

The Resurgence of al-Qaeda in Iraq

Prepared Testimony before the joint hearing of the Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade Subcommittee and the Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs

December 12, 2013

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Chairmen Poe and Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Members Sherman and Deutch, distinguished members of the subcommittees and staff, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. It is a particular pleasure to testify in the company of such prominent witnesses, whose work on Iraq has shaped my thinking considerably.

Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) has seemingly returned from the dead.¹ On the verge of strategic defeat as U.S. forces departed Iraq, AQI has since regrouped into a large and growing force, contributing to the surge in violence in Iraq and the broader region. Although the neighboring conflict in Syria partially drives AQI's resurgence, the causes of the group's comeback are much deeper. Domestically, the weakness of the Iraqi state – and thus the ability of small, violent groups to operate with considerable freedom – has been a persistent problem since the fall of Saddam's regime. Politically, the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki made progress in restoring faith in Iraq's institutions and establishing order in 2008-2009. However, in recent years he has focused on consolidating power and, in so doing, has alienated Iraq's Sunni Muslim community. Iraqi security services are now more brutal, more political, and less skilled than they were when U.S. forces departed Iraq in 2011. As the Sunnis became marginalized, AQI's popularity again grew. Iraq's neighbors contribute to the problem, sending money and volunteers directly to AQI or indirectly to the organization to support its role in the Syrian conflict. As the violence spreads, it has taken on its own dynamic. Iraqis trust the security services less, and more Sunnis support AQI for revenge or because of a perceived need for self-defense from the Shi'a-dominated security services or associated militias. This in turn leads the

¹ AQI changed its name to the Islamic State in Iraq in 2006 and to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (the latter term meaning greater Syria) in 2013. The group's new name is often abbreviated as ISIS. In keeping with the language of this hearing, this paper will use AQI to refer to the group.

regime and the Shi'a community to view the Sunnis with even more suspicion and in their eyes justifies greater regime repression. Unfortunately, none of these problems are abating, and several are getting worse. So AQI's power is likely to grow.

The growing strength of AQI threatens both the United States and Iraq. The organization's attacks are destabilizing Iraq and risk jeopardizing the oil flow from one of the world's largest exporters. Outside Iraq, the violence could potentially spill over into the region as AQI's ambitions include Syria and other states like Jordan. Other forms of spillover from Iraq such as refugee flows are also dangerous. As the organization becomes stronger, its ability to strike Western targets outside the region, including in Europe and the United States, grows.

Since U.S. forces departed Iraq, the United States has done its best to ignore the country. Hearings like this one are rare moments when Iraq is given the attention it deserves. Although there are regular diplomatic contacts, the administration has not made Iraq stability a priority despite the country's strategic importance and the U.S. role in worsening a number of the country's problems. This must change. Deeper engagement is required if the United States is to have any chance of dissuading the Maliki government from continuing its self-defeating policies. Many of the keys to defeating AQI, however, lay outside Iraq. The United States will need to push allies like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to stop using Iraq as a transfer point for financing and arming fighters in Syria. In addition, Washington should strongly discourage their perception that Iraq could be another front for rolling back Iran. Indeed, U.S. and Iran both oppose AQI and could work together against it. Washington should also consider backing secular Syrian opposition groups more forcefully to ensure that jihadist organizations do not dominate the opposition, as this cross-border relationship has tremendous benefits for AQI. Finally, the United States must also prepare for the problem to get worse: it should take steps to mitigate potential spillover from Iraq to Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and other neighbors as well as ensure its own counterterrorism capabilities and authorities are sufficiently robust so it can act unilaterally if necessary.

The remainder of my testimony has three parts. First, I will explain the causes of AQI's resurgence and why the danger it poses is likely to worsen. Second, I assess the associated risks of AQI's rise, both in Iraq and in the broader region. Finally, I offer several policy recommendations for these subcommittees to consider.

