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The Resurgence of al-Qaeda in Iraq

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished Representatives, I am honored to be able to appear before you to discuss the situation in Iraq and the resurrection of al-Qaeda since the departure of U.S. forces in December 2011. It is a great credit to this committee that at a time when the nation appears determined to forget our interests in Iraq, you refuse to do so. It is absolutely vital. Since 2003, the United States has invested an enormous amount in Iraq, and the future of Iraq remains of great importance to the interests of the United States and our allies. Iraq has replaced Iran as the second leading oil exporter in OPEC, and projections of future low oil prices are highly contingent upon the continued growth of Iraqi oil exports. Remembering that virtually every postwar American recession was preceded by an increase in oil prices, Iraq and its oil production remain critical to the prosperity of the United States.

Unfortunately, over the past two years, Iraq has taken a noticeable turn for the worse, although how bad things will get still remains uncertain. Our topic today, the reemergence of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), is among the most visible and frightening manifestations of Iraq's downward turn. AQI has been one of the principal culprits in the worsening violence across Iraq. In 2012, Iraq experienced a 10 percent increase in violent civilian deaths. That was the first annual increase since 2006, prior to the so-called "Surge." In 2013, Iraq may very well experience a 100 percent increase in violent civilian deaths over 2012. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to say that violence is multiplying in Iraq by orders of magnitude.

However, we need to recognize that the increasing violence in Iraq, and the reemergence of groups like AQI do not constitute Iraq's problems per se. They are instead the symptoms of those problems. They are the outward manifestations of deep-seated structural conflicts and unresolved differences among Iraq's various constituencies. Although it is not impossible to mitigate or even resolve those underlying problems, they will not be overcome easily, and few of Iraq's political leaders are making the kind of effort that would be needed to do so. Instead, most of Iraq's leaders concentrate on achieving short-term tactical gains against their rivals, often in ways that exacerbate those problems rather than ameliorating them.

For this reason, it will be difficult even to meaningfully reduce the levels of violence in Iraq without addressing Iraq's fundamental political (and, to a lesser extent, economic and social) problems. Iraq will never be peaceful, prosperous and free of the scourge of AQI and groups like it until Iraq's leaders properly grapple with those underlying problems and forge reasonable compromises to allow the country to move forward. The converse is also true. The longer that Iraq's fundamental political problems are allowed to fester; the longer that Iraq's bad, old political culture is allowed to hold sway; and the longer that Iraq's leaders obsess over how to beat their adversaries rather than fixing what ails the nation, the worse the violence is likely to get and the stronger that groups like AQI are likely to grow. In the end, as they hope, these groups might succeed in pushing the country back into civil war.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq

The initial rise of AQI and the other Salafist groups was a product of the many mistakes of the United States after the fall of Saddam. The United States invaded, toppled the totalitarian dictatorship of Saddam Husayn and put nothing in its place. In so doing, Washington created a failed state and a security vacuum. These circumstances quickly spawned widespread organized and unorganized crime, terrorism, an insurgency among the Sunni tribes of Western Iraq who felt threatened by the ham-fisted American efforts to create a Shi'a-Kurd dominated government, and eventually an inter-communal civil war in 2005-2007.

Indeed, the creation of a power vacuum in Iraq did what it often does, and has done in places like the former Yugoslavia, Congo, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Somalia and elsewhere: It enabled various criminals, sociopaths and opportunists to lash out at their rivals and use pre-existing (even long-dormant) differences as causes to mobilize support and employ violence. This in turn prompted other groups to take up arms to defend themselves, setting off a fear-based spiral of attacks and reprisals that pushed the country into all-out civil war. AQI and its ilk took advantage of the security vacuum and the fear it inspired to become a dominant force among Iraq's Sunni population by 2006.

AQI has both home grown and foreign elements. It was founded by foreign al-Qaeda operatives who entered Iraq in the wake of the U.S. invasion to kill both Americans and Shi'a. They insinuated themselves with the Sunni tribal community of Western Iraq, which had been badly alienated by the Bush Administration's disastrous mishandling of the post-invasion reconstruction. During that time, many Sunni Iraqis believed that the United States had handed the Iraqi government to the worst elements among the Shi'a—warlords, extremists and thieves—expressly to crush the Sunni population. Believing they had no other allies and nowhere else to turn, many Sunni Iraqis saw the foreign al-Qaeda operatives with their combat experience, expertise, weapons and money as heaven-sent to help them in their hour of need. The Sunni tribal community largely embraced al-Qaeda as allies in their fight against the Shi'a militias and the Americans, who seemed in Sunni eyes to be aiding and abetting those militias.

Consequently, AQI's initial, mostly foreign cadre, quickly gained numerous local recruits. Over time, AQI became a largely Iraqi affair. One of its goals was to drive the Americans from Iraq to reclaim the territory for the Muslim world as part of al-Qaeda's larger aspiration of creating a new Islamic Caliphate to rule all Muslim lands. Another was to slaughter, convert or expel the Shi'a, whom al-Qaeda's rabid Sunni Salafists regard as apostates and heretics who must be

cleansed from the land to create a pure, Sunni Islamic state. AQI, both its foreign and domestic personnel, set about these goals with a vengeance.

