

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Engel,

It is an honor to come before you today to discuss events in Iraq and Syria.

I spent 4 1/2 years working in Iraq on three assignments between 2003 and 2010 and I worked on Syria in Damascus and then from Washington for three years between 2011 and 2014.

When I was on the ground in Iraq, and later in Syria, we never saw a group as potent as the Islamic State. My colleague, former ambassador Ryan Crocker, calls the Islamic State "al-Qaida version 6.0." Its thousands of fighters, many of them veterans, its administrative capacity, its financial resources and its recruiting savvy all present a big challenge first to regional stability but also to our national security.

The Islamic State stretches in the West from the outskirts of Aleppo, what was Syria's second-largest city, across the Syrian and Iraqi deserts and over that World War I era Syria-Iraq border to the outskirts of Baghdad with Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, firmly under the Islamic State's control. This is now a single conflict across Syria and Iraq.

On the western front, the Syrian side, there is little to be hopeful about.

On the eastern front, the situation in Iraq is very difficult, but not as desperate as it was during the peak of the fighting there in 2005 until 2008. Indeed, there are hints of military progress on the ground, as well as some progress on the political front. The administration's strategy that links our military support to political inclusiveness in Baghdad may yet yield sustainable progress against the Islamic State.

Most important, the military situation in Iraq has shifted against the Islamic State. Iraqi security and Shia militia forces have slowly forced the Islamic State's fighters to leave parts of Diyala province northeast of Baghdad, as well as from towns near southern Baghdad like Jarf as-Sukhr and Muademyah - what we used to call the "triangle of death." Iraqi security and Shia militia forces in recent days pushed Islamic State forces out of Baiji and its important refinery north of Baghdad.

It's not 1945 but it could well be late 1942.

The administration's rushing assistance to Kurdish fighters - Peshmerga - as well as its help to steady remaining elements of the Iraqi Army have helped hugely, as have American airstrikes.

There are some hopeful signs on the political side too:

The central government in Baghdad and the Kurdish regional government for the first time agreed on a formula to start negotiations over their differences about the budget and the oil sector.

This is important to the Kurds: they have heavy military expenses as well as costs from its hosting over 200,000 Syrian refugees as well as some 850,000 Iraqi internally displaced persons (many from Mosul when the Islamic State captured the city last June). Their civil servants have had salary disruptions.

And this preliminary agreement is important to Baghdad - it shows the world that Iraq can solve tough political problems and demonstrates that the new government under Prime Minister Abadi is politically agile.

There is still far to go to reconcile the Kurdish Regional Government and the government in Baghdad. In particular, they must come to an agreement about how to manage oilfield development and exports. This will be especially harder given the Iraqi government's budget deficit due to lower oil exports and export prices.

And the Americans and the international coalition need to be careful as well. Merely arming the Kurds without also pushing for a sustainable political agreement between the Kurds and Baghdad will set up future battles over oilfields and land between the central government and the Kurds. We need to urge compromises on the two sides.

Finance Minister Hoshyar Zibari is close to the Kurdish Regional Government and the Oil Minister, Adil Abdel Mehdi, is from the Shia political coalition but in my firsthand experience relates well to the Kurdish political leadership. These two men are very capable, they are men of good will and if empowered to reach a conclusive deal that would settle the big problems between the central government and the Kurdish Regional Government. I am sure the administration is encouraging them forward.

It is vital for the stability of Iraq that a durable Kurdish-Baghdad deal be reached.

And it is vital to finding a sustainable, durable solution to the Islamic State problem in Iraq that Iraqi Sunni Arabs agree to join the fight against the Islamic State.

Here too there are some hopeful signs.

Above all, the Islamic State's own atrocious brutality is helping. Its massacres of Sunni Arab tribes' members in areas under its control have alienated many Sunni Arabs. Local councils in Anbar, Mosul and Salah ad-Din have called for volunteers from their Sunni Arab communities to fight the Islamic State. They claim that they will fight if given the material support. They also claim that this material support has been very slow to arrive.

Prime Minister al-Abadi is a very capable politician; his personality is very different from that of his predecessor. He has shown some sensitivity to the Sunni Arabs, and he also began to address the deep corruption problems in the Iraqi army by firing a couple dozen generals two weeks ago.

The Prime Minister has not, and cannot, however, fix all the sectarian problems that stress relations between Sunni and Shia Arabs in Iraq, however.

Many Shia, as well as Kurdish,, leaders are reluctant to give the Sunni Arab fighters arms. They fear the Sunni Arabs might one day use those same weapons against the Shia and the Kurds. The National Guard legislation has not yet received approval in Baghdad. Yet, without help from Baghdad, Sunni Arab population won't mobilize against the Islamic State. So again, we will have to be engaged not just with military advisors but also at a political level.