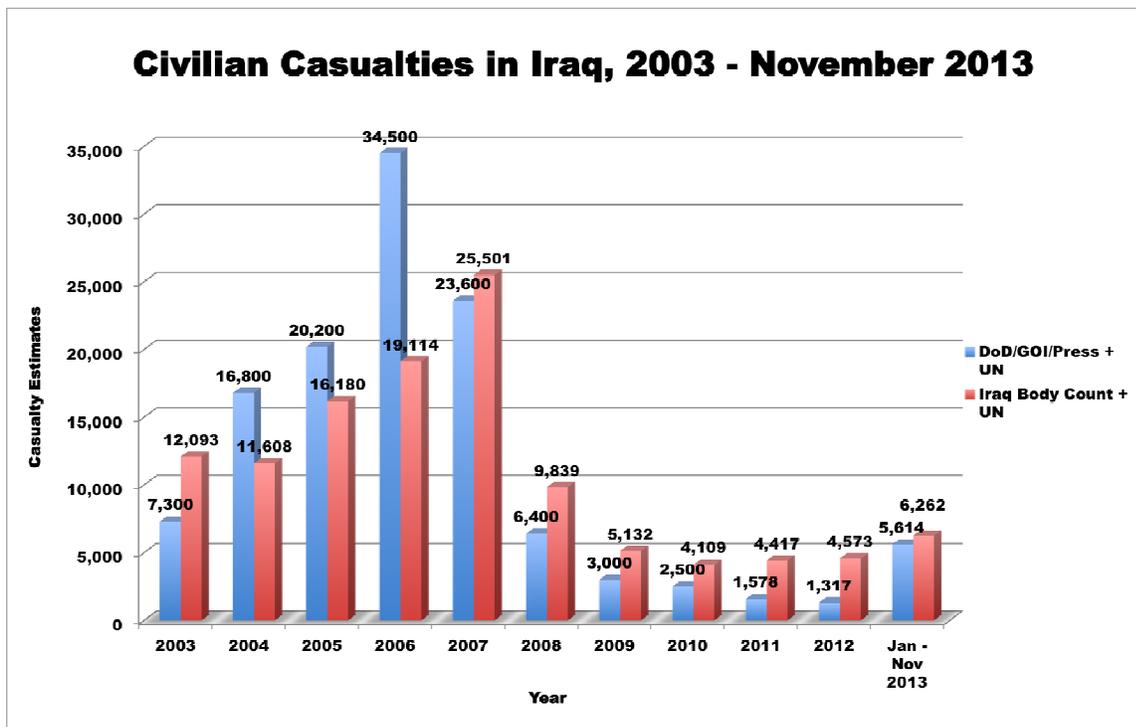
The Return of Al Qaeda in Iraq

Only five years ago, AQI appeared on the verge of collapse. Then-CIA Director Michael Hayden declared in 2008, "Al Qaeda is on the verge of a strategic defeat in Iraq" – an assessment backed by a plunge in the organization's attacks, a collapse in its ability to hold territory, and widespread criticism of the organization from within the broader Muslim world, including from many former jihadist supporters.²

Five years later, the organization is back and, as the chart below indicates, civilian casualties in Iraq are again rising.³

² "CIA Director Michael Hayden Says Al Qaeda Is on 'Verge' of Defeat in Iraq," *Fox News*, May 30, 2008, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2008/05/30/cia-director-michael-hayden-says-al-qaeda-is-on-verge-defeat-in-iraq/>; Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, "The Unraveling: Al-Qaeda's Revolt against Bin Ladin," *The New Republic*, June 2008.

³ Statistics from DoD/GOI/Press 2003 – June 2013 were taken from the Brookings's Iraq Index. Figures for July-November were taken from United Nations in Iraq. Statistics for Iraq Body Count for 2003 – May 2013 were similarly taken from Brookings's Iraq Index. Figures for June-November were taken from United Nations in Iraq.



Three points on AQI’s return deserve particular emphasis. First, as the chart highlights, the death toll in Iraq is steadily increasing— even excluding the hundreds of deaths in December of this year already and the conservative methodologies used by the data compilers, 2013 is the worst year for civilian casualties since 2008. Government officials claim that there are now “upwards of 40 suicide bombers per month.”⁴ Second, the scope of AQI activity has surged – something the chart does not reveal. AQI is doing more than just increasing the volume of its attacks. The group now strikes in parts of Iraq from which it had previously been eradicated, supports the rebellion in Syria, and conducts bold and operationally sophisticated raids on prisons to release its cadre.⁵ Third and perhaps most importantly, AQI again uses insurgent tactics, such as holding territory in Iraq and Syria, in addition to terrorism. Although less dangerous than it was at the height of the Iraqi civil war, this shift represents a considerable growth in capabilities.⁶

Incomplete state building is one root of the problem. Saddam ruled largely by terror, and his regime was increasingly hollow by the time of its 2003 overthrow. After his fall, Iraq lacked institutions that could secure order, provide services, or otherwise fulfill basic government functions. The Iraqi civil war worsened this problem, empowering militias, destroying what

⁴ Testimony by Brett McGurk, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Iraq and Iran, “U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Iraq,” Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, November 13, 2013, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA13/20131113/101473/HHRG-113-FA13-Wstate-McGurkB-20131113.pdf>;

⁵ For one valuable study, see Jessica Lewis, “Al-Qaeda in Iraq resurgent: The Breaking the Walls Campaign Part I,” *Institute for the Study of War*, Middle East Security Report 14, September 2013, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AQI-Resurgent-10Sept_0.pdf.