Nevertheless, it is also important to recognize that AQI was actually only one of many Sunni insurgent/terrorist/militia groups operating in Iraq against the Shi'a, the Americans and to a lesser extent, the Kurds. At the height of Iraq's civil war, dozens of groups like the 1920s Revolution Brigade, Ansar al-Sunnah, Jaysh al-Muhammad and Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa Naqshbandia (JRTN). Many, but not all, of these groups embraced the same Salafist theology as AQI, but all of them espoused the same virulent Sunni chauvinism. To a considerable extent, we have come to use the term "AQI" as a shorthand term describing a wider range of violent Sunni extremist groups.

For several years, primarily from 2004 to 2007, these Sunni groups helped wreak havoc upon Iraq and the American forces deployed there. They formed the core of the Sunni order of battle against the Shi'a in Iraq's horrific civil war. They also constituted the bulk of the insurgency against the United States presence.

The partnership between the Salafi jihadists and the Sunni tribal community of Iraq was never an easy one, however. The Sunni tribes were never as religious as the Salafist zealots, and certainly they did not care for the fundamentalism imposed by their new allies on parts of Iraq that they came to control. Their excesses always rubbed most Sunni tribesmen the wrong way. Arguably of greater importance, al-Qa'ida in Iraq had turned the traditional tribal hierarchy upside down. When they entered Iraq, their first recruits were the dispossessed of Iraqi tribal society—the misfits, the outsiders, the lowest men on the totem poles. As al-Qa'ida grew in power, these were the men who benefitted most in power, wealth and prestige. They lorded it over the shaykhs, dismissing the millennia-old hierarchy of the region. Moreover, while their losses to Shi'a militias, especially in Baghdad, had convinced the traditional Sunni hierarchy that the civil war needed to end, not so al-Qa'ida and the other violent fanatics who were willing to fight on to the last, even if that meant the extermination of Iraq's Sunni community.

Not surprisingly, by 2006, many Sunni tribesmen and many more of their shaykhs had had it with al-Qa'ida. They tried to evict the terrorists on their own but failed. Meanwhile, the U.S. Marines, charged with the pacification of Anbar since 2004, had already begun applying low-intensity conflict tactics intended to divide the tribes from the terrorists. American personnel began reaching out to the tribal shaykhs to try to reconcile with them, offering them protection, services, resources, even bribes if they would throw off the terrorists, insurgents and militias.

For the Sunni shaykhs, it was that combination of threat and opportunity that moved them. They increasingly foresaw that the longer that al-Qa'ida and other Salafi groups were able to hold sway in Anbar and Salah ad-Din, the harder it would be to evict them and the more that they would reshape Iraqi Sunni tribal society to suit themselves, to the detriment of the traditional power structure. And by observing the Marines, seeing the consistency of their behavior and their determination to reach out to the Sunni community, the shaykhs concluded that they finally had a real partner who they could rely on to break al-Qa'ida, extirpate it from Sunni society and return them to their traditional status. Thus was born the Anbar Awakening which started in late

2006 but gathered tremendous steam from the further application of those same tactics to the rest of the country.

Perhaps the least understood element of that story, however, was the reintegration of the Sunnis into the wider Iraqi state and society. It was not just that the Marines (and later, the entire U.S. mission) promised to protect and aid the Sunni tribes against al-Qa'ida and the other zealots. It was also, that the Americans promised to protect the Sunni community against the Shi'a as well.

Thus, one of the most important shifts that occurred as part of the "Surge" was that the United States went from being the enablers of the Shi'a to the defenders of the Sunnis. In the past, American forces had largely stood idly by while Shi'a militias and death squads slaughtered the Sunnis, drove them from Baghdad and other towns—often under the camouflage of the government's own security services. As a result of America's shift to population security during the Surge, the Sunnis saw American troops stop the Shi'a conquests cold. American troops prevented the Shi'a militias from consummating their victory in the Battle of Baghdad with a final slaughter of the remaining Sunnis holed up in the Mansur district, the last remaining Sunni enclave in the city.

More than that, the United States promised—and then made good on those promises—to force the Shi'a and Kurdish leaders to give the Sunnis a place at Iraq's table again. Sunni political leaders were given cabinet posts and other high-ranking jobs. Sunni fighters were re-integrated into Iraq's security forces, most notably as the "Sons of Iraq" but most importantly as ordinary soldiers and commanders in Iraqi field units as part of the reform of the ISF. Indeed, some units composed largely of Sunni troops and officers would later play key roles in the government campaigns to break the power of Jaysh al-Mahdi. The United States also brought goods and services to a Sunni community that had been denied them by the Shi'a (and Kurdish) warlords and chauvinists since 2003. At first, these were furnished by American military forces themselves, but later, as Sunni leaders regained their political influence, by Iraq's nascent government itself. Suddenly, the Sunnis had a reason to cooperate with the government of Iraq and to try to build a new Iraqi state, rather than tear it down.

