongoing Projects by Strategic Oversight Area

SOA 2
Governance, Humanitarian Assistance, and Development
5

SOA 1
Military Operations and Security Cooperation
7

SOA 3
Support to Mission
15

- **USAID OIG** is conducting an audit to assess USAID's management of its transition strategy for humanitarian assistance in Iraq and oversight of its humanitarian assistance and stabilization activities.

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 evaluation to determine how USCENTCOM executed pandemic response plans; and to identify the challenges encountered in implementing the response plans and the impact to operations resulting from COVID-19.

- 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 December 31, 2020, the Lead IG agencies and their partner agencies had 14 planned projects related to OIR. Figure 9 describes the planned projects by strategic oversight area.

Tables 6 and 7, 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 force 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 determine whether the Theater Support Activity's tactical signals intelligence processing is sufficient to satisfy priority intelligence requirements.

- The **DoD OIG** intends to determine whether the DoD is implementing effective oversight, controls, and processes to mitigate cybersecurity risks to unmanned systems.

GOVERNANCE, HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE, AND DEVELOPMENT

- **USAID OIG** intends 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.

Figure 9.

Planned Projects by Strategic Oversight Area
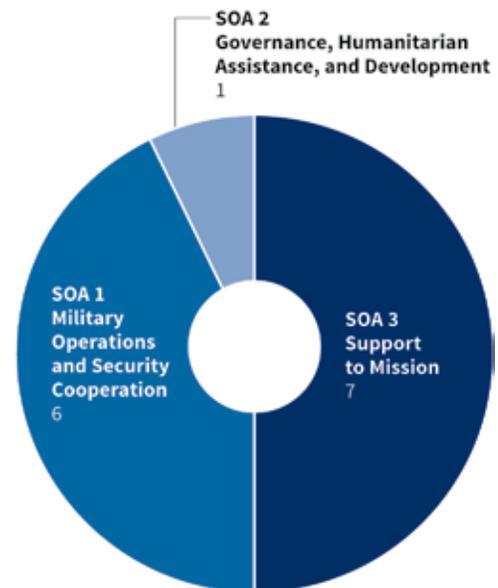
SUPPORT TO MISSION

- 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 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.

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, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to constrain the Lead IG agencies' ability to conduct OIR-related investigations. The Defense Criminal Investigative Service (DCIS, the DoD OIG's criminal investigative component) removed investigative personnel from Iraq, Qatar, and Djibouti, where investigators were handling some OIR-related cases because of COVID-19-related staff rotations. Some DCIS personnel returned to Qatar in September. DoS OIG and USAID OIG investigators based in Frankfurt, Germany, have been teleworking from their residences on cases related to OIR.

INVESTIGATIVE ACTIVITY RELATED TO OIR

During this quarter, Lead IG investigations resulted in one arrest, one criminal charge, and one criminal conviction. Those actions are discussed below.

The investigative branches of the Lead IG agencies and their partner agencies closed 12 investigations, initiated 7 new investigations, and coordinated on 97 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 25 fraud awareness briefings for 458 participants.

The Dashboard on page 94 depicts activities of the Fraud and Corruption Investigative Working Group.

