



OIG

Office of Inspector General

U.S. Department of State • Broadcasting Board of Governors

ISP-I-18-29

Office of Inspections

September 2018

**Department of State
Stabilization Programs in Syria Funded
Under the Further Continuing and
Security Assistance Appropriations Act,
2017**

DOMESTIC OPERATIONS AND SPECIAL REPORTS

Summary of Review

Since the start of the Syria conflict in 2011, the United States has provided more than \$8.6 billion in humanitarian assistance and a further \$900 million in non-lethal and stabilization assistance to Syria. On November 10, 2016, the administration requested \$5.8 billion in additional funding to support efforts to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and to counter violent extremism. Congress funded portions of this request through a supplemental appropriation, the Further Continuing and Security Assistance Appropriations Act, 2017 (SAAA), which became law on December 10, 2016. The Department of State (Department) allocated \$315 million in SAAA funds for Syria stabilization assistance, including nearly \$181 million to Department bureaus. The Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA) estimated that approximately 85 percent of these funds would support stabilization in northeast Syria, while the remaining 15 percent would support projects in other regions of the country. OIG undertook this review to determine: (1) obligation and expenditure levels of Department-managed funds made available under SAAA for stabilization in Syria; and (2) the extent to which specific planning, coordination, and program management constraints affected the ability of the Department to plan and put into operation stabilization programs in Syria.

OIG found that the Department faces major challenges in delivering stabilization assistance to Syria. External constraints, such as a high-threat security environment, regional political concerns, policy and legal restrictions on funding, and the lack of a United Nations or host country partner for stabilization activities, create risks that stabilization programs will not achieve the intended strategic result of preventing the reemergence of ISIS and similar terrorist organizations. These external constraints are largely outside the Department's control. However, OIG found that the Department could strengthen its overall planning and coordination for stabilization activities. OIG recommended that the Department identify lessons learned from establishing the Syria Transition Assistance Response Team (START) Forward, a unit staffed by civilians in Syria. OIG did not make a recommendation related to improving Syria coordination because the Secretary of State appointed a Special Representative for Syria Engagement in August 2018. Although OIG found that the lack of a project tracking system for Department stabilization activities in Syria and staffing issues associated with setting up START Forward in Syria were concerns, it did not make recommendations on these subjects. In its response on the draft report, the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs concurred with the recommendation. OIG considers the recommendation resolved. The bureau's response and OIG's reply can be found in the Recommendations section of this report. The bureau's formal written response is reprinted in its entirety in Appendix B.

Following the conclusion of OIG's review, the Department announced on August 17, 2018 that it planned to use approximately \$300 million in foreign government contributions and pledges to fund ongoing stabilization and recovery initiatives in northeast Syria. As a result of the additional donor funding, the Secretary authorized the Department to redirect approximately \$230 million in FY 2017 Syria stabilization funds to support other foreign policy priorities.

BACKGROUND

The Syria conflict has resulted in more than half a million deaths, more than a million injured, and more than 12 million displaced persons—half the country's pre-war population. The conflict began in 2011 as a popular uprising by a largely Sunni population against an oppressive Syrian regime dominated by the Alawi religious minority. Regional Sunni powers Turkey and Saudi Arabia backed the uprising; Shia powers Iran and Lebanon-based Hizballah backed the Syrian regime. Turkey, Iran, and Hizballah also intervened directly with their own forces. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) captured broad swaths of the country starting in 2013 and declared an Islamic caliphate. Russia's 2015 intervention swung the battlefield balance in favor of the Syrian regime, which continues to deploy brutal tactics, including the use of chemical weapons and air and artillery strikes on civilian populations.

Following an accelerated military campaign authorized by the administration, the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS (Coalition) and other forces, including the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, captured 98 percent of the territory previously held by ISIS in Syria and Iraq by the end of 2017. Northeastern Syrian populations required extensive humanitarian assistance after the defeat of ISIS. Following the October 2017 liberation of self-proclaimed ISIS capital Raqqa, local authorities set up various autonomous governing entities, including the Raqqa Civil Council and the Taqba Civil Council. Raqqa has a substantially Arab population and, according to an independent report,¹ tense Arab-Kurdish relations and the weakening of tribal social structures in Raqqa could complicate stabilization efforts.

In a speech on January 17, 2018,² then-Secretary of State Tillerson committed the Department to stabilization initiatives to support the end-state of defeating ISIS and al-Qaida and ensuring that these organizations do not resurface in a new form. Department plans for stabilization in northeastern Syria—the primary region of the country liberated from ISIS by the Coalition—call for assistance to be programmed along four major lines of effort. These are creating a secure environment through training and the removal of explosive remnants of war; promoting representative local governance and civil society; rehabilitating basic infrastructure; and promoting economic growth and development. According to Department officials, assistance programs will not include reconstruction or nation-building components.