Thus, what broke AQI in 2007-2008 was the major effort, undertaken as part of the Surge strategy, to actually address Iraq's problems. The shift to a population security strategy in particular suppressed the violence, broke the links between the militias/insurgents and the Iraqi people and allowed American officials to forge a new power-sharing arrangement among Iraq's various ethno-sectarian groups. This in turn ended the sense of alienation among the Sunni community and allowed for the creation of a new political process. That, not more aggressive special forces or more powerful weaponry, were what crippled AQI and the other Salafist groups by turning Iraq's Sunni population against them. Mao Zedong once famously observed that the guerrilla is like a fish that swims in the sea of the people. The best way to kill the fish is to turn the sea against it. The Surge of 2007-2008 turned the sea of Iraq's Sunni tribal populace against AQI, and the result was their rapid collapse and suffocation.

By 2009, AQI and its Salafist brethren were effectively defeated. AQI had been reduced to a few small cells hiding in the caves of Jabal Hamrin mostly just trying to survive and unable to mount meaningful attacks. For most Iraqis, AQI had become little more than a bad memory,

easily put out of their minds as they contemplated what seemed to be Iraq's hard, but brighter future.

The Rebirth of AQI

Of course, even then Iraq was still a far way from stability, tranquility, prosperity or true democracy. In an absolute sense, it remained a mess. But in a relative sense, it had made enormous progress. It was finally headed in the right direction. And it had taken some remarkable steps forward, steps that had seemed impossible even three years before.

Looking back, Iraq may have reached its political, military and economic apex in 2009 and early 2010. In 2009 Iraq held provincial elections, and in 2010 national elections, that had resulted in stunning victories for those parties considered the most secular, the most vested in improving governance and services, the least tied to the militias and the least sectarian. They also handed equally stunning defeats to the parties most closely tied to the militias and the civil war. Indeed, the militias—Sunni and Shi'a—were withering, as were the vast majority of terrorist groups. Violence and deaths were way down. Secular, peaceful, nationalistic Iraqi leaders (including Sunnis like Osama al-Nujayfi and Rafe al-Issawi) were emerging and becoming dominant figures in government. There was a widespread feeling that everyone had to play by the democratic rules and no one could get caught subverting the will of the Iraqi people or even being too corrupt.

All of this progress was very real, but it was also very fragile. Like a bone that had been fractured but was now mending, it needed a cast to protect it, hold it, and allow the bones to knit together and become strong. That role was played by the United States, in particular by our military forces in Iraq. During that time frame, it became an increasingly symbolic role as the drawdown in troop strength meant that we did less and less of the actual provision of security for Iraqis, but it was an absolutely critical role.

As long as American forces remained, Iraqis did not fear the re-emergence of the security vacuum or the widespread use of violence by any group (including whichever group controlled the government, thereby giving it by far the greatest capacity to use violence against its rivals). It also meant that Iraq's political leaders had to abide by the democratic rules of the road laid down by the Americans. This enabled good Iraqis to act constructively, and prevented the bad ones from acting too destructively. Iraqis could assume that the future would be better, not worse, and make decisions based on their hopes, not their fears.

The problems began after Iraq's 2010 national elections. The elections themselves were wonderful—the best yet. Iraqis voted overwhelmingly for Ayad Allawi's mostly-Sunni Iraqiyya and Maliki's overwhelmingly Shi'a State of Law coalitions, the two groups seen as most secular, least sectarian and least tied to the militias. Of the two, Iraqiyya garnered slightly more votes. But Maliki refused to believe that he had lost, insisting that the vote had been rigged (perhaps by the Americans, his aides claimed) and refusing to allow Allawi to take the first turn at forming a government. Then he pressured Iraq's high court to rule that he could get the first shot at forming a government, which deadlocked the entire political system. And the United States (and the UN) went along and said nothing. Rather than insist that Allawi be given the first chance, as is customary in most democracies and as was clearly what was best for Iraqi democracy. The

U.S. did nothing. Ten months of political backstabbing followed, and in the end, the Iranians forced Muqtada as-Sadr to back Maliki, uniting the Shi'a behind him. At that point, the Kurds fell into place, believing that the prime minister had to be a Shi'a, and Iraqiyya's chances were finished.

It was also a defeat for Iraqi democracy. The message that it sent to Iraq's people and politicians alike was that the United States under the new Obama Administration was no longer going to enforce the rules of the democratic road. Washington was not going to insist that the will of the people win out. America was willing to step aside and allow Iraq's traditional political culture of pay-offs, log-rolling, threats and violence to re-emerge to determine who would rule the country. It undermined the reform of Iraqi politics and resurrected the specter of the failed state.

Having backed Maliki for prime minister simply to end the embarrassing political stalemate, the Administration compounded its mistake by lashing itself uncritically to his government. No matter what Maliki did—good, bad or indifferent—Washington backed him. Whether it was out of fear of being criticized for allowing him to remain in office in the first place, or sheer lack of interest and a desire to simply do what was easiest and required the least effort on the part of the U.S., the Administration applauded and overlooked everything he did. Maliki certainly did some good. He was not all bad. But he also did some very bad things—things that were highly subversive of Iraqi democracy. Among the worst was to thoroughly politicize the ISF, ousting huge numbers of the competent, apolitical officers that the United States had worked so hard to put in place and replacing them with people loyal to him, regardless of their credentials. Very quickly, the ISF went from an apolitical force that most Iraqis trusted, to a servant of the Maliki government deeply distrusted by those outside the prime minister's camp.