ACTIVITY BY FRAUD AND CORRUPTION INVESTIGATIVE WORKING GROUP

OPERATION INHERENT RESOLVE
As of December 31, 2020

OPEN INVESTIGATIONS*

97

Q1 FY 2021 BRIEFINGS

Briefings Held	**25**
Briefing Attendees	**458**

Q1 FY 2021 RESULTS

Arrests	**1**
Criminal Charges	**1**
Criminal Convictions	**1**
Fines/Recoveries	—
Suspensions	—
Debarments	—
Contract Terminations	—
Personnel Actions	—
Administrative Actions	—
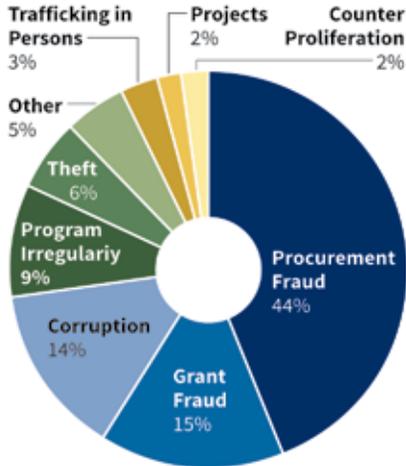
OPEN INVESTIGATIONS BY WORKING GROUP MEMBER*
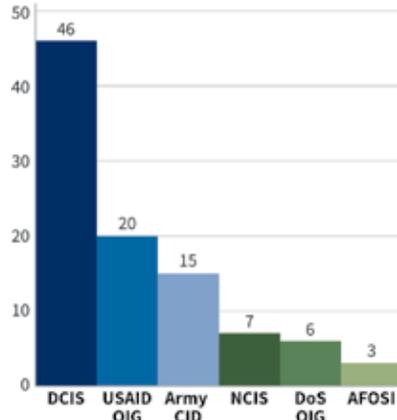
SOURCES OF ALLEGATIONS
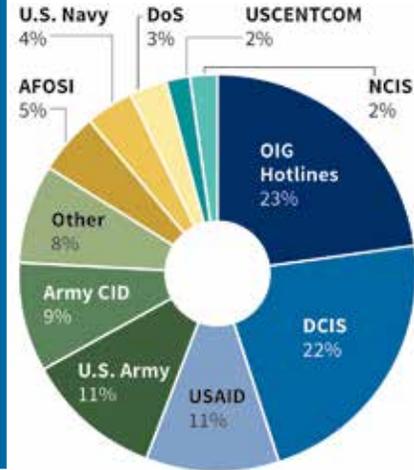
PRIMARY OFFENSE LOCATIONS

Not shown on map: United States

*Some investigations are conducted with more than one agency, and some are not conducted 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 12/31/2020.

TWO INDIVIDUALS CHARGED WITH BRIBERY RELATED TO IRAQ CONTRACTS

On October 4, 2020, upon returning to the U.S. from Iraq, DoD contractor Mark Alan Fryday was arrested at Dulles International Airport by Special Agents from the U.S. Army Criminal Investigations Command and DCIS.

On September 18, 2020, Fryday and Lara Jumaah Mohammed, who both reside in Erbil, Iraq, were charged in an indictment filed in the District of Columbia with one count of conspiracy and one count of bribery of a public official.

The indictment alleges that Fryday and Mohammed offered bribes to a U.S. Army official at Erbil Air Base in Iraq. Fryday and Mohammed allegedly owned companies based in Erbil that sought contracts to supply goods and services to U.S. military forces there. In early 2020, Fryday and Mohammed allegedly offered to pay an Army contracting official a kickback equivalent to 20 percent of the value of any contract that he awarded to their companies. Fryday and Mohammed also allegedly offered an upfront cash payment in exchange for the award of a contract to supply equipment that was due to be awarded in late March 2020.

FORMER NGO PROCUREMENT OFFICIAL PLEADS GUILTY TO BRIBERY

On December 23, 2020, Ernest Halilov, a former non-governmental organization (NGO) procurement official, pled guilty to one charge of federal programs bribery before the U.S. District Court in the District of Columbia for paying bribes to NGO procurement officers in exchange for sensitive procurement information related to NGO contracts funded in part by USAID. These contracts were for the procurement of food and supplies for those affected by various humanitarian crises, including refugees displaced by the conflict in Syria.

According to admissions as part of his plea agreement, from January 2011 through December 2016, Halilov coordinated a bid-rigging scheme to bid on contracts procured by NGOs, and funded by USAID, to support USAID's response to various humanitarian crises. Specifically, Halilov bribed two NGO officers in order to obtain confidential procurement information, such as bid evaluation information, specifications, and internal vendor rankings. In turn, Halilov provided this information to his preferred companies in exchange for kickbacks, ensuring that the companies had an advantage over other bidders, thus increasing their ability to win NGO-procured contracts. Halilov also admitted that he instructed a witness to lie to law enforcement agents and to destroy emails related to the investigation.

