



*Prepared Testimony of*

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Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify on this important topic.

The United States has enduring national security requirements in Iraq. The hard-fought gains of the United States, its global coalition, and the Iraqi people to expel the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) from its strongholds, including Mosul, are necessary but insufficient to ensure long-term American interests in Iraq. The endurance of those gains is threatened, moreover, by factional fighting and major governance failures throughout Iraq that have led both to widespread popular protests and to the mobilization of armed groups.<sup>1</sup>

Core American objectives in Iraq are as follows:

- Deny Iraq as a safe haven to al Qaeda, ISIS, and potential successors by:
  - Destroying their military organizations and preventing them from reconstituting;
  - Diminishing the drivers of instability in which these groups rise and flourish;
  - And ultimately ending the communal civil wars in Iraq and Syria on terms that set conditions to achieve both of the goals above.
- Integrate Iraq into the states system in the Middle East in ways benefiting U.S. interests and allies by:
  - Encouraging U.S. allies to re-establish diplomatic, economic, and other normal state-to-state relations with its Arab neighbors;
  - Maintaining Iraq as a U.S. ally against terrorist groups and state sponsors of terror, including Iran;
  - Ensuring Russia does not become a primary military partner for Iraq;
  - And ultimately extricating Iraq from the global and regional conflict in Syria.
- Prevent Iran from using Iraq as a base for hegemonic expansion in the Middle East by:
  - Ensuring Iraq retains sovereign institutions of government;
  - Extricating Iraq from global and regional conflicts;<sup>2</sup>
  - And denying Iran the ability to recruit, pay, retain, and replenish military proxies for use in Iraq and elsewhere;
- Maintain the free flow of goods, resources, and services that benefit a global economy, while preventing sanctioned countries, persons, and entities from profiting illegally.

Iraq stands at a crossroads. It held a parliamentary election in May 2018. As of September 24, 2018, it has not yet formed a government. The composition and character of the next government will determine whether the U.S. can achieve its goals through determined U.S. diplomatic engagement with Iraq backed by positive and, if needed, coercive instruments of policy.



Iranian political proxies are competing with Iraqi figures acceptable to the U.S. for control of the Iraqi government. Victory for the Iranian proxies would likely lead to the expulsion of the U.S. from Iraq and *de facto* Iranian control over Iraqi foreign policy at least, if not domestic policy.

Iraqi political parties are prohibited by law from maintaining armed militias, but many nevertheless do. The most militarily-capable of those militias belong to the Iranian proxies. They have been actively shaping the political environment to influence the government formation process. They have also recently fired rockets toward the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad for the first time since 2014. American interests absolutely require that the future Iraqi government not include the *de facto* leaders of these militias.

The Iraqi government has nominally incorporated some of these militias directly into the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), unfortunately. They have acquired ISF unit designations hoping to obfuscate the fact that they remain distinct militia units. They nevertheless rebuffed the prime minister's attempts to declare himself their commander-in-chief earlier in September 2018. Their true allegiance is to their Iranian masters.<sup>3</sup>

These forces will continue to corrode the ISF regardless of who becomes the next prime minister if they are permitted to remain effectively outside of the Iraqi prime minister's control—or if the next prime minister is himself an Iranian proxy. This situation is unacceptable to the U.S. not simply because it will lead to attacks on American personnel and the likely expulsion of American forces, but also because it will replicate the erosion of ISF capability that allowed ISIS to seize large areas of Iraq in 2014.

The Trump Administration has recently begun acting to resist the efforts of Iranian political proxies to capture the Iraqi state. It has begun, for the first time, to use the threat of the imposition of American sanctions aimed at Iran against Tehran's agents in Iraq and those who do business with them. Iraq has had to send a delegation to Washington to request special exemptions from these sanctions, again for the first time, since the U.S. had waived them without demanding any *quid pro quo* from Iraq in the past.

Asaib Ahl al Haq (AAH) unquestionably deserves to be sanctioned for its long history of killing Americans, including most notably the kidnapping and murder of five Americans from Karbala in 2007—a crime in which Qais al Khazali, AAH's leader, was personally complicit. Harakat Hizbullah al Nujaba, a newer group, is establishing itself as a regional terror network in support of Iranian objectives and certainly also, therefore, deserves to be sanctioned.



Now is not the moment, however, for Congress to mandate the imposition of sanctions on these or any other specific groups or individuals in Iraq. The threat of sanctions—either broad or highly-targeted—is the most powerful non-military weapon American diplomats in the region currently have. The behavior of Iraqis as our diplomats have threatened to use that weapon demonstrates its significance. Our diplomats have shown the determination and skill to use this tool in the extremely delicate effort to keep Iranian agents from gaining control of the Iraqi government. They must retain full power to choose exactly when, where, and how to deploy this tool in a series of negotiations that Congress cannot possibly follow or react to in real time.

I do not in principle oppose Congressionally-mandated sanctions against Iranian proxies—or any other enemies of the United States in Iraq or elsewhere. Congress may well quite appropriately revisit the question of sanctioning these or other groups in Iraq once the new Iraqi government has formed and is seated—which may be soon. It is useful, moreover, to have legislation of this type under active consideration in Congress at this time to lend credibility and seriousness to American threats to sanction Iraqi entities. But the time to act on this legislation is after a new government forms and not before.

American national security in Iraq, the region, and beyond absolutely requires rolling back, weakening, and ultimately eliminating armed Iranian proxies beyond the Islamic Republic's borders. The U.S. should use all instruments of national power, including sanctions such as those being considered in this body, other diplomatic and economic pressures and incentives, the strengthening of Iraqi government and security institutions, the long-term deployment of limited American military forces to assist an independent and acceptable Iraqi state, and other means as required. But all such efforts must be coordinated by a region-wide strategy to contain and roll-back Iranian aggression and subversion of its neighbors. The administration must articulate as part of its counter-Iranian efforts a specific long-term approach to removing Iranian-controlled fighting forces from within the ISF and Iraq generally.

Iraq is not yet lost. Iranian influence flowed in to fill the vacuum left by the departure of U.S. forces in 2011 and American hesitancy following ISIS's rise in 2014. Recent administration efforts are clawing back some of the ground that the U.S. has lost to Tehran. Efforts to roll back militias and ensure a sovereign and independent Iraqi government deserve support.

I thank the committee for the opportunity speak before you today, and look forward to your questions.



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<sup>1</sup> Kimberly Kagan and Frederick W. Kagan, “The U.S. Can Defuse Iraq’s Crisis,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 12, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-u-s-can-defuse-iraqs-crisis-1536792976>.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick W. Kagan, Kimberly Kagan, Jennifer Cafarella, Harleen Ghambir, Christopher Kozak, Hugo Spaulding, and Katherine Zimmerman, “U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and al Qaeda, Report Two: Competing Visions for Syria and Iraq: The Myth of an Anti-ISIS Grand Coalition,” Institute for the Study of War and the American Enterprise Institute’s Critical Threats Project, January 2016,

<http://www.understandingwar.org/report/competing-visions-syria-and-iraq-myth-anti-isis-grand-coalition>.

<sup>3</sup> Jessa Rose Dury-Agri, Omer Kassim, and Patrick Martin, “Iraqi Security Forces and Popular Mobilization Forces: Orders of Battle,” Institute for the Study of War, December 2017,

<http://www.understandingwar.org/report/iraqi-security-forces-and-popular-mobilization-forces-orders-battle-0>.