Stabilization programs are distinct from humanitarian assistance and longer term development. Under a definition of stabilization adopted by the U.S. Government,³ stabilization is a political endeavor involving an integrated civilian-military process where locally legitimate authorities and systems can peaceably manage conflict and prevent a resurgence in violence. Transitional in nature, stabilization may include efforts to establish civil security, provide access to dispute resolution, deliver targeted basic services, and establish a foundation for the return of displaced people and

¹ United States Institute of Peace Special Report, "Governance Challenges in Raqqa after the Islamic State," Mona Yacoubian, October 2017.

² "Remarks on the Way Forward for the United States Regarding Syria," January 17, 2018.

³ This definition appears in a Department report, *A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas* (May 2018).

longer-term development. Stabilization is intended to be short-term, typically between 1 and 5 years.

Syria Stabilization Planning Roles and Responsibilities

Since the closure of U.S. Embassy Damascus, Syria, in February 2012, the U.S. Government has coordinated Syria assistance from multiple domestic and overseas locations. The Department did not formally designate an official to exercise chief of mission authority after the U.S. Ambassador to Syria retired in February 2014; however, the Department appointed two successive Special Envoys for Syria from March 2014 through February 2017. In February 2017, the Department transferred these responsibilities to the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA) Deputy Assistant Secretary for Levant, Syria, Israel, and Palestine Affairs. Following OIG's review, the Secretary of State appointed Ambassador James F. Jeffrey as the Special Representative for Syria Engagement in August 2018, and charged him with coordinating Department policy on all aspects of the Syria conflict.

Within the Department, NEA's Office of Assistance Coordination is responsible for developing and implementing a coherent and comprehensive assistance policy for the region. It serves as NEA's lead office in assistance policy,⁴ and its Syria Coordination Division manages implementation of non-lethal and stabilization assistance programs in the country. Other NEA offices, such as the Office of Levant Affairs, participate in policy formulation. The Department's Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS helps set priorities for stabilization activities in northeast Syria and coordinates with 75 coalition partners to degrade and defeat ISIS globally. The Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations leads formulation of the Department's overall stabilization policy. However, it has not played an active role in Syria stabilization program implementation since transferring its programs to NEA's Office of Assistance Coordination in 2014. Other Department bureaus⁵ and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) also operate stabilization programs in Syria. The Department of Defense furnishes humanitarian assistance in Syria under its authorities, coordinated through USAID.

Overseas, the Syria Transition Assistance Response Team (START), resident in Turkey, and the Southern Syria Assistance Platform, resident in Jordan, coordinate field operations. The latter operation primarily focuses on southern Syria programs. START also oversees the START Forward platform in northeast Syria, which includes Department and USAID personnel. Finally, U.S. embassies and consulates in Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan facilitate diplomatic engagement and delivery of assistance. Figure 1, below, shows the northeastern Syrian regions where the U.S. Government is conducting stabilization activities.

⁴ 1 FAM 166.10 Office of Near Eastern Affairs Assistance Coordination

⁵ In addition to NEA, the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor and the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs implement stabilization programs in Syria.

Figure 1: Map of Northeast Syria



Source: OIG

External Political, Security, Legal, and Operational Constraints

The Department faces major challenges in delivering stabilization assistance to Syria. External constraints include regional political concerns, a high-threat security environment, policy and legal restrictions on how appropriated funds can be spent, and the lack of a U.N. or host country partner to conduct stabilization programs. These create risks that programs will not achieve the intended strategic result of preventing the reemergence of ISIS and similar terrorist organizations. While these constraints are largely outside the Department's control, they affect all aspects of operations and planning.

NEA told OIG that complex and overlapping foreign policy considerations required ongoing coordination between its policy and assistance offices. Development of a political settlement to the Syria conflict, as then-Secretary of State Tillerson said in his January 17, 2018, speech, will take time, as negotiations towards constitutional reform and U.N.-supervised free elections proceed. NEA officials told OIG that the bureau required frequent senior-level policy decisions about the types of programs, implementing partners, and legal authorities it can use, given the sensitive political environment in Syria. While unavoidable, such policy decisions required time and added to the complexity of programming funds.

High-Threat Security Environment, Terrorist Organizations Posed Challenges

NEA told OIG that employees, implementers, and beneficiaries of U.S. programming efforts in Syria faced serious safety and security challenges related to the ongoing conflict. As of March 2, 2018, a total of 151 aid workers had been killed, 47 wounded, and 49 kidnapped in Syria since 2011. Security concerns also required the Department to relocate offices and personnel to third countries.