USAID OIG'S OFFICE OF INVESTIGATIONS VIRTUALLY HOSTS EIGHTH MEETING OF THE SYRIA INVESTIGATIONS WORKING GROUP

On October 22, 2020, USAID OIG Office of Investigations virtually hosted the eighth meeting of the Syria Investigations Working Group, along with USAID OIG's Office of General Council, USAID's Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance and USAID's Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning. Topics included business email compromise, risk mitigation to the humanitarian response in Syria, and a review of USAID's Automated Directive Service Chapter 308, "Agreements with Public International Organizations." The meeting was held virtually and was attended by more than 70 oversight professionals, bilateral donors, and UN organizations, including the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth

and Development Office; the European Anti-Fraud Office; the International Federation of the Red Cross; the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency; the United Nations Development Programme; the World Food Programme; the World Bank; and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

INVESTIGATIVE ACTIVITY RELATED TO LEGACY CASES

The Lead IG agencies and their partner agencies have 8 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 and contacts 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. The DoD OIG has an investigator to coordinate the hotline contacts among the Lead IG agencies and others, as appropriate. During the quarter, the DoD OIG investigator referred 50 cases to Lead IG agencies and other investigative organizations.

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

Figure 10.

Hotline Activities
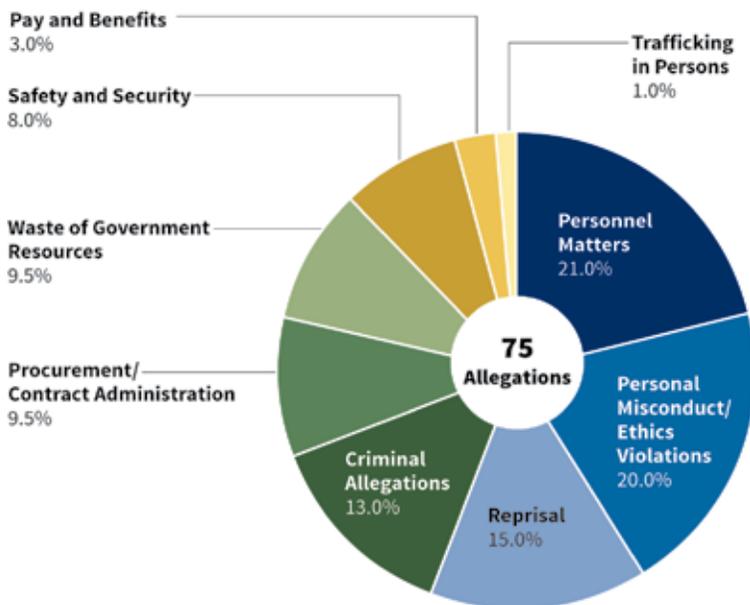
Several hundred military and medical vehicles at the Port of Shuaiba, Kuwait, stand ready for transport to Iraqi Security Forces. (U.S. Army photo)

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
Classified Appendix to this Report

This report normally includes an appendix containing classified information about the U.S. mission to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria. However, due to constraints resulting from the coronavirus disease–2019 pandemic, the Lead IG agencies did not prepare a classified appendix this quarter.

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 October 1, 2020 through December 31, 2020. 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 185 individuals with international terrorism-related conduct relating to ISIS. From those cases charged since 2014, the DoJ has obtained more than 145 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 October 1 through December 31, 2020:

- **On November 9, 2020, in the Northern District of Indiana, Samantha Elhassani** was sentenced to 78 months in prison and 3 years of supervised release after pleading guilty to financing terrorism. According to court records, in November 2014, her husband told her that he and his brother wanted to travel to Syria to join ISIS, which she knew at the time was a terrorist organization that engaged in terrorist activities. Between November 2014 and April 2015, Elhassani helped the two men join ISIS by making multiple trips to Hong Kong and transporting more than $30,000 in cash and gold from the United States and depositing it in a safe deposit box in Hong Kong. Elhassani melted down the gold to look like jewelry and did not disclose the cash and gold on customs declaration forms. When Elhassani transported the money and gold, she knew that her husband and brother-in-law had expressed an interest in joining ISIS and that they intended to use these resources to support ISIS.