⁶ Ben Van Heuvelen, “Next door to Syria, an Al Qaeda Linked Group Is Also Gaining Ground in Iraq,” *Washington Post*, December 7, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/next-door-to-syria-an-al-qaeda-linked-group-is-also-gaining-ground-in-iraq/2013/12/07/ca9dfd4a-5e16-11e3-bc56-c6ca94801fac_story.html

remained of the economy, and further weakening faith in government and security forces. As Iraq pulled back from the brink, however, the Iraqi state began to reemerge. At the end of the last decade, the army, the police, and government performance all improved – though admittedly from a very low bar. The presence of U.S. forces and the associated high-level of engagement played an important role in these positive trends.

Sectarianism also propels AQI's resurgence. In the waning days of the U.S. occupation, Iraq held elections that reduced the influence of warlords, and Maliki took action against Shi'a militants, apparently committing his government to oppose sectarianism. Since then, however, the Maliki government has tried to consolidate power and undermine rivals. Such consolidation made the regime increasingly insular, burning rather than building bridges with the Sunni community. Promises made to Sunnis who fought against AQI were not honored. Maliki has surrounded himself with trusted advisors from the Shi'a community and visibly excluded Iraq's Sunni Muslims from positions of influence. He has politicized Iraq's security forces, making them an arm of the regime rather than of the Iraqi state. The security services often collude with Shi'a radicals in revenge attacks on Sunni Muslims, and Iraqi Sunnis perceive them as a hostile force. Even when they are not part of the problem, the Iraqi security forces are overworked, underpaid, and poorly led. Counterinsurgency methods that relied on excellent intelligence and winning over the community were abandoned in favor of indiscriminate methods that only further alienated Iraqi Sunnis.⁷ The alienated population has proven more willing to support, or at least tolerate, AQI activities.

AQI has flourished in this environment. Where once Iraqi Sunnis rejected its extreme ideology and brutal behavior, it now poses as a defender of the Sunnis against the brutality of the regime. Those Sunnis who oppose AQI risk being painted as government tools or as willing to leave their coreligionists defenseless in the face of growing sectarianism. AQI again began to grow in size. Matt Olsen, who heads the National Counterterrorism Center, contends that AQI is stronger today than during its 2006 operational peak.⁸

Iraqi leaders often blame violence in Syria for AQI's resurgence. Indeed, this conflict has boosted AQI. The collapse of order in Syrian provides a permissive environment for jihadists to arm, train, and organize. The fighting, meanwhile, has energized the broader Muslim world. Individuals and social organizations have provided arms, hundreds of millions of dollars, and thousands of volunteers to various Sunni rebel groups in Syria. Although Syria is often referred to as the "new Iraq" or "new Afghanistan" regarding its role in inspiring jihadists and bringing them to the battle, in reality it is much worse. Though data are scarce, it appears more foreigners from the West have come to Syria in a far shorter period of time than the numbers who traveled to previous fields of jihad.⁹ These fighters are remarkably well networked with other jihadist

⁷ For reviews of these ups and down, see in particular Kenneth Pollack, "The Fall and Rise and Fall of Iraq," *Brookings Institution*, July 30, 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2013/07/30-fall-rise-fall-iraq-pollack>; Michael Knights, "Iraq's Never-Ending Security Crisis," *BBC News*, October 3, 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqs-never-ending-security-crisis>.and Michael Knights, "Yes, Iraq is Unraveling," *Foreign Policy*, May 15, 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/yes-iraq-is-unraveling>.

⁸ "Al Qaeda in Iraq Strongest Since 2006," *Associated Press*, November 14, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/11/14/shiites-iraq-bombs-ashoura/3524941/>

⁹ Thomas Hegghammer, "The Number of Foreign Fighters from Europe in Syria is Historically Unprecedented," *Washington Post*, November 27, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2013/11/27/number-of-foreign-fighters-from-europe-in-syria-is-historically-unprecedented-who-should-be-worried/>

causes. Many have ties to AQI already, and many others are developing relationships after arriving in Syria.