In 2011, with U.S. elections in sight, the Obama Administration decided to end its military commitment to Iraq. Technically, the Administration was willing to keep roughly 3,000 troops in the country, and technically it was the Iraqis who were unwilling to meet our legal needs to stay. But these are technicalities that do not bear up on closer examination. The 3,000 troops were a far cry from the 20-25,000 troops that the U.S. military felt were needed to keep the peace. Few Iraqi politicians were willing to fight for such a meaningless presence. Similarly, there were other ways that Washington might have handled the legal issues surrounding an American follow-on force, but the White House made clear it was uninterested.

The withdrawal of the last U.S. troops in December 2011 re-opened Iraq's security vacuum. Perhaps just by a crack, but it was enough. Over the next two years the security vacuum forced the doors open wider and wider. It wasn't so much that when the U.S. left there was nothing that could enforce law and order, it was the fear of all Iraqis—particularly their leaders—that the American departure would mean that violence was once again an option. And as it always does, that fear drove the parties to pre-empt one another to gain the advantage of surprise.

It was the prime minister who moved first. We don't know Maliki's motives, but it seems that while he was in Washington in December 2011, before the last American soldier departed, his aides claimed that various Sunni leaders were plotting to mount a coup against him as soon as the Americans were gone. So he deployed troops and tanks outside the homes of three key Sunni leaders and arrested hundreds of lower-ranking Iraqiyya officials. When Sunni Vice President

Tariq al-Hashimi fled, Maliki had an arrest warrant issued in absentia, “confessions” (quite possibly coerced by torture) by Hashimi’s bodyguards implicating him personally were broadcast on Iraqi TV and then Iraq’s captive courts tried, convicted and sentenced him to death in absentia.

A series of similarly frightening moves followed over the next 18 months. Although his opponents insist that Maliki had always intended to make himself the new despot of Iraq, the evidence suggests something different, although perhaps no less dangerous. Maliki was driven by genuine fear. Fear that all of his rivals were out to get him. He wasn’t necessarily wrong about that. For many of them, if they could have overthrown him or killed him, they probably would have. But because he was the prime minister, the head of the government itself, Maliki’s intentions were meaningless. All that mattered were his actions, and these were deeply subversive of Iraqi democracy, undermined all of the factors that had brought about Iraq’s resurrection in 2007-2009 and revived the four problems that had produced the descent into civil war, and enflamed the Kurdish issue to boot.

As a Shi’a Islamist, Maliki was always most suspicious of the Sunnis. Then, when Iraqiyya bested him in the 2010 elections, it seems to have convinced him that he had been right all along and the Sunnis—all of whom seem to be crypto-Ba’thists in his mind—were his greatest threat. So it was against the Sunnis that he came down hardest. Between his attacks and their counterattacks, many Sunni leaders were arrested or driven from politics. They lost their positions and their patronage networks. Many promises to the Sunni community were never honored. And the Iraqi military ceased to be apolitical guardians of the people, and became instead loyal executors of the prime minister’s particular agenda.

To the Sunnis, Maliki was tearing up all of the promises that they had won from the Americans and from him. They felt they were again being deprived of their fair share of political power and economic resources. They felt that once again, Shi’i chauvinists were in charge of the government and were using its apparatus, particularly the security services, to wage a sectarian war against them. They increasingly came to believe that they had no peaceful, political recourse to address their grievances, let alone secure their legitimate aspirations. Once again, they felt that they had no choice but to fight. And so, various Sunnis began to discretely reach out to their old terrorist friends again. By 2012, al-Qa’ida in Iraq was back from the dead, conducting coordinated nation-wide bombings, contesting control of parts of Diyala province, killing scores or even hundreds at a time.

The Impact of the Syrian Civil War

To hear it from many Iraqi officials, the increase in terrorist attacks across Iraq over the past two years has been entirely the product of the Syrian civil war. The Syrian civil war has unquestionably contributed to the problems of Iraq, but this claim is not just overstated, it is potentially dangerous. Focusing on spillover from the Syrian civil war is convenient for the Iraqi government to shift blame away from its own mistakes. Stemming spillover from Syria into Iraq—difficult in its own right—will not get at the real causes of the problem. It could raise expectations artificially, and when they inevitably crash because the violence does not abate, this could exacerbate popular unhappiness with the government. Alternatively, it could cause the

Iraqi government to take precipitous action to deal with spillover from Syria (like intervening in the Syrian civil war) that could instead undermine Iraq's own fragile stability.

The impact of spillover from the Syrian civil war has affected Iraq in several different ways. It has meant a flow of Salafi fighters, weapons, money and other supplies into the Sunni tribal lands of Iraq from Saudi Arabia. The Saudis and other Gulf Arab states have been using Iraq as a conduit to help the opposition in Syria, which is predominantly Sunni. From the Saudi perspective, this makes sense in two ways. In an immediate sense, the Sunni tribes of this area span the borders from northern Saudi Arabia to western Iraq to eastern Syria. Thus, these tribes provide an excellent delivery network for supplies from Saudi Arabia into Syria. However, at a broader level, the Gulf Arabs recognize that the Iraqi tribesmen are keeping some portion of the men and materiel to help them in their own fight against Baghdad. The suppliers generally see this as a bonus. As one well-connected Saudi explained it, "We see the Syrian civil war and the (coming) Iraqi civil war as the same and we will treat them as the same." From Riyadh's perspective, there are Iranian-backed Shi'i governments in both Syria and Iraq that are oppressing their Sunni populations—Sunni populations that Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab states feel increasingly determined to support.