- **On November 12, 2020, in the District of Utah, Murat Suljovic** pled guilty to one count of attempting to provide material support to ISIS. Suljovic admitted that in January 2019, while living in Utah, he corresponded with an individual, identified as Person A, who he believed was an ISIS follower. He admitted he believed Person A was interested in performing an attack for ISIS. He also believed Person A was assisting another individual, referred to as Person B in the plea agreement, who was also interested in performing an attack for ISIS. Suljovic admitted that in his correspondence with Person A, he pretended to be an ISIS leader through an online persona, and he believed Person A and Person B believed he was an ISIS leader. Suljovic provided advice about potential targets for a terrorist attack and advice about how to plan an attack. Suljovic admitted he provided a bomb-making tutorial video to Person A in the correspondence to share with Person B for purposes of training and assisting Person B in carrying out an attack, according to the plea agreement. By providing the bomb-making tutorial video to Person A, Suljovic admitted he knowingly attempted to provide material support to ISIS, knowing that ISIS engages in terrorism.

- **On November 18, 2020, in the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, Shahidul Gaffar and Nabila Khan** pled guilty to conspiracy to provide material support and resources to ISIS. According to court documents, in 2015, Gaffar and Khan conspired to provide financial support to two of Khan's brothers who traveled to Syria to join ISIS fighters.

- **On November 24, 2020, in the Eastern District of Texas, Kristopher Sean Matthews** pled guilty to conspiring to provide material support to ISIS. Matthews admitted that since May 2019, he conspired with a co-defendant to share bomb-making information for the purpose of domestic and foreign attacks on behalf of ISIS and to radicalize and recruit other individuals to support 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, including 4 people that were transferred during the quarter.

The DoJ's National Security Division and Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development, Assistance and Training continued to consult with foreign counterparts on counterterrorism legislation; policies and procedures for continuing the investigation, prosecution, and adjudication of terrorism cases during the pandemic; and future training projects.

During the quarter, nearly all of the DOJ's International Criminal Investigative Training and Assistance Program (ICITAP) attachés had returned to their posts around the globe but continued working in a telework posture in-country, communicating regularly with in-country teams and Embassy personnel via phone, email, and various communication platforms, such as WebEx, Microsoft Teams, and Skype. In addition, ICITAP maintains close communication with host-country partners to continue providing advisory support and virtual mentoring and e-training. In general, the amount of engagement, training, and mentoring by ICITAP increased during the quarter from the previous quarter despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The DoJ's Office of the Deputy Attorney General, through its Rule of Law Office, reopened the Office of the Justice Attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad in August 2020. The Justice Attaché, a senior federal prosecutor, set out to re-establish direct working relationships with investigating judges and law enforcement counterparts on operational matters, including counterterrorism and countering terrorist financing cases. In addition, the Justice Attaché explored and assessed methods to provide capacity building given the hold on program activities during the pandemic.

The National Security Division provided, for the first time, a full-time, an in-country attorney to help support Operation Gallant Phoenix. The National Security Division Attaché to Operation Gallant Phoenix supported a range of matters related to facilitating appropriate civilian prosecutorial dispositions for foreign terrorist fighters and other terrorists, including:

- Reviewing intelligence and available information to determine if criminal prosecutions can be brought against suspected foreign terrorist fighters and other terrorists, including those being detained in Syria by partner forces, in either U.S. or foreign courts;

- Navigating the complexities of foreign legal systems and assisting in assembling available information for use by international partners in foreign investigations and prosecutions; and

- Assisting both interagency and international partners at the platform in navigating complex legal issues associated with the use of intelligence in criminal investigations and court proceedings, and issues related to the admissibility of evidence (converting intelligence into evidence).