Moreover, the government in Baghdad depends on Shia militias, some of which are on our terrorism list, to push back against the Islamic State. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch recently provided detailed reports about serious abuses committed by these militias against Sunni Arab civilians during the fighting. NPR earlier this week did a similar story about abuses against Sunni civilians at the hands of Kurdish Peshmerga. If forced to choose between the Islamic State or Shia or Kurdish militias, Sunni Arab communities will choose the Islamic State for safety. Thus, the Baghdad and Kurdish regional governments must tame those militias

if we are to gain lasting Sunni Arab support against the Islamic State in Iraq. That will be hard - the Iranians and their friends inside the Iraqi government are promoting those Shia militias.

These difficulties pale in comparison to the challenges in Syria, however.

The plan to launch airstrikes now against the Islamic State and later train vetted fighters from the Syrian opposition to confront the Islamic State is not succeeding. The Islamic State advance stalled at the town of Kobani but elsewhere, such as in central Syria, the Islamic State's fighters are still advancing slowly.

Moreover, we have pounded Islamic State targets in Deir Zour where they confronted surrounded military units of the Assad regime. Those attacks enabled the regime to reopen previously closed supply lines and shift military assets, especially air assets, against moderate armed opposition fighters around Aleppo. In a sense, we have been Assad's air force in eastern Syria.

We pound Islamic State targets at Kobani where they are fighting a Kurdish group affiliated with the terrorist PKK organization. We are the Kurds' air force even though this is angering the Turks whose help against the Islamic State is vital if we are ultimately to destroy the group.

We have never attacked the Islamic State close to Aleppo where it confronts moderate Syrian fighters. So the moderates, fighting a two-front war against Assad and the Islamic State, received no direct relief from any of our attacks.

Instead, our air operations in northwestern Syria directly harmed the moderate armed groups. Our strikes against elements of the al-Qaida affiliated Nusra Front led the Nusra Front to suspect the moderates we've helped are, in fact, an American-backed fifth column against jihadis. Thus, Nusra two weeks ago launched a pre-emptive attack against moderate elements in northwestern Syria. Nusra largely routed them.

We didn't warn the moderate fighters about our strategy and what it could encompass, so they were surprised and unprepared for the air attacks and what Nusra Front response. Oddly, we don't discuss strategy with them at all, they tell us.

Squeezed between the Asad regime and the jihadis, the moderate armed groups in northern Syria will not survive if this American/Coalition approach continues. Their morale problems are worse. They are more isolated politically as they get blamed for being American agents when other Syrians fighting the Asad regime get bombed by American aircraft. In a few months I doubt there will be a moderate opposition in the North.

Instead, there will be only jihadis from Nusra and the Islamic State against the Asad regime and Kurds allied with it. And I cannot see how that will help us contain, much less roll back, the Islamic State.

The UN's very capable envoy Steffan DeMistura has proposed a "freeze" in hostilities in Aleppo in the North since he thinks that both the moderate opposition and the regime now understand they face a common enemy in the Islamic State.

DeMistura's proposal would, if accepted by all sides, allow for humanitarian aid to reach Aleppo, a very laudable goal. The suffering of the Syrian people in cities like Aleppo is unimaginable.

There have been many local ceasefire attempts in the past but nearly all failed because there was no enforcement mechanism. Monitors don't suffice, as we saw with the ineffective UN observer mission in 2012.

An enforcement mechanism can't work without international backing. Regional states and international states providing material support to both sides in the conflict must agree about the utility of such ceasefires. And these countries must use their influence to ensure the warring sides abide by ceasefire terms. We've never had this yet; there is no international consensus about what to do about Syria.

Moreover, local ceasefires in a places like Aleppo won't deal with the jihadi problem. The Nusra Front and the Islamic State, both of which have forces near Aleppo, would not accept a ceasefire even if Asad does. Moreover, it is extremely unlikely that what remains of the moderate opposition in the North would join with Asad forces against Nusra or the Islamic State. After all the brutality, it is a fantasy to hope for such an alliance. Already one of the groups we have worked with, the Hazm Movement, has agreed to a truce with the Nusra Front so that they can both concentrate against the Asad regime in Aleppo.

And if the fighting in Aleppo did diminish, very likely the Asad regime would shift scarce military forces elsewhere, thus escalating fighting in the places like the Damascus suburbs and the South where the moderate opposition is still fighting.

Realistically, therefore, unless we dramatically change our tactics, the moderates will not be able to contain the jihadis of Nusra and the Islamic State even if we do some day train five or ten thousand fighters.

For its part, the Asad regime lacks the manpower to move into eastern Syria. Even if it could scrounge up the manpower, Syrian regime forces only advance with the help of Iranian and Hizballah forces. The presence of Iranian and Hizballah forces in eastern Syria would aggravate suspicions among Sunni Arabs in western Iraq that Iranian and surrogate forces are surrounding them from east and west. Those fears would impede bringing Iraqi Sunni Arabs on board against the Islamic State on the eastern front.

Thus, the Islamic State will enjoy a secure base in eastern and central Syria for the foreseeable future. The strategic depth the Islamic State will enjoy in Syria will in turn hinder efforts to destroy its forces in Iraq as well.