AQI also relocated part of its cadre to Syria, enjoying the sanctuary such chaos offers and perceiving the struggle there as part of its own broader fight against what it considers apostate regimes. Bashar al-Asad deliberately tolerated the creation of networks for sending fighters to Iraq to undermine the United States occupation of Iraq after 2003. Ironically, these same networks facilitated the flow of fighters (some AQI-affiliated) and arms back into Syria when order collapsed there.

A number of Arab states and movements share AQI's view that its fight against the Maliki government is equivalent to the Syrian Sunni community's struggle against the Asad regime. Both rebels, in the eyes of many Sunni Muslims, are fighting an Iran-backed apostate regime that is brutalizing the Sunni community. Over time, this has created a self-fulfilling prophecy. As fighters flocked to Syria to defend their religious communities, it prompted others to do so as well: now Shi'a militias from Iraq, the Shi'a Hizballah in Lebanon, and an array of Sunni organizations cite each other's presence as proof of a grand regional conspiracy. These states and movements supporting Syrian rebels often use AQI and western Iraqi tribes to transfer resources to Syria. Naturally, AQI kept some arms and money for itself. Even more important, it was able to convince many volunteers who intended to fight in Syria to stay in Iraq and fight on its behalf.¹⁰

Putting sectarianism aside, a number of Sunni states, notably Saudi Arabia, perceive the Syria conflict – and by extension Iraq – as part of a strategic competition with Iran. Riyadh fears Tehran is bent on regional hegemony and sees Tehran's gain of an ally in Iraq after 2003 as a huge shift in the regional balance. Undermining Iran's ally, and ideally reversing Iran's gains in Iraq, motivate these states to support anti-regime forces in both Syria and Iraq.

In addition to greater access to resources, the Syria conflict also restored AQI's credibility. Many jihadists who wanted to focus on the United States or more traditional targets had vehemently criticized AQI's sectarian bent and its killing of Sunni Muslims. The Syria conflict, however, changed this perception as fighters now mobilize along sectarian lines.

Spreading throughout the country and broader region, the violence has taken on its own dynamic. With each attack, the credibility of Baghdad's Maliki regime declines and its perceived need to crack down harder increases. And with each reprisal or mass arrest, support or at least toleration of AQI grows. Now a self-perpetuating spiral, past violence drives future violence.

There is little reason to be optimistic that this cycle of violence will break. The Syrian war is not likely to abate, and indeed the jihadist role there continues to grow as overall levels of violence increase and neighbors continue to meddle. Maliki fears losing his power base in the Shi'a community more than alienating Sunnis, and he has resisted U.S. pressure to open up decision-making. The scheduled April 2014 parliamentary elections may even worsen this problem. Fear and sectarian rhetoric will probably be used to mobilize supporters, provoking hostile reactions from rival communities. In addition, the Maliki government's likely attempt to manipulate election results and shore up his base among Iraqi Shi'as may further alienate Sunni Muslims. As Sunni Muslims feel increasingly ostracized, such frustrations may translate into even broader popular support for AQI inside Iraq.

The Dangers of a Resurgent AQI

¹⁰ McGurk, "U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Iraq."

AQI, of course, poses a direct danger to the lives of Iraqis and the stability of the country. Its activities helped plunge Iraq into a brutal sectarian war that killed over 100,000 Iraqis between 2005 and 2007. Today's levels of violence are high, but the risk that they will grow dramatically and Iraq will see massive death tolls and refugee flows is painfully real. Putting aside the human cost, Iraq is now one of the world's top oil exporters. Unlike several other leading producers, it is poised to increase production in the years to come.¹¹ Increased violence potentially jeopardizes its exports. In addition, over 4,000 American soldiers died in Iraq, our country spent hundreds of billions of dollars there, and U.S. mistakes during the occupation contributed to the country's instability and civil war. Return to civil war or state failure would mean this sacrifice was in vain.