The wider impact of the Syrian civil war has also exacerbated the Sunni-Shi'a rift in Iraq by conjuring the possibility that in a new Iraqi civil war, the Sunnis could expect greater help from the Sunni Arab states than they did the first time around. As I noted earlier, one reason that the Sunni tribal leadership partnered with the U.S. military to launch the Awakening was their realization that the Shi'a were winning the Iraqi civil war, driving the Sunnis from Baghdad and surrounding towns, and threatening to ethnically cleanse the Sunni community from the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys. They understood that they needed American help to prevent such a catastrophic defeat. Today, there are no Americans to turn to if a new civil war goes as badly as the first, so the Sunnis have had to go looking for new allies.

The mobilization of the Sunni Arab world brought about by the Syrian civil war has seemed to at least some Iraqi Sunni leaders to have provided an answer to that dilemma. Thus, although Iraq's Sunnis no longer have the Americans to protect them, many now believe that they have the entire Sunni world to support them. In their minds, their struggle against Maliki has gone from one in which they were the underdogs in a fight against a much larger Iraqi Shi'a community, to one in which they are part of a vast Sunni army mobilizing to crush the puny Shi'a apostasy.

What is to be Done?

What this history should make clear is that the problems of Iraq produced and enabled the rise of al-Qaeda in Iraq. AQI did not cause the problems of Iraq (although it unquestionably did exacerbate them).

When the Sunni community has felt threatened by the Shi'a-dominated government—in 2004-2006 and again since 2011—AQI and other Salafist groups have found receptive audiences among the Sunni tribes. Initially, they were embraced. Today they seem more tolerated. Both work for AQI. Many Sunnis remember the bad old days when AQI and the Salafists ruled over swathes of western Iraq. But they fear the Shi'a-dominated government intends to oppress or

even slaughter them, and so they provide both passive and active support to the Salafist groups. Passive support by allowing the terrorists to operate without alerting the authorities. Active support because a slowly increasing number of Iraqis are again joining AQI, JRTN and other groups and/or providing them with money, explosives and weaponry. Some do so to fight back against what they see as their Shi'a oppressors. Others because they hope that doing so will force the Shi'a leaders to compromise and return to the power-sharing arrangement worked out by the Americans during the Surge.

Thus, addressing the rise of al-Qaeda, halting and reversing it, will mean addressing Iraq's underlying political problems and particularly the renewed alienation of Iraq's Sunni tribes. Until that is accomplished, anything else will be merely treating the symptoms, not the underlying disease. And no matter how hard we or the Iraqi government may battle the symptoms, if they do not cure the underlying disease, the symptoms will recur, quite possibly in ever more virulent form.

However, the United States government is not the government of Iraq. It is not even guiding the government of Iraq. Thus, an important question for this Committee is what the United States might be able to do about this situation? How can the United States help guard its interests in the stability of Iraq?

And that is not easy to answer. Frederick the Great once said that diplomacy without arms is like music without instruments. In today's world, we might add things like trade, economic aid, technical assistance and other aspects of soft power to the Soldier-King's 18th Century notion of diplomatic instruments. Yet even by that measure, the United States has dramatically fewer assets to call upon to advance its Iraq policy than it had in years past. The end of the American military presence, the dramatic reduction in American aid to Iraq, and the increasing influence of Iran in Iraq all mean that the United States will find it far more difficult to guide Iraq's course. Consequently, one of the most important tasks for the United States if we are to help Iraq address both the symptoms and the problems is to forge new instruments that will provide us with new leverage to replace what we have lost.

Creating New Sources of American Influence

The key to increasing American influence in Iraq moving forward is conditionality. Virtually all American assistance to Iraq should be conditioned on Iraqis doing the things that the United States needs them to do, which in every case is likely to be something that is in the long-term interests of the Iraqi people and the Iraqi nation, albeit not necessarily in the short-term interests of various Iraqi politicians. Conditioning assistance means linking specific aspects of American activities to specific, related aspects of Iraqi behavior. It also means tying wider aspects of American cooperation with Iraq to the general course of the Iraqi political system. Ultimately, the United States must condition the continuation of the U.S.-Iraqi relationship on the willingness of the Iraqi political leadership to guide their country in the direction of greater stability, inclusivity and effective governance.

Operationalizing the Strategic Framework Agreement. Ultimately, the greatest source of American influence in Iraq is the provision of additional assistance in a vast range of different areas—from military support and weapons sales, to capacity building, education, almost every

aspect of economic reform, and a slew of major diplomatic matters. The foundation for this future cooperation is a little-known but critically important document known as the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA), which the United States and Iraq signed in late 2008. It is important not to make too much of the SFA. It is nothing but a framework; an empty shell for the United States and Iraq to flesh out as they see fit over the years—but which neither side has filled out as intended. There is little more than general exhortations regarding the broad types of aid that could be provided, without any specification of time, dates, quantities, or other details.