The DoD and foreign partners acknowledged the benefit of National Security Division attorney presence. The second deployment of a National Security Division attorney was scheduled for mid-January 2021, to sustain support for this vital mission.

The DoJ Office of International Affairs is assisting partner nations in developing institutions and best practices needed for effective mutual legal assistance and extradition cooperation. Through the Office's Global Central Authorities Initiative, in coordination with the DoS, experts work with international counterparts, particularly throughout Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, to help partner countries build effective central authorities. These institutions support effective international cooperation in criminal justice matters and enable the legal processes necessary to bring terrorists and other criminals to justice under the rule of law.

Despite Iraq travel restrictions due to COVID-19 and the security posture, on November 9, 2020, ICITAP launched a virtual assessment of the Iraqi government's capabilities to combat public corruption under the Advanced Law Enforcement Skills and Investigative Capacity Development Project. For over a decade, ICITAP has been instrumental in supporting capacity building for the Iraqi government in counterterrorism, criminal investigations, forensics and counter-corruption. In the past, ICITAP senior law enforcement advisors assisted in developing effective investigative capabilities and organizational structures for Iraq's Commission of Integrity, the principal counter corruption investigative institution. With Iraq's transitional government, leading to 2021 elections, ICITAP is assessing institutional counter-corruption capabilities and sustainability by examining demonstrated performance and obstacles to meeting international accountability standards, as well as investigative and prosecutorial benchmarks. ICITAP's assessment team, comprised of highly experienced senior law enforcement advisors, is conducting extensive virtual interviews of nearly 50 U.S., UN, and Iraqi officials, as well as reviewing over 100 exhibits, in developing this evidence-based assessment. ICITAP's findings and recommendations will inform the DoS's planning and project development.

FBI personnel are not involved in training or capacity-building programs with Coalition partners in Iraq, outside of routine interactions with host nation partners on a variety of criminal and national security matters. The FBI does not have a presence in Syria for capacity-building activities.

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 (Treasury) 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 92 individuals and entities providing support to ISIS pursuant to Executive Order 13224.

This quarter, the Secretary of the Treasury made two new designations.

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 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.

On October 22, 2020, Treasury designated Iraj Masjedi, a general in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force and Iran's Ambassador to Iraq, for acting for or on behalf of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force. In his decades of service with the group, Masjedi oversaw a program of training and support to Iraqi militia groups, and he directed or supported groups that are responsible for attacks that have killed and wounded U.S. and Coalition forces in Iraq. Masjedi publicly admitted the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force's role in special operations and the training of militia groups in Iraq, Syria, and beyond.

Treasury continues to work 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 also takes a leadership role in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, serving as a co-lead of the Counter ISIS Finance Group along with its counterparts from Italy and Saudi Arabia. On November 10, 2020, Treasury contributed to the virtual meeting on countering ISIS in West Africa with members of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, co-hosted by the DoS and Nigeria, highlighting the importance of countering terrorist financing as part of a larger effort against ISIS in the region.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE DESIGNATIONS

This quarter, the Secretary of State designated three individuals and one group related to OIR as Specially Designated Global Terrorists.

The DoS's Specially Designated Global Terrorists designations during the quarter were:

- **Abdullahi Osman Mohamed and Maalim Ayman**, senior leaders of al-Shabaab, the Somalia-based al-Qaeda affiliate. According to the DoS, Mohamed is al-Shabaab's senior explosive expert responsible for the overall management of al-Shabaab's explosives operations and manufacturing and Ayman is the leader of an al-Shabaab unit that conducts terrorist attacks and operations in both Kenya and Somalia. The DoS stated that Ayman was responsible for preparing the January 2020 attack on Camp Simba in Manda Bay, Kenya, that killed one U.S. military service member and two American contractors.