At least four designated foreign terrorist organizations operate in Syria: Hizballah, al-Qaida, al-Nusrah Front (al-Qaida's affiliate in Syria), and ISIS. In addition, since 1979, the Secretary of State has designated the Government of Syria a state sponsor of terrorism. U.S. law imposes criminal penalties for providing material support or resources to a foreign terrorist organization.⁶ Because of the risk that U.S. Government assistance could inadvertently be diverted to a designated terrorist organization, the Department and its interagency partners used vetting and other measures to mitigate this risk. For example, NEA suspended certain programs in northwest Syria because of concerns that the bureau could not monitor programs sufficiently to mitigate these risks. Following the conclusion of OIG's review, the Administration ended all northwest Syria programs in order to shift funds to northeast Syria programs.

Lack of United Nations and Host Country Partners Were Significant Obstacles

Department officials told OIG that the most significant external constraints the Department faced were the lack of host country and U.N. partners for stabilization activities. Because the U.N. continues to recognize the Syrian regime, its mandate is limited to those activities approved by the host government. Accordingly, the absence of U.N. partners for stabilization activities required NEA to work primarily with nongovernmental organizations as implementing partners. The Department has operated programs in northwest and southern Syria since 2012. By contrast, NEA was unable to operate programs in northeast Syria until the liberation of this territory from ISIS in 2016 and 2017. Program implementers struggled to identify suitable local staff in northeast Syria because many skilled workers fled during ISIS occupation. NEA reported that the Department and USAID were seeking to expand the use of American citizens and third-country nationals to enhance their capacity to operate in that region.

FINDINGS

Status of Syria Stabilization Funds

Since the start of the Syria conflict in 2011, the United States has provided more than \$8.6 billion in humanitarian assistance and a further \$900 million in non-lethal and stabilization assistance to Syria. On November 10, 2016, the administration requested \$5.8 billion additional funding to support efforts to defeat ISIS and counter violent extremism. Congress funded portions of this

⁶ See 18 U.S.C. §§ 2339A and 2339B.

request through a supplemental appropriation, the Further Continuing and Security Assistance Appropriations Act, 2017⁷ (SAAA), which became law on December 10, 2016.

Table 1: Syria Stabilization Assistance Appropriated Under the Further Continuing and Security Assistance Appropriations Act, 2017 (as of September 7, 2018)

Agency	Initial Allocation ^a	Revised Allocation ^b	Obligations	Expenditures
Department of State				
Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs	\$112,957,565	\$72,347,565	\$72,000,000	\$35,334,280
Governance	\$35,500,000	\$25,000,000	\$27,499,999	\$11,251,788
Justice and Community Security	\$35,000,000	\$21,000,000	\$19,750,000	\$12,439,640
Civil Society	\$22,300,000	\$9,000,000	\$9,000,000	\$5,376,335
Media	\$17,000,000	\$17,000,000	\$15,750,001	\$6,266,517
Education	\$2,810,000	\$0	\$0	\$0
Syria Accountability Mechanism	\$347,565	\$347,565	\$0	\$0
Bureau of Political-Military Affairs	\$30,000,000	\$30,000,000	\$30,000,000	\$30,000,000
Demining and Mine Education ^c	\$30,000,000	\$30,000,000	\$30,000,000	\$30,000,000
Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor	\$13,000,000	\$13,000,000	\$11,000,000	\$4,739,432
Victims of Torture	\$6,000,000	\$6,000,000	\$5,000,000	\$1,000,000
Justice and Accountability	\$3,000,000	\$3,000,000	\$2,000,000	\$1,297,967
Digital Security	\$2,000,000	\$2,000,000	\$2,000,000	\$1,739,432
Activist Support	\$2,000,000	\$2,000,000	\$2,000,000	\$2,000,000
Contingency Placeholder ^d	\$25,000,000	\$0	\$0	\$0
Subtotal	\$180,957,565	\$115,347,565	\$113,000,000	\$70,073,712
U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)				
Bureau for the Middle East	\$73,990,000	\$40,000,000	\$39,988,625	\$31,914,520
Office of Transition Initiatives	\$60,400,000	\$26,250,000	\$26,250,000	\$20,549,228
Subtotal	\$134,390,000	\$66,250,000	\$66,238,625	\$52,463,748
Total	\$315,347,565	\$181,579,565	\$179,238,625	\$122,537,459

Source: Generated by OIG from data provided by the Department.