Having failed to do so for so long, it is now vitally important that the United States work with Iraq to transform the SFA from a theoretical framework into a functioning program. A key challenge will be reconciling U.S. and Iraqi expectations for the SFA and finding creative ways to use it to pursue these critical aims in an era of sharply declining resources. The United States will have to think creatively about how to provide valuable assistance without the need for large-scale American financing. Moreover, as Iraq's oil revenues increase over time, Iraq should be able to pay for more of its reconstruction needs. Therefore, the real value added from the American side will be insight and advice on how best to employ those resources rather than adding in more resources—something that neither the administration nor Congress has any interest in providing.

Consequently, the United States should focus the assistance it provides to Iraq under the rubric of the SFA primarily on capacity building by providing technical advice, consulting services, and technology and knowledge transfers to key areas of the Iraqi economy. The United States must now consider both how it can be most effective in this role and how it can maintain the leverage to encourage Iraqis to build a transparent and accountable government when America is no longer putting up large amounts of its own money for projects.

There are, fortunately, a number of areas of the Iraqi economy both inside and outside the SFA where the United States can deliver tangible added value at a relatively low financial cost. These include:

- International engagement and mediation on issues such as Iraq's Chapter VII UN obligations, including annual reparations to Kuwait and disputes over the Iraq-Kuwait maritime boundary (which have the potential to hamper Iraq's primary oil export route through the Persian Gulf), dialogue with Iraq's northern neighbors, especially Turkey, on regional water-sharing agreements, and the protection of Iraq's oil revenues from legal claims relating to actions of the former regime, something that if left unaddressed could hamper long-term investment in the oil and gas sector;
- Formation of a joint economic commission under the SFA, which, when requested by Iraqis, could serve as a central oversight body to coordinate, monitor, and provide technical expertise for reconstruction and capital investment projects initiated with Iraqi funds;
- Technical advice, knowledge sharing, and technology transfer to vital areas of the Iraqi economy and society such as improved domestic water efficiency and management and agricultural development and productivity;

- Legislative actions to create a business environment that encourages Western business investments.

Conducting Counterterrorism Operations

Assistance with Iraqi counterterrorism operations falls into a similar category. The Iraqis have made clear that they want American assistance, and that creates leverage. It is certainly true that Iraq could benefit from American assistance in its CT efforts, especially as the threat from AQI and other Salafist groups expands. Thus, there is a legitimate reason to provide such assistance. However, we should never lose sight of the critical point that counterterrorism operations is a poor means of countering terrorism, and that eradicating the resurgent terrorism problem will require the same kinds of efforts to address Iraq's fundamental political, economic and social problems as were made in 2007-2009. CT assistance can help, but it cannot solve the problem of terrorism.

In addition, it may be useful for the United States to continue to assist Iraq's own CT efforts both as a means of keeping AQI and other Salafist terrorist groups in check and as a way of maintaining some oversight of how the Iraqi government employs its elite counterterror formations. Iraq's highly-trained CT units have often been used to round up rivals (and brand them as terrorists). Thus, greater American oversight of their operations could only be beneficial.

American Arms Sales to Iraq. It is critical that the United States be willing to provide Iraq with major arms purchases. Ideally, the United States should furnish every aspect of Iraqi military equipment, from mess kits to main battle tanks and everything in between. As long as Iraq desires them (which it currently does) and can afford them (which it increasingly can), such arms sales, when provided by the United States, could be inherently stabilizing if managed effectively and in tandem with political reform in Baghdad; it could also help stabilize the region by preventing the emergence of an aggressive Iraq that would pose a threat to its neighbors. In addition, arms sales represent yet another source of influence with the Iraqi leadership since they are items Baghdad greatly desires. Consequently, these sales should be considered from a strategic perspective, not a commercial one and from that perspective, they are not just desirable but critical. Indeed, one of the most important lessons of the Arab Spring and Mubarak's fall has been the tremendous utility American arms sales can have in the Middle East.

As with all American interactions toward Iraq in future, however, Washington's critical consideration when weighing arms sales to Iraq must be their impact on Iraq's domestic politics. Again, such sales can be extremely helpful in this area, as I discuss below. However, they can also be destabilizing if mishandled. Moreover, they too represent a critical element of American leverage with Iraq. In particular, American arms sales to Iraq should be conditioned on continuing improvement (or at least no significant deterioration) in Iraq's civil-military relations. The Iraqi military should understand that Washington's willingness to provide the arms they so desperately want will be possible only to the extent that the ISF stays in its lane and stays out of politics. So too should the government understand that American arms sales—among other things—will be jeopardized by efforts to politicize the ISF. Finally, because the KRG is terrified that the central government will imagine it has a military “solution” to their dispute once the ISF is armed with American tanks and fighter-bombers, Washington must lay down clear red lines to

both sides regarding what is permissible. Furthermore, the United States should extract guarantees from the government that it will not invade the Kurdistan region, except perhaps in the highly unlikely event that the Kurds use their own forces to attack other parts of Iraq.