- **Ashraf al-Qizani**, emir of Jund al-Khilafah in Tunisia, an ISIS affiliate in Tunisia. According to the DoS, under al-Qizani's leadership, Jund al-Khilafah has carried out numerous attacks in Tunisia.

- **Saraya al-Mukhtar**, an Iran-backed terrorist organization based in Bahrain. According to the DoS, Saraya al-Mukhtar reportedly receives financial and logistical support from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and has the goal of deposing the Bahraini government with the intention of paving the way for Iran to exert greater influence in Bahrain. In addition, according to the DoS, Saraya al-Mukhtar has plotted attacks against U.S. personnel in Bahrain and has offered cash rewards for the assassination of Bahraini officials.

APPENDIX E
Ongoing Oversight Projects

Tables 4 and 5 list the title and objective for Lead IG and partner agencies' ongoing oversight projects related to OIR.

Table 4.

Ongoing Oversight Projects Related to OIR by Lead IG Agency, as of December 31, 2020

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

Evaluation of U.S. Central Command's Kinetic Targeting Processes and Reporting Procedures
To evaluate USCENTCOM's target development and prosecution processes, as well as post-strike collateral damage and civilian casualty assessment activities.
* Suspended due to COVID-19. The project will restart when force health protection conditions permit.

Audit of Pre-Deployment Training on Counter Unmanned Aerial Systems
To determine whether the Military Services 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 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 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.

Evaluation of the U.S. Combatant Commands' Responses to the Coronavirus Disease–2019
To determine how U.S. Africa Command, U.S. Central Command, U.S. European Command, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, U.S. Southern Command, and their component commands executed pandemic response plans; and to identify the challenges encountered in implementing the response plans and the impact to operations resulting from the COVID-19.

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.

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 Department of State's Risk Assessments and Monitoring of Voluntary Contributions to International Organizations
To determine whether the DoS policies, processes, and guidance for voluntary contributions ensure that 1) risks are identified, assessed, and responded to before providing funds to public international organizations, and 2) funds are monitored to achieve award objectives.

Inspection of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security Special Program for Embassy Augmentation Response
To evaluate the operational effectiveness, resource management and management controls, and program management of the Special Program for Embassy Augmentation and Response.

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.

Review of Department of State Preparations to Return Employees and Contractors to Federal Offices during the Global Coronavirus Pandemic
To describe 1) DoS's plans and procedures for returning employees to offices during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 2) the methods outlined in those plans and procedures to ensure suitable safety and welfare considerations and precautions have been undertaken on behalf of employees and contractors.

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 Undefinitized 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 Oversight of Selected Implementer Delivering Humanitarian Assistance in Response to the Syrian Crisis
To determine what corrective actions the selected Syria-response implementer has taken to remedy internal control weaknesses identified by USAID's OIG's Office of Investigations; and if USAID eliminated oversight gaps identified by investigations of the selected Syria-response implementer.

Audit of USAID/Iraq Activities
To assess the effectiveness of USAID's management of its transition strategy for humanitarian assistance in Iraq and the mechanisms USAID employs to provide oversight of its humanitarian assistance.

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.

Table 5.

Ongoing Oversight Projects Related to OIR by Lead IG Partner Agency, as of December 31, 2020

GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

Close Air Support to Friendly Forces
To determine what are the DoD's requirements for friendly force identification associated with close air support; to what extent has the DoD identified initiatives to enhance friendly force identification capabilities for close air support missions and ensured the capabilities are interoperable; and to what extent has the DoD has evaluated the training for forces integrating and delivering close air support.

U.S. Assistance to Iraq's Ministry of Interior
To determine what are the goals, types, and amounts of assistance the United States has provided to Iraq's Ministry of Interior since 2014; and to what extent has the United States assessed and evaluated its assistance to the Ministry of Interior since 2014.

APPENDIX F
Planned Oversight Projects

Tables 6 and 7 list the title and objective for Lead IG and partner agencies' ongoing oversight projects.

Table 6.