^a Does not include bilateral funding for Syria made available under the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2017 (P.L. 115-31) or Relief and Recovery Funds made available under the Further Continuing and Security Assistance Appropriations Act, 2017 (P.L. 114-254).

^b The Department announced plans to redirect some FY 2017 funds allocated for Syria in August 2018.

^c Funds appropriated in the Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs – Overseas Contingency Operations account. All other funds listed in the table are appropriated in the Economic Support Fund – Overseas Contingency Operations account.

^d The Department and USAID reserved \$25 million made available under the Further Continuing and Security Assistance Appropriations Act, 2017, for contingency needs that may arise during FY 2018.

⁷ See P.L. 114-254.

The Department originally allocated \$315.34 million in SAAA funds for Syria stabilization assistance, including \$180.96 million to Department bureaus. On August 17, 2018, the Department announced that it secured approximately \$300 million in foreign government contributions and pledges to fund ongoing stabilization and recovery initiatives in northeast Syria. As a result of the additional donor funding, the Secretary authorized the Department to redirect approximately \$230 million in FY 2017 Syria stabilization funds to support other foreign policy priorities. As of September 2018, the Department obligated \$113 million of the \$115.35 million allocated for Syria stabilization under SAAA, as shown above in Table 1. The Department had expended \$70.07 million of the SAAA funds for Syria stabilization.

Department Focused on Explosive Remnants of War as Initial Priority

As of September 2018, approximately 43 percent of funds expended by the Department under SAAA were for programs to eliminate explosive remnants of war and mitigate other explosive hazards in northeast Syria. The Bureau of Political-Military Affairs managed a \$72.37 million program⁸ to eliminate explosive remnants of war in northeast Syria, of which \$30 million came from SAAA funding. ISIS heavily mined the territory it controlled in Iraq and Syria to slow its ouster by coalition forces. As part of stabilization planning, the United States prioritized removal of these explosive hazards to enable re-establishment of essential services and permit the return of internally displaced persons. At the time of OIG's review, program implementers had cleared 14.7 million square meters of land suspected of explosive contamination and removed more than 14,900 explosive hazards in northeast Syria. This work included clearing 214 sites identified as critical infrastructure by the START Forward team. The bureau obligated the \$30 million in SAAA funds in May 2017 and fully expended them by the time of the inspection.

Interagency Coordination

Coordination Challenges Slowed Decision Making

Department and other agency stakeholders interviewed by OIG said that coordination challenges slowed decision making and impeded development of clear lines of authority for Syria stabilization planning. OIG interviewed 56 Department and other agency employees who worked with the Department on Syria stabilization issues. Of the 29 employees who expressed an opinion on the effect of not having a chief of mission for Syria, 20 identified issues involving interagency coordination that they attributed, in part, to the lack of an ambassador or other senior official to make decisions on Syria issues. However, NEA's senior leadership disagreed, telling OIG they believed that existing leadership structures ensured accountability because NEA's Acting Assistant Secretary and other senior Department leaders, in practice, had sufficient decision-making authority. In addition, NEA's senior leadership stated that the lack of a country team and an embassy platform from which to operate in Syria were more significant impediments than the absence of a chief of mission.

⁸ This total includes funds from SAAA and other appropriations as well as monies provided to the Department by other donor countries.

The large number of Department bureaus, overseas offices, and international partners involved in responding to the Syria conflict created an environment where clear lines of authority and accountability are especially important. Department employees told OIG that while the START office in Turkey performed a critical information sharing and coordination function, its director did not have authority to require Department bureaus and other agencies to inform the office about their assistance activities, programs, and strategic goals, as would be the case in an embassy headed by a chief of mission. Nor did NEA have authority to make final decisions on assistance strategy and activities conducted by the Department and other agencies.

Table 2: Syria Stabilization Assistance Agency Representatives and International Partners

Overseas Agency Representatives	Domestic Agency Representatives	International Partners
Syria Transition Assistance Response Team	Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs	Syria Recovery Trust Fund
Syria Transition Assistance Response Team - Forward	Bureau of Political-Military Affairs	Members of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS
Southern Syria Assistance Platform	Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor	
U.S. Central Command	Office of the Presidential Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS	
U.S. Special Operations Command	U.S. Agency for International Development	
Regional Embassies	Department of Defense	

Source: OIG.

In at least one instance, disagreements among stakeholders about priorities delayed decisions about allocating funds between northeast Syria and other parts of the country. Similarly, policy decisions about the Department's role in assuming certain security program responsibilities from the Department of Defense had not been reached as of February 2018. These disagreements also delayed decisions on other issues, such as whether to request that the Secretary exercise legal authorities that would allow the use of foreign assistance funds for emergency assistance⁹ and whether to institute country clearance procedures for civilian personnel assigned to temporary duty in Syria.

