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Syria and Iraq
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Mr. Chairman, Congressman Smith, Members of the Committee, I am honored to have the opportunity today to discuss with you the situation in Syria and Iraq. I had the privilege of serving as ambassador to both countries, in Iraq from 2007 to 2009 and in Syria from 1998 to 2001, spanning the death of Hafez al-Assad and the succession of his son Bashar.

I commend the Committee for its focus on these two nations whose complex conflicts are at the heart of the Middle East crisis and which threaten regional and international security, including our own. The horrific attacks in Paris, claimed by the Islamic State, underscore the dangers. I believe there are courses of action available to us that could alter the current catastrophic downward spiral of events in both countries. In order to do that, it is important first to assess the nature and origins of the current situation.

SYRIA. The seeds of the current conflict were sown more than 30 years ago in an incident that very few Americans remember but that no Syrian will ever forget. In early 1982 after a series of bombings and other attacks, the Syrian regime cornered the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in Syria's fourth largest city, Hama. Hafez al-Assad ringed the inner city with armor and artillery under the command of his brother Rifaat and destroyed it. The Muslim Brotherhood was effectively eliminated, but so were some 15,000 – 40,000 overwhelmingly Sunni civilians. It was one of the greatest incidents of mass murder by an Arab government against its own people until the current conflict, and it had several important consequences. First, the al-Assads, father and son, knew that someday Syria's Sunnis might try to even the score against their minority Alawi regime. They spent years perfecting the ultimate police state, with overlapping and interlocking intelligence and security services and a strong sense of solidarity among the Alawis: either they hung with the al-Assads, or they would hang separately. As a result, when the brutal suppression of demonstrations in 2011 led to an armed insurrection, Bashar al-Assad was ready. He was not Mubarak, Qadhafi, or Bin Ali, and he wasn't going.

The second consequence of Hama was a latent radicalization of the Sunni community. The enormity of the regime's actions may have physically eliminated the Muslim Brotherhood, but it also insured that its spirit would live, seeking an opportunity for revenge. It is therefore not really a surprise that when large scale armed opposition to the regime developed, it quickly became denominated in jihadi terms, first with Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Qaida in Syria) and then Islamic State.

These two defining factors were very knowable at the outset of fighting, and should have informed our policy decisions. A recognition of the regime's durability might have motivated an early effort with the Russians to press for political steps to avoid a larger confrontation. A difficult undertaking, certainly. But with a quarter of a million Syrians dead and many million refugees or displaced with no real prospect for a negotiated settlement in sight, it certainly would have been worth the effort.

With the opposition, I urged in the early phases of the conflict that we not put boots on the ground but wingtips and pumps filled by a small cadre of Arabic speaking, area trained Foreign Service officers to connect with emerging elements of the anti-Assad movement both to assess the actors and to influence the development of a non-jihadi opposition. Such an effort would have required close coordination with the Turks and Jordanians and would have entailed risk. However, the Foreign Service, of which I was a proud member for more than 37 years, is not risk averse, and a handful of good diplomats in a tough place can make an enormous difference. A few of my colleagues and I undertook similar missions in Iraqi Kurdistan before the 2003 war.

Sadly, the time for such initiatives is long past. The Russian intervention and an escalation of Iranian support has enabled the Assad regime to regain some ground. In the process, the prospects for a political settlement, always remote, have become even more distant. Secretary Kerry is making a major effort, but none of the main protagonists is prepared for the steps needed to end the conflict. The fighting will go on; Assad will at least hold his own; thousands more will die; refugee flows will continue; and the risk of more devastating attacks on the West will rise.

IRAQ. When I left Iraq in 2009, I could never have imagined how it looks today, even in my worst nightmares. During three decades in the Middle East, I learned two things. The first is be careful what you get into. Military interventions set in motion consequences to the 30th and 40th order that can't be predicted, let alone planned for. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the rise of militant Islam, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the rise of Hizballah, the American invasion of Iraq and the birth of al-Qaeda in Iraq. The second thing I learned is to be just as careful over what you get out of. Disengagement can have consequences as great or greater than those of the original intervention. In Iraq, we were not careful about either. Withdrawal of our forces and a virtual end to sustained political engagement in Iraq after 2010 did not end the war. It simply left the field to our enemies: Iran, its proxy Shia militias, and the Islamic State. It is the coalition from hell: Iran and the Islamic State do not seek each other's destruction; both seek the disintegration of a unitary Iraqi state into a Jihadistan. For Islamic State, an Iranian dominated Shiastan, and a Kurdistan heavily influenced by Iran. This is an unacceptable threat to U.S. national security.

THE IRANIAN AND RUSSIAN CONTEXT. We have to understand that Iran and Russia are determined adversaries of ours in any anti-Islamic State campaign. It has been evident from the beginning that Russian forces are not in Syria to fight the Islamic State. They are there, along with Iran, to bolster the regime and have primarily targeted non-Islamic State forces, some of which are supported by the U.S. Russia is firmly established in Syrian Sunni eyes as the enemy, and even the appearance of U.S. willingness to work with Moscow runs the risk of associating us with policies and actions that are perceived as seeking to destroy the Sunni community.