AQI also may be more dangerous this time around because jihadist organizations have learned from past mistakes. Under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi until his death at the hands of coalition forces in 2006, AQI alienated Iraq's Sunnis by its heavy-handed behavior, brutality toward Sunni civilians, and attempts to usurp traditional leaders. In Yemen and Syria, Al Qaeda affiliates have learned lessons from AQI's past problems and are working more harmoniously with local leaders – stances endorsed by the Al Qaeda core. In addition, these affiliates are providing limited social services in conquered areas, further boosting their popularity. Although U.S. forces killed Zarqawi and the Al Qaeda core was frustrated with AQI's sectarianism, it is unclear how much the group has taken its own past mistakes to heart. However, the changes by like-minded groups suggest AQI itself may be more careful this time.¹²

AQI is perhaps the most important Al Qaeda affiliate. Indeed, not only has it been responsible for the deaths of thousands of Iraqis, it has sponsored jihadist insurgents next door in Syria and played a significant role in bringing groups like Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb into the Al Qaeda fold. Indeed, in Syria it has even tried to establish itself as the dominant jihadist group there, leading to conflict with jihadist rivals like Jabhat al-Nusra.

AQI's focus on Iraq's Shi'a government and population was never in harmony with the Al Qaeda's core's focus on the United States and the West. Now, however, AQI's sectarian focus has become the norm for many groups and extremists, and this agenda has broad support among many Sunni Muslims, enabling the group to improve fundraising and recruiting.¹³ Although cynics might say such a development has benefits for U.S. security – when jihadists focus on the Shi'a, they are not focused on Americans – in the long-term this is counterproductive for U.S. interests. At minimum, the spread of sectarianism is potentially destabilizing to countries with significant Shi'a populations, like Bahrain, Kuwait, and Lebanon, as well as Iraq. More broadly, sectarianism significantly catalyzes radicalization of both Shi'a and Sunni communities, thereby increasing the overall number of extremists and terrorists.

Indeed, AQI-linked conflict is at the heart of the problem of spillover in the Middle East.¹⁴ What happens in Iraq does not stay in Iraq: it has already helped infect Syria, and the

¹¹ “Benoit Faucon, Summer Said, and Sarah Kent, “OPEC Rift Emerging over Iraq Output,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 29, 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303562904579227632634058104>

¹² See Daniel Byman, “Breaking the Bonds between al-Qa’ida and Its Affiliate Organizations,” Brookings Analysis Paper no 27 (August 2012), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2012/07/alqaida-terrorism-byman>

¹³ Geneive Abdo, “The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi’a-Sunni Divide” (Brookings, 2013),

<http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2013/04/sunni%20shia%20abdo/sunni%20shia%20abdo.pdf>

¹⁴ See Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack, *Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover from an Iraqi Civil War* (Brookings, 2007) for my thoughts on this subject.

furies unleashed by the conflict shape the politics of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other states. Sectarian conflict in particular ignites passions of their peoples, increasing tension and religious discrimination at home and inspiring some young men to become foreign fighters. These states become more fearful and more prone to dangerous interventions as a result. Some of the foreign fighters will die, but others will return and radicalize their own populations.

Refugees can be a particularly dangerous form of spillover. The vast majority of refugees are victims of conflict, seeking only protection for themselves and their families. Some, however, use the refugee camps as bases, fueling the fight. In addition, militant forces often recruit from refugee camps, as unemployed young men with grudges to bear are often ideal recruits. Such militarized refugee communities can add fuel to the fire of existing conflicts and contribute to new conflicts in their host lands.¹⁵

The spillover may even go beyond the Middle East. These conflicts are magnets for foreign fighters, and hundreds have traveled to Syria to fight from the West – a cause of immense concern for America’s European allies. Because many go through Iraq, and because still others work with groups in Syria like AQI that have links on both sides of the border, AQI’s growth may pose an indirect terrorism threat to the United States and its European allies.

Implications and Recommendations

History haunts American perceptions about any future U.S. role in Iraq. Understandably most Americans would prefer to leave this country behind once and for all, but we must recognize that U.S. policy toward Iraq has failed to stabilize this critical country and has done little to dent the growth of AQI. Recognizing the unpopularity of any major U.S. role in Iraq among the American people, there is still more that can be done.

The United States’ minimal level of engagement, rather than actual policies, hinders meaningful impact in Iraq. U.S. efforts to promote better relations between Iraqi Kurds and the central government, to push Maliki to refrain from discriminatory policies, to depoliticize and improve the security services, and to win over the Sunni community (and in particular former anti-AQI fighters) are well-intentioned and sensible. However, these are often implemented without engagement at the highest levels, diminishing their impact.