Although no specific requirement exists to designate a chief of mission¹⁰ under unusual circumstances such as in Syria, the Department has chiefs of mission in Somalia, Libya, and

⁹ Notwithstanding authority, under 22 U.S.C. § 2261(a)(1), permits the President to use foreign assistance funds, notwithstanding any other provision of law, for emergency assistance.

¹⁰ As described in 22 U.S. Code Chapter 52 § 3927(a)(1) and (2), chiefs of missions have full responsibility for the direction, coordination, and supervision of all executive branch employees in their country of assignment and must be kept fully and currently informed with respect to all activities and operations of the U.S. Government within their country. With respect to foreign assistance activities, as described in 1 FAM 013.2(g)(1)(c)(6), chiefs of mission

Yemen, where embassies are based in neighboring countries due to suspension of operations in the host country. OIG has identified promoting accountability through internal coordination and clear lines of authority as a major management challenge for the Department as a whole.¹¹ In situations where a lack of coordination and dispersed authority exist, OIG consistently found that they create program management weaknesses.

As stated in the recently published Stabilization Assistance Review,¹² one of the greatest challenges to stabilization is that different Government agencies, regional, and international actors often have agendas that work at competing purposes. Coordinating these disparate interests to seek unity of purpose across all lines of effort is, therefore, a key requirement for developing a coherent civilian response to stabilization. Without clear lines of accountability, starting with the empowerment of a senior official to make decisions, Department planning for Syria stabilization is at risk of delays that could affect its ability to meet strategic goals laid out by the President and the Secretary. Because the Secretary of State appointed a senior official – the Special Representative for Syria Engagement – in August 2018, OIG is not making a recommendation to address the coordination challenges created by the lack of a senior official responsible for Syria stabilization planning.

Security, Logistics, and Interoperability

Department Lacked Institutionalized Interagency Mechanisms to Facilitate Deployment of Civilian Personnel for Stabilization Missions

The lack of an existing institutionalized interagency mechanism that could be adapted to the Syria stabilization effort contributed to the length of time needed to plan for and open the START Forward office. Without a U.S. embassy platform in Syria, the Department lacked on-the-ground capacity to support program implementation in northeast Syria until the office could be opened, a process that took approximately 10 months. According to Department officials interviewed by OIG, Department of Defense legal authorities prevented assigning Department employees with stabilization responsibilities to the geographic Combatant Command for security purposes.¹³ As a result, the Department had to negotiate security and logistics arrangements through an exchange of memoranda between the two agencies' Executive Secretaries to create an interim mechanism to enable Department operations.

supervise the implementation of all programs authorized under the Foreign Assistance and Arms Controls Acts in their country of assignment.

¹¹ OIG, *Inspector General Statement on the Department of State's Major Management and Performance Challenges*. (OIG-EX-18-02, November 2017).

¹² Department of State, *A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas* (May 2018).

¹³ As described in 1 FAM 013.2(a) and (b), chiefs of mission are responsible for the security of all U.S. Executive Branch personnel on official duty abroad. However, because of the closure of U.S. Embassy Damascus in February 2012, the Department lacked a security platform to conduct stabilization and needed to request Department of Defense assistance for security and logistics.

The two agencies concluded the memorandum of agreement in May 2017. Although it described broad responsibilities for the respective agencies, the agencies' differing security standards created initial interoperability and logistics challenges. These included:

- Bureau of Diplomatic Security (DS) standards for protecting civilian personnel differed from those of the Department of Defense, which required communicating DS standards and training Department of Defense personnel to support security functions.
- Reimbursement procedures¹⁴ between the Department and the Department of Defense pertaining to expenses, such as equipment, life support, and training of personnel, were not fully defined.
- Department communications equipment initially was incompatible with Department of Defense communications equipment in some cases.
- Civilian employees assigned to START Forward were initially required to take a Department of Defense security training course in addition to the Department's training for high-threat posts—a time-consuming requirement for employees assigned for short duration temporary duty assignments.
- The Department of Defense and the Department did not reciprocally recognize medical clearances, delaying assignments as employees obtained these clearances.
- Procedures for transporting supplies and equipment through Department of Defense channels required negotiation and establishment of a support position in Kuwait to facilitate logistics.

DS employees told OIG that many of these initial impediments had been successfully addressed by February 2018 and that the bureau could support operational requirements successfully, despite security and logistics challenges. DS employees also stated that the process of setting up START Forward identified valuable practices for future engagements, such as having an active duty military officer assigned to DS's High Threat Programs Directorate to coordinate requirements. However, Department and agency officials interviewed by OIG said that the restrictive security environment in Syria continued to inhibit the ability of START Forward to operate in areas of northeast Syria where its presence was necessary to pursue stabilization goals.