The same is even truer of Iran. Some have suggested that in the wake of the nuclear agreement, we should make common cause with Iran against Islamic State. As I have tried to suggest, Iranian aims in Iraq as well as in Syria are profoundly at odds with our own. Iran is using Islamic State to justify the support of Shia militias in Iraq, commanded by men who killed American servicemen, whose purpose is to weaken the Iraqi central government and prevent any

Sunni-Shia reconciliation. Any hint of coordination with Iran would be perceived as a U.S. alliance with the mortal enemies of Iraq's Sunnis.

We should bear in mind that the fractured landscape of the Middle East is increasingly defined by the dynamics of an overarching cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It is a struggle denominated in sectarian terms, Sunni versus Shia. Russia clearly stands with Iran, al-Assad, and Hizballah. We will do incalculable damage to our interests in the region if we do not make it unmistakably clear that we are adamantly opposed to their actions.

NEXT STEPS. We should acknowledge that if our policy is to degrade and ultimately defeat the Islamic State as the President stated last year, it is not working. Fifteen months into the U.S.- led air campaign, Islamic State has lost some ground in Iraq, but has also taken Ramadi and Palmyra in Syria. The insertion of 50 Special Operations advisors into primarily Kurdish opposition units in Syria will not likely to turn the tide. The President moved away from a degrade and defeat strategy last week, speaking instead of containment of Islamic State. The horrific attacks in Paris, claimed by Islamic State, following the downing of a Russian airliner and murderous bombings in Beirut, all in a two week period, make it starkly clear that a containment strategy puts our national security at unacceptable risk. Islamic State will not be contained.

So what do we do? First, we must significantly ramp up coalition airstrikes against Islamic State. Recent targeting of the Islamic State oil network is a good step, and it should be expanded. Simply put, we need to be all in with an air campaign that goes after their command and control and ability to conduct offensive operations. In short, to actually degrade the organization.

At the same time, we need to avoid a massive reaction to Paris that would be perceived as the West once again targeting only Sunni Muslims. This is just what Islamic State wants. To ultimately defeat Islamic State and end this terrible conflict, we need to change the political context and to understand that for many Syrian Sunnis, al-Assad is a far worse enemy than Islamic State. In Syria, I have argued for a no-fly zone in the north and south. It would be a clear message that we stand with Syrian civilians against the savage bombings by Assad of his own population and against those who back him in Moscow and Tehran. Depriving Assad of the ability to murder his own people from the air would not mean his defeat, but it could change his calculations as well as those of Russia and Iran, finally enabling a political process. It is an axiom that there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict. But military actions can shape the political environment. The Russian intervention did so negatively. A no-fly zone could reshape the context more favorably. According to the Institute for the Study of War, zones could be enforced without putting U.S. aircraft in Syrian airspace by a combination of Patriot and Cruise missiles and aircraft operating in Turkish and Jordanian airspace. With cooperation from these countries, no-fly zones could cover safe zones for civilians and serve as areas where face-to-face coordination with non-jihad opposition elements would be possible.

Another step that would make a positive difference in Sunni perceptions of the U.S. would be for the Administration and Congress to announce we are accepting 100,000 Syrian refugees. This would demonstrate that we care about those Assad is displacing unlike those who are abetting his crimes, and it will undercut Islamic State assertions that the U.S. does not care about Sunni lives.

Security checks are essential. They should and can be done on an expedited basis as a presidential priority, not as an excuse to shut down the process.

Other measures would be to make the anti-Islamic State envoy a presidential envoy. This would demonstrate a seriousness of purpose on the part of the White House and give the envoy authorities he currently lacks. Re-establishing a deputy national security advisor to coordinate the anti-Islamic State campaign in Washington would serve the same end.

In Iraq as in Syria, there is no military solution to the Islamic State threat. The political chasm between Sunni and Shia have given Islamic State the space to fester. Iran has worked to sharpen those divides; and virtual U.S. absence over the last four years has given Iran, its proxies, and Islamic State the scope to act, and they have. The U.S. needs to reengage, not with military force but with sustained, high-level diplomacy led by the President and the Secretary of State. For many reasons, Iraqi leaders find it extraordinarily difficult to make the political compromises necessary to foster a broad sense of inclusion among all of Iraq's communities. Iraqis cannot make the necessary deals on their own, but the U.S. can serve as an effective broker. We have done it before. Only when Iraqi Sunnis feel they have a secure and equitable place in the Iraqi state will the ultimate defeat of the Islamic State be possible.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the most chaotic period in the history of the modern Middle East is also a time of the greatest U.S. disengagement since we stepped onto the regional stage after World War II. We certainly cannot fix all the problems of the Middle East. But U.S. leadership can make a difference. Without it, the current disastrous situation will only get worse. And it will come home to us. As we have all seen so tragically, what happens in the Middle East does not stay in the Middle East.