Beyond increasing the overall level of U.S. engagement, Washington should consider several steps. First, the United States should ramp up efforts to aid the non-jihadist components of the Syrian opposition. Such steps are fraught with problems -- the fragmentation of the opposition, the risk of U.S. arms being diverted, the conflicting agendas of U.S. allies, and so on -- and may not dramatically shift the military balance in Syria. They are nonetheless worthwhile. By building up credible alternatives to the jihadists, the United States helps shrink their influence and control of territory. In addition, the direct risk to the United States remains low. This is valuable for the long-term in Syria, decreasing the odds of a radical regime coming to power or that terrorists would control significant swaths of territory. This has consequences not only for Syria but also for the country’s neighbors, particularly Iraq. The two civil wars are intertwined, and reducing the influence of jihadists in one conflict will reduce their influence in the other.

Second, the United States must privately confront its Gulf allies over their support for jihadist movements. Much of this support is indirect and not done by regimes. However, these regimes tolerate their own citizens’ activities in support of jihadists in Syria, ranging from

¹⁵ See Sarah Lischer, “Collateral Damage: Humanitarian Assistance as a Cause of Conflict,” *International Security*, 28.1 (2003) 79-109

rhetorical support to financial backing and the recruitment of foreign volunteers.¹⁶ In the long-term, the growth of sectarianism and the generation of more jihadists is detrimental to our allies' security as well as our own. In addition to reducing the power of radicals in Syria, having fewer resources transit Iraq would reduce AQI's ability to siphon off support for the Syrian jihad. Washington should particularly emphasize that Gulf allies should not try to encourage a "second front" against Iran by undermining the Maliki government.

Ironically, the United States may have an ally in Iran for some of its actions. Both countries have an interest in opposing Sunni radicalism in the Middle East and Iran, like the United States, has a strong interest in Iraqi stability. Should nuclear talks with Iran progress, Washington should encourage Tehran to use its influence on Maliki to push him to act responsibly.

The United States must also prepare for the likelihood that the above or other positive measures will only achieve limited success or even fail completely. Above all, Washington should prepare for AQI's continued growth. As such, the United States military should develop different overt and covert packages of counterinsurgency assistance for the government of Iraq -- the levels varying by how willing the Maliki government is to make changes and according to the level of threat AQI is perceived to pose.¹⁷ Despite the public's overwhelming distaste for greater involvement in Iraq, the United States may need to play a stronger role, assisting the Iraqi government in order to protect U.S. interests.

Simultaneously, the United States should prepare for spillover from Iraq. In Iraq during the height of the civil war and in Syria since 2011, the scale of the humanitarian tragedy and the spread of violence across borders caught the United States off guard. Given the steady escalation of this conflict and recent experience in region, there is no excuse for not preparing for another round of spillover from Iraq. The United States should try to coordinate Iraqi neighbors to prepare for refugee flows, establish contingency plans for cross-border terrorism, and try to stifle neighboring state interventions that would only perpetuate conflict.

Finally, the United States should ensure it has the capabilities and authorities to intervene unilaterally against terrorist bases in Iraq. To be clear, the ideal approach is that the Iraqi government acts on its own. And, in most cases, the terrorists there are focused on the Iraqi and Syrian governments and thus pose no immediate threat to the U.S. homeland. But the Iraqi government remains weak and often exacerbates the problem, while the risk of AQI to Americans and U.S. interests outside Iraq is growing. The United States must ensure it has the necessary intelligence and basing infrastructure should direct strikes be necessary. More broadly, Congress should pass a new version of the post-9/11 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) legislation in order to ensure the authority for robust action.

The mistakes and costs of past U.S. involvement and the current frustrations with the Maliki government are not a reason to completely abandon Iraq. An effective response will

¹⁶ Elizabeth Dickinson, "Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home," Saban Analysis Paper, December 6, 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2013/12/06-private-gulf-financing-syria-extremist-rebels-sectarian-conflict-dickinson>

¹⁷ Earlier this year the United States reportedly stepped up its covert support for Iraqi counterterrorism units, working through the CIA. Adam Entous, Julian E. Barnes and Siobhan Gorman, "CIA Ramps Up Role in Iraq," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 11, 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324735304578354561954501502>.

require higher-level engagement with Iraq and more involvement with our regional allies, both of which are difficult. The alternative, however, is that terrorism in and emanating from Iraq grows in the years to come.