Planned Oversight Projects Related to OIR by Lead IG Agency, as of December 31, 2020

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 U.S. Central Command area of responsibility is meeting mission goals.

Evaluation of U.S. Special Operations Command Joint Military Information Support Operations Web Operations Center
To determine whether U.S. Special Operations Command's Joint Military Information Support Operations Web Operations Center provides U.S. combatant commanders the increased capability to conduct Internet-based information operations globally.
* Suspended due to COVID-19. The project will restart when force health protection conditions permit.

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 Department of Defense 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 oversight of DoD Language Interpretation and Translation Enterprise II Contractors in Afghanistan to ensure the contractors fulfilled requirements.

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 the 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.

Evaluation of U.S. Central Command and U.S. Special Operations Command Implementation of DoD's Law of War Program
To determine 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. This evaluation will also determine whether potential USCENTCOM and USSOCOM law of war violations were reported and reviewed in accordance with DoD policy.

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 7.

Planned Oversight Projects Related to OIR by Lead IG Partner Agency, as of December 31, 2020

AIR FORCE AUDIT AGENCY

Redeployed Unit Equipment Account Closure
To determine procedures to ensure equipment accounts of redeployed units are closed.

Electronic Countermeasure Pod Centralized Repair Facility
To determine the efficiency of electronic countermeasure repair facility in the area of responsibility.

Personal Wireless Communication System Accountability
To determine if area of responsibility personnel accounted for assets and established personal wireless communication system contracted requirements to meet the mission.

ACRONYMS

| Acronym	
CJTF-OIR	Combined Joint Task Force-OIR
COVID-19	coronavirus disease-2019
CPI	critical petroleum infrastructure
CTEF	Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund
CTS	Counter Terrorism Service
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency
DoD	Department of Defense
DoD OUSD(P) ISA	DoD Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy-International Security Affairs
DoJ	Department of Justice
DoS	Department of State
DoS DS	DoS Bureau of Diplomatic Security
Dos NEA	DoS Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs
DoS NEA AC	DoS NEA Office of Assistance Coordination
DoS PRM	DoS Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FFS	Funding Facility for Stabilization
FMF	foreign military financing

| Acronym	
FY	fiscal year
GAO	Government Accountability Office
IDP	internally displaced person
IED	improvised explosive device
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
IG	Inspector General
IHEC	Independent High Electoral Commission
InSF	Internal Security Forces
IRI	International Republican Institute
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
JOC-I	Joint Operations Command–Iraq
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iraqi Kurdish)
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
Lead IG	Lead Inspector General
Lead IG agencies	Refers to DoD OIG, DoS OIG, and USAID OIG

U.S. Soldiers secure a perimeter with their M2 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle in Syria. (U.S. Army photo)

Acronym	
MAG	Military Advisory Group
MERV	Middle Euphrates River Valley
MoD	Ministry of Defense
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NMI	NATO Mission-Iraq
NPA	Norwegian People's Aid
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OCO	Overseas Contingency Operation
OIG	Office of Inspector General
OIR	Operation Inherent Resolve
OSC-I	Office of Security Cooperation–Iraq
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party (Turkish)
PMC	Popular Mobilization Committee
PMF	Popular Mobilization Force
PSPR	Post Security Program Review
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Kurdish)
SDC	Syrian Democratic Council
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces

Acronym	
SNES	Self-Administration of North and East Syria
Treasury	Department of the Treasury
TSO	Turkish-supported Opposition Groups
UN	United Nations
UNDP	UN Development Programme
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	UN Children's Fund
USAGM	United States Agency for Global Media
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
USAID BHA	USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance
USAID START	USAID Syria Transition Assistance Response Team
USCENTCOM	U.S. Central Command
USEUCOM	U.S. European Command
WFP	World Food Programme
YPG	People's Protection Units (Kurdish)
YPJ	Women's Protection Units (Kurdish)

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A UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter flies over its area of operations in the Middle East. (U.S. Army photo)

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