Bolstering the Sources of Restraint

It is also important to recognize that, as bad as things have gotten, all is not lost in Iraq. Despite the resurgence in violence—and in the perpetrators of violence like AQI—and the reemergence of the many factors that pulled Iraq into the vortex of civil war in 2005-2006, Iraq has not yet returned to a state of civil war. Indeed, given how bad things have gotten, what is striking is that Iraq is not worse off than it already is. Three unexpected, interrelated factors have emerged to slow Iraq's reemergent violence in 2013.

The Iranians. According to a range of Iraqi sources, Iran believes that it has its hands full with Syria and does not want to open up another front in the grand Sunni-Shi'a civil war that many Sunni extremists are now stoking. The Iranians apparently recognize that they are not benefitting from fears of a wider sectarian conflict and are trying to prevent one from emerging—which is precisely what would happen if civil war resumed in Iraq. Moreover, Tehran no doubt recognizes that a civil war on its doorstep would be particularly dangerous because the spillover could easily affect Iran's own fractious minorities and fragile internal politics.

Other Iraqis report that Tehran sees a new civil war in Iraq as being potentially deleterious to its currently enviable position within Iraq. Unless the Shi'a could win a quick, overwhelming victory in a new civil war, the status quo is preferable to any other outcome for them. In any other scenario, Iraq would be torn by fighting and the Shi'a dominated government would likely lose control of parts of Iraq. Much better, from Tehran's perspective, to have the Shi'a in nominal control over the entire country—in part to enable Iran to move supplies across it to their allies in Syria.

The Kurds. The Kurds have never been more than half-hearted citizens of the modern Iraqi republic, having attempted to distance themselves from—or cut ties completely with—Baghdad on a half-dozen occasions since the fall of the Ottoman empire. This desire has sharpened markedly among the leaders of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) since the unfulfilled Erbil agreement of 2013, which defined a road-map for all parties in return for agreeing that Nuri al-Maliki would remain prime minister. By early 2013, KRG President Mas'ud Barzani, seemed committed to a precipitate move toward secession so furious had he become with Maliki, and so enchanted by new economic and political opportunities created with Turkey as a result of both Erdogan's Kurdish policy and the Syrian civil war. Kurdish officials openly discussed a declaration of independence that year or the next.

Thus, it was a dramatic turnabout when in the spring of 2013, as the violence between Sunni and Shi'a intensified in Arab Iraq, that Barzani suddenly came down to Baghdad to play peacemaker. Kurdish sources suggested a variety of reasons for Barzani's change of heart. First, the Turkish-PKK ceasefire included provisions for PKK fighters to redeploy from Turkey to the KRG. Making this work is critical to Barzani both to bolster his status as the leading figure among all Kurds, and to cement his relationship with Erdogan and the Turks, which in turn is critical for

Kurdistan's future hopes of autonomy and eventual independence. Barzani needed the rest of Iraq to remain quiet while he took in the PKK to placate the Turks.

However, Barzani and his KDP have also been deeply concerned about their position within Kurdish internal politics. Jalal Talabani, the president of Iraq and head of the rival PUK suffered a stroke in late 2012 from which he has not recovered. Most Kurds expect he never will. But the question of who will succeed him as head of the PUK has been an open question with a variety of candidates vying behind the scenes. Here as well, Barzani and his trusted lieutenants concluded that they needed peace in the rest of Iraq to ensure that the PUK comes out in the right place—with a leader Barzani can work with, if not dominate.

Meanwhile, Barzani's term as president of the KRG was running out. He called elections for September 2013 and then fought a bruising battle with the opposition to have the KRG constitution altered to allow him to serve as president for an additional two years. The September KRG elections returned the KDP as the largest party with 38 seats, but Gorran, the main Kurdish opposition party, claimed 24 seats, besting the PUK's paltry 18. These results raise the possibility that Gorran might be able to take over the PUK's territory, which would then threaten the KDP's dominance within the KRG. Again, Barzani felt that he did not need a fight with Baghdad during this delicate period of intense internal machinations.

Fear of Losing. Finally, as Iraq seemed to be lurching back to civil war in the spring and summer of 2013, important figures among both Sunnis and Shi'a called into question the desirability of pursuing belligerent courses of action for a simple reason: they might lose.

As I noted earlier, some Sunni tribal leaders see the mobilization of the Sunni world against the Shi'a threat as being a critical change since 2006, one that could bring them victory in a new Iraqi civil war. Others are not so sure. When confronted with promises of aid from the Gulf Arabs, some Sunni leaders have apparently demanded, "how many battalions will the Bahrainis send?" A battle is going on among the Sunni leaders over whether to roll the dice of war and risk the fate of their community on the evanescent promise of a Sunni Arab world that has done little concrete to help in Iraq for decades.

As for the Shi'a, they know that they were on the brink of victory in 2006, but they too fear the mobilization of the Sunni world and what this could mean in a new Iraqi civil war. Moreover, Iraqi Army formations have performed poorly in various confrontations with the Kurds and Sunnis over the past year. Kurdish Peshmerga forces have repeatedly out-maneuvered Iraqi formations in a series of shadow battles. Several Iraqi Army brigades have effectively broken down into their separate ethno-sectarian components and rendered combat ineffective. Thus, Maliki seems equally unsure that he would win this time.