Despite progress on security and logistics challenges, the Department still lacked a permanent institutional mechanism to enable efficient deployment of civilian personnel for stabilization missions for future conflicts and to address some of the ongoing operational challenges associated with the memorandum of understanding. According to guidance in 12 FAM 054.2(c) and 12 FAM 054.2-1, the Department is required to undertake a deliberate planning process for security that ensures every mission-critical task is identified, planned, prepared for, rehearsed, and assessed. NEA and DS acknowledged a need for permanent institutional mechanisms to improve planning for stabilization missions. Options under consideration, according to Department and other agencies' personnel interviewed by OIG, included development of a

¹⁴ As described in 4 FAM 844.3(a), when the Department determines that a requirement will be fulfilled by another agency, it prepares and transmits an intragovernmental order to the other agency. The memorandum of understanding between the Department and the Department of Defense did not describe procedures and authorities that would apply to intragovernmental orders (reimbursement procedures) for the Syria stabilization mission.

global interagency agreement with the Department of Defense or legislative changes that would ease interagency personnel assignments. While opening START Forward succeeded in the immediate goal of establishing a civilian presence in Syria, without permanent institutional mechanisms that incorporate lessons learned from this exercise, the Department remained at risk of delays in establishing expeditionary platforms in high-threat environments.

Recommendation 1: The Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, in coordination with the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, should prepare a memorandum for the Secretary that identifies lessons learned from opening the Syria Transition Assistance Response Team Forward office in Syria and proposals for developing permanent interagency institutional mechanisms to facilitate deployment of Department personnel for future stabilization missions. (Action: NEA, in coordination with DS)

Program Implementation

Department Lacked Mechanisms to Track Project-Level Assistance

OIG was unable to determine the number, type, and location of planned Department-funded stabilization projects in northeast Syria, based on available data. NEA developed a tracking spreadsheet that included limited information on its activities and those of USAID for northeast Syria. Additionally, NEA developed an operational plan for Syria, in response to a 2017 OIG recommendation that described funding and program-level activities for its Syria assistance.¹⁵ However, the tracking spreadsheet did not include information from other Department bureaus, such as the Bureaus of Political-Military Affairs and Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. The tracking spreadsheet also did not identify planned projects, costs, and results, or link these projects to strategic-level goals to facilitate data-based evaluation of progress at the strategic level. Department and interagency stakeholders told OIG they often lacked information about the status of Department stabilization assistance projects in Syria, despite regular coordination meetings led by START, START Forward, and NEA and regular updates through situation reports from these offices.

The Department is the lead Federal agency for coordinating and integrating stabilization planning.¹⁶ In Syria, this is a complex responsibility that requires whole-of-government coordination among multiple agencies. At the time of this review, the Department and its interagency partners were concurrently planning and implementing several hundred projects

¹⁵ OIG, *Inspection of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs*, (ISP-I-17-22, May 2017). OIG recommended that NEA, in coordination with the U.S. Office of Foreign Assistance, prepare an operational plan for Syria-related foreign assistance, to delineate funding, program goals, and implementing mechanisms for Syria assistance. Department cable 2016 State 51896, "FY2016 Foreign Assistance Operational Plan Launch Date: May 16, 2016 and Due Date: June 10, 2016," May 9, 2016, states that operating units must complete an operational plan as part of the strategic planning process to provide a comprehensive record of how foreign assistance funds are used.

¹⁶ As described in National Security Policy Directive-44, the Department is the lead Federal agency for coordinating and integrating all U.S. Government departments and agencies to prepare and plan for stabilization assistance and related activities.

related to removal of explosive remnants of war; training of security forces; restoration of essential services such as electricity, sanitation, and water; and support for civil society and independent media. Sequencing and layering assistance¹⁷ among agencies is important to ensuring effective stabilization outcomes.

The Federal oversight community consistently has identified difficulties in tracking and sharing information as a core challenge in stabilization operations. The Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction reported in 2013 that the absence of an integrated information management system led to the U.S. Government being unable to provide basic information on projects it had undertaken in Iraq, including their location and cost.¹⁸ The absence of an information sharing system created significant internal controls weaknesses, hampered program and project management, and complicated reporting to Congress. The Government Accountability Office in 2012 identified interagency challenges related to information sharing on stabilization, reconstruction, and humanitarian assistance that, if not addressed, could result in the potential for unnecessary overlap, wasted resources, and a fragmented approach to assistance efforts.¹⁹

NEA said that after the October 2017 update to the U.S. Assistance Strategy for Syria, it began assessing how to track and measure the results of its programs and projects, consistent with updated strategic goals. OIG did not make a recommendation in this report to address this problem because it has previously made recommendations for improving the Department's tracking of foreign assistance data.²⁰ In addition, the Department is prohibited by law²¹ from developing any new systems to track foreign assistance data until it complies with past OIG recommendations. Instead, OIG advised NEA to assess the extent to which existing information sharing could be adapted to facilitate project-level tracking for Department programs and to link that information to outcomes.

Spotlight on Success: START Contributed Positively to Pre-Liberation Raqqa Planning

Despite the challenges discussed above, Department and other agency officials interviewed by OIG consistently said that START's capacity to bring together civilian and military personnel contributed positively to pre-liberation stabilization planning for Raqqa in 2016 and 2017. Beginning in September 2016, the Department co-led a planning process on stabilization in

¹⁷ As discussed in the forthcoming *Stabilization Assistance Review*, prioritizing, sequencing, and layering assistance among U.S. Government and other actors is necessary to avoid creating dependency and to prioritize assistance effectively.

¹⁸ Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Learning from Iraq: A Final Report from the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction* (March 2013).

¹⁹ Government Accountability Office, *2012 Annual Report: Opportunities to Reduce Duplication, Overlap and Fragmentation, Achieve Savings, and Enhance Revenues* (GAO-12-342SP, February 2012).

²⁰ OIG, *Compliance Follow-up Review: Department of State Still Unable to Accurately Track and Report on Foreign Assistance Funds* (ISP-C-17-27, June 2017).

²¹ Section 7006(a) of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2017 (P.L. 115-31) prohibits the use of funds to create new systems or expand existing systems to track commitments, obligations, or expenditures of funds unless the Secretary of State, in consultation with the Chief Information Officer, certifies that the new system or expansion is consistent with OIG and Foreign Assistance Data Review recommendations.

Raqqa that included participation from the full range of U.S. Government stakeholders and several foreign governments. As part of the planning process, stakeholders convened five in-person workshops and formed four working groups²² that met regularly and reported to a standing, twice monthly synchronization meeting. The planning exercise yielded the Raqqa Civilian Planning Framework, a matrix that outlined detailed actions across eight lines of effort related to stabilization and humanitarian assistance. Department personnel and their colleagues from other U.S. Government agencies praised the planning process and said that it was detailed, inclusive, and reflected lessons learned from areas liberated from ISIS earlier in the conflict.

Human Resources

Field Positions Staffed, but Doing so Strained Offices Supplying Staff for Temporary Duty Assignments

NEA told OIG that it was able to identify employees with regional expertise and language proficiency to staff START Forward field positions, primarily through temporary duty assignments of START and bureau personnel.²³ However, this created vacancies in the offices that supplied staff for the temporary duty assignments, resulting in increased workloads for the permanent START and bureau personnel who remained in those offices. Additionally, six START and Office of Coordination Assistance positions remained vacant due to the Department's hiring freeze,²⁴ further contributing to the added workload. Because the Department stated that it did not anticipate a long-term presence at START Forward, OIG did not make a recommendation to address staffing issues but advised the bureau that a decision to extend the duration of START Forward's mission or expand its size would require more formal recruitment, assignment, and resource planning processes.

²² The working groups focused on humanitarian and critical infrastructure; governance and essential services; explosive remnants of war and security; and strategic communications and diplomatic engagement.

²³ The Office of Coordination Assistance recruited a roster of temporary duty employees from its own office, START, and other NEA offices who were assigned to at least 30-day tours to START Forward, as well as an office director, who was assigned to a one-year tour.

²⁴ The Office of Management and Budget first announced a Government-wide hiring freeze on January 23, 2017. While it froze most positions, which could not be filled if vacant, the Secretary approved specific exemptions to the hiring freeze to ensure the Department could meet critical needs. Beginning in January 2018, the then-Secretary gave bureaus greater authority to strategically manage the exemption process and fill vacant positions through lateral reassignments and internal promotions.

RECOMMENDATION

OIG provided a draft of this report to Department stakeholders for their review and comment on the findings and recommendation. OIG issued the following recommendation to the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. The bureau's complete response can be found in Appendix B. The Department also provided technical comments that OIG incorporated, as appropriate, into the report.

Recommendation 1: The Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, in coordination with the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, should prepare a memorandum for the Secretary that identifies lessons learned from opening the Syria Transition Assistance Response Team Forward office in Syria and proposals for developing permanent interagency institutional mechanisms to facilitate deployment of Department personnel for future stabilization missions. (Action: NEA, in coordination with DS)

Management Response: In its September 25, 2018, response, the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs concurred with this recommendation.