Finally, Maliki also faces new divisions within the Shi'a camp that threaten to undermine his ability to use force to bring either the Kurds or Sunnis to heel. In particular, the Sadrists have again split from his coalition. There has never been any love lost between the Prime Minister and Muqtada, but in the past the Iranians had put tremendous pressure on the Sadrists to support Maliki. During the summer of 2012, Sadr defied Iranian wishes and broke with Maliki

altogether, at least for now. However, Tehran has managed to turn this to its advantage by helping to forge a new ISCI-Sadrism coalition to counterbalance Maliki.

In truth, the Iranians have never liked Maliki. They remember his role in helping the Americans crush their militia allies in 2007-2008 and believe (probably correctly) that Maliki hates them and would like to build a strong Iraq able to stand up to Iran. Tehran has repeatedly looked for a more pliable alternative to Maliki but have yet to find one, and so must grudgingly continue to rely on him. Building up an alternative Shi'a coalition to Maliki's State of Law serves Tehran's interests by keeping Maliki weak and keeping all of the Shi'a dependent on Iran as the fulcrum of Iraqi Shi'a politics. The result is that Maliki has been left with a divided power base, and many Shi'a rivals willing to side with the Sunnis and Kurds to oppose him. That too has forced him to throttle back his confrontational approach to Iraq's other communities.

The Impending National Elections

It is against this backdrop that Iraq will hold national elections in 2014 to choose a new parliament and a new prime minister. These elections offer an opportunity for the United States and other like-minded countries to help Iraq deal with their internal political problems and so deal with the underlying sources giving rise to the new wave of terrorism gripping Iraq. Unfortunately, they also hold the potential to do the opposite: dramatically worsen Iraq's political problems, which could only greatly exacerbate the violence and possibly push the country back into civil war.

His protests to the contrary notwithstanding, it is widely expected that Prime Minister Maliki will run for parliament and seek to remain prime minister. (He has already had Iraq's highest court strike down a newly-passed law that set a two-term limit on the prime minister and president. His opposition fears that if Maliki secures a third term, he will never step down. In fact, many worry that if he believes that he will lose, Maliki will rig the election or declare martial law and suspend it altogether. So far, the prime minister has given no indication that he would do so, but many of his closest advisors insisted that the 2010 elections had been rigged against him (by the United States—a ludicrous claim given that the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad staunchly supported Maliki). Certainly no one can rule out the possibility that if the Prime Minister's coterie believed that the vote were being rigged against him, they might try to fight fire with fire.

On the other side, Iraq's opposition also has a great deal riding on the election. For them, it is a crucial test. In their eyes, it will establish whether there truly is a way to handle Maliki through a peaceful, political process and whether politics more generally are a viable path to achieve the political, economic and security needs of their communities. For the moderates, it is critical that the elections demonstrate that such an alternative is possible. For the extremists, if Maliki wins—legally or illegally—they will use it to claim that the peaceful, political course is a dead end and violence the only way to defend themselves against a “dictatorial” prime minister.

Consequently, the national elections could be the last push needed to send Iraq over the cliff of renewed civil war. These fears loom especially large because, historically, Iraqi elections have more often hurt its democratic development than helped. In 2004 and again in 2005, in the midst of the security vacuum, misbegotten elections demanded by the United States empowered the

worst elements in Iraqi society, enflamed the sectarian fears, and hastened the country's descent into all-out civil war. In 2010, national elections should have been a major step forward, as the Iraqi people voted overwhelmingly for the parties considered most secular and least tied to the militias. The problem came afterwards. Once the United States failed to enforce the rules of the democratic process, it became a free-for-all, with Iraqi political leaders falling back on their worst habits and producing a government in a way that compromised democracy and set-up the problems to come.

Still there is other evidence worth considering. Iraq's provincial elections in 2009 rewarded the political parties that stood for secularism, democracy, the rule of law, and an end to conflict. But they were held in the warm afterglow of the Surge and at time when large numbers of American troops remained in Iraq. Thus, many fear that they merely represent the exception proving the rule.

Finally, in April 2013, Iraq held provincial elections again and they turned out very well. There was little to no vote tampering. No one claimed that the vote was rigged or voting suppressed. The government did not shut down the elections, and even held them (albeit three months later) in the Sunni-dominated provinces where unrest has been greatest. Moreover, the results were striking: The Prime Minister's coalition lost big and the rival Shi'a parties of ISCI and the Sadrist (both hewing to a more moderate line than in the past) did surprisingly well. Thus, this year's provincial elections suggested that Iraq could hold elections without American forces present and get both a good process and a good result that all parties would honor without resorting to violence. That is definitely a hopeful sign. We just do not know if it is enough.

That uncertainty is why it is so important for the United States to rebuild its influence in Iraq and employ it to help the Iraqis address their internal problems—political especially, but eventually economic and social as well. There is reason for optimism. We did it before, albeit with a vast toolkit of resources to draw upon, something we lack this time around. There are also forces in Iraq trying to push the country in the right direction, but they are not strong enough. There is some time, but it is impossible to know how much. Now is not the time to throw up our hands and say that it is too hard. As former Ambassador Ryan Crocker used to say, everything about Iraq is very hard, and it is very hard all the time. But try we must because the rising terrorist violence in Iraq and the specter of renewed civil war threatens America's interests just as it threatens Iraq's.