OIG Reply: OIG considers the recommendation resolved. The recommendation can be closed when OIG receives and accepts the memorandum prepared for the Secretary that identifies lessons learned regarding the Syria Transition Assistance Response Team Forward office in Syria and proposals for developing permanent interagency institutional mechanisms to facilitate deployment of Department personnel for future stabilization missions.

APPENDIX A: OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

This review was conducted between January 2 and March 23, 2018, in accordance with the Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation, as issued in 2012 by the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency, and the Inspector's Handbook, as issued by OIG for the Department and the Broadcasting Board of Governors.

Objectives and Scope

The Office of Inspections provides the Secretary of State, the Chairman of Broadcasting Board of Governors, and Congress with systematic and independent evaluations of the operations of the Department and the Broadcasting Board of Governors. This inspection was conducted under the auspices of Section 8L of the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended, in addition to Section 209 of the Foreign Service Act of 1980.

The specific objectives for this inspection were to determine:

- (1) The obligation and expenditure levels of Department-managed funds made available under the Further Continuing and Security Assistance Appropriations Act, 2017, for stabilization in Syria.
- (2) The extent to which specific planning, coordination, and program management constraints affected the ability of the Department to plan and operationalize stabilization programs in Syria.

Methodology

OIG uses a risk-based approach to prepare for each inspection; reviews, circulates, and compiles the results of survey instruments, as appropriate; conducts interviews with Department and on-site personnel; observes daily operations; and reviews the substance of the report and its findings and recommendations with offices, individuals, and organizations affected by the review. OIG uses professional judgment, along with physical, documentary, testimonial, and analytical evidence collected or generated, to develop findings, conclusions, and actionable recommendations.

For this inspection, OIG conducted 56 interviews with Department and other stakeholders, reviewed Department-furnished budget data, and reviewed classified and unclassified reporting, correspondence, and records.

Inspectors Arne Baker (Team Leader), Amy Bliss (Deputy Team Leader), Richard Kaminski, Robert Silberstein, and Jonathon Walz conducted this review.

APPENDIX B: MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

9/25/2018

UNCLASSIFIED

TO: OIG – Sandra Lewis, Assistant Inspector General for Inspections

FROM: NEA – Joan A. Polaschik, Senior Bureau Official
DS – Christian Schurman, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary

SUBJECT: Response to Draft OIG Report – Inspection of Syria Transition Assistance Response Team - Forward (START-FWD)

NEA and DS have reviewed the draft OIG Inspection report. We provide the following comments in response to the recommendations provided by OIG:

OIG Recommendation 1: The Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, in coordination with the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, should prepare a memorandum for the Secretary that identifies lessons learned from opening the Syria Transition Assistance Response Team Forward office in Syria and proposals for developing permanent interagency institutional mechanisms to facilitate deployment of Department personnel for future stabilization missions. (Action: NEA, in coordination with DS)

Management Response: NEA and DS accept the recommendation to identify lessons learned from opening the START-FWD office in Syria and to explore mechanisms for future stabilization missions. To this end, NEA and DS, along with other Department offices, are working closely with the Bureau of Conflict Stabilization Operations to integrate lessons learned relating to all facets of the creation of START-FWD into a prospective Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between DoD, the Department, and USAID on Civilian-Military Co-deployments, which is currently being developed. This MOA is undergoing preliminary drafting, with ongoing discussions within the Department. This MOA may potentially serve a vital function in the interagency's efforts to tailor and codify the

principles outlined in the Stabilization Assistance Review, which was approved by the Secretaries of State and Defense, as well as the USAID Administrator. As envisioned, the MOA would build on any lessons-learned from the START-FWD experience and, for similar unique, non-traditional settings, would codify roles, responsibilities and authorities for the rapid co-deployment of U.S. government civilian personnel from State and USAID with DoD military forces into conflict-affected areas in which DoD has a military presence.

The point of contact for this memorandum is Leslie Thompson
[Thompsonl2@state.gov/6-8503]

UNCLASSIFIED



HELP FIGHT

FRAUD. WASTE. ABUSE.

1-800-409-9926

[OIG.stateoig.gov/HOTLINE](https://oig.state.gov/HOTLINE)

If you fear reprisal, contact the

OIG Whistleblower Ombudsman to learn more about your rights:

OIGWPEAOmbuds@stateoig.gov

oig.state.gov

Office of Inspector General • U.S. Department of State • P.O. Box 9778 • Arlington, VA 22219

UNCLASSIFIED