

Testimony of Ryan C. Crocker, Diplomat-in-Residence at Princeton University and former U.S. Ambassador, before the Homeland Security Committee on May 23, 2018: "ISIS-Post Caliphate: Threat Implications for America and the West"

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Thompson, Members of the Committee, it is a privilege to be here today to discuss this critically important topic. We are close to the moment when the Islamic State will no longer hold ground in Iraq or Syria. When one considers that less than four years ago, an ascendant Islamic State had surged through western Iraq, taking its second largest city Mosul in a matter of hours and had reached the gates of Baghdad, this is a stunning development. It demonstrates the extraordinary capabilities of our military forces, exercised in an extraordinarily complicated environment. It also shows the importance of U.S. leadership. We were not in this fight alone. 75 other nations have joined us, making this a truly global coalition. Islamic State threatened the world; the world responded by coming together to eliminate their so-called caliphate.

ISIS AND THE FAILURE OF GOVERNANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

But is this fight really over? Does Islamic State teeter on the brink of extinction? Both the Trump and Obama Administrations have largely treated Islamic State as a military problem with a military solution. That is a dangerous over simplification. Islamic State itself is not the problem. It is the symptom of a much more complex, largely political problem: a chronic failure of governance.

We are in a cycle of 100 year anniversaries that are relevant to our conversation here. WW I ended a century ago. The question of the political future of the lands of the Middle East had to be answered by the victorious Allies. The area had been a part of the Ottoman Empire for centuries. The future of this region was on the agenda for the Versailles peace talks, which concluded with the treaty of Versailles in 1919. But this was a formality. Those decisions had already been made by the British and the French, embodied in the Sykes-Picot accord of 1916 which was still secret when the Versailles talks began. Under its terms, these two countries would divide the region between them. The lines on the map that define the Middle East today were largely drawn by foreigners. As the British and French took over the mandates assigned to them, one element that was not on their minds was good governance, the building of stable institutions, respect for the rule of law, and preparations for peoples of the area to govern themselves. To project the image of independent states, the mandatory powers installed monarchies in a number of areas – Egypt, Iraq, Transjordan and by the Italians in Libya. These monarchies had no connections to the peoples over which they allegedly ruled, and certainly no interest in establishing the institutions and traditions of good governance.

Lacking legitimacy and perceived as puppets of the imperialists, these monarchies were overthrown, replaced largely by military rulers. Other "isms" were developed to replace imperialism and monarchism. In Egypt, it was Arab nationalism personified by Gamal abd-al

Nasser. In Iraq, undiluted authoritarianism following the 1958 coup by Abdal Karim Qassim. Later, a Libyan military officer named Qadhafi overthrew King Idris. Other isms followed – Arab socialism (Baathism) in Iraq and Syria. Communism in South Yemen. Republicanism in Tunisia and Egypt post Nasser. They all had one element in common: they failed to provide good governance for their people, and they all failed. This was the essence of the Arab Spring – a popular demand for better governance. But that takes time and respect for the rule of law as well as the development of institutions that provide for the common good. These are in exceedingly short supply throughout the region. In Egypt, for example, it was no surprise that the Muslim Brotherhood won the first election since it was the only political party independent of the Mubarak regime. But it was also no surprise it failed completely to provide good governance. It had no experience and found no experience of institutionalized democracy.

Now we have yet another ism, Islamism. It too has failed. Interestingly, a recently translated trove of documents suggests that Islamic State understood the problem and was making an effort to develop the skills of governance.

So what happens next? It is impossible to predict with accuracy. However, it is a safe bet that without significant progress toward better governance in the region, another ism will arise. Perhaps it will be ISIS 2.0, just as ISIS was al-Qaida 2.0. Perhaps it will be of a completely different nature. Whatever it is, it will not be good. To borrow from the great Irish poet W.B. Yeats, “What rough beast, its hour come around at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?”

And what does it mean for our interests in the region, especially in Iraq and Syria after the military defeat of the Islamic State? As we consider these questions, we need to look at Iraq and Syria as related but distinct challenges. I will start with Iraq.

IRAQ

As you know so well, Mr. Chairman, we have been here before. I was Ambassador to Iraq during the surge, 2007-2009. As you know, the surge was built on the Awakening movement in the Sunni province of Anbar, when Iraqi tribal leaders who had stood with Islamic State’s predecessor, al-Qaida in Iraq, turned against them with our encouragement and support. By any measure, the surge was a success. Shortly before my departure from Iraq in February 2009, I visited Ramadi, the once and future stronghold of al-Qaida and its successor, the Islamic State. The security situation was so good that Awakening leader Ahmad Abu Risha and I spent an hour walking through the Ramadi market. This owed a great deal to the courage and sacrifice of our troopers, so brilliantly led by General Petraeus and later by General Odierno. But even at the height of the surge, there remained small pockets of al-Qaida in Mosul and the Euphrates river valley. Why? Because elements of the Sunni Arab population in those areas feared the Shia-led government in Baghdad at least as much as they feared al-Qaida. Those elements, including future ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, went to ground and awaited better days.

Those days came with the beginning of a civil war in Syria in March 2011 and the military and political withdrawal of the U.S. from Iraq, also in 2011. In our absence, Prime Minister Maliki and other Iraqi leaders reverted to a default position of zero sum thinking. When we were there in force, politically as well as militarily, we could help broker deals among Iraqis that they could not reach by themselves. For many leaders, compromise was a threat. In their world, compromise meant a concession, concessions equaled defeat and defeat meant death. Often in this country, we become impatient with leaders in countries like Iraq who do not speedily commit to the institutions of democracy. We consider that they lack political will and do not deserve our support.

The reality is more complicated. In the case of Maliki, his greatest fear was of a military coup that would return the Baathists to power. Given Iraq's history, this was not completely unreasonable. Iraq's first military coup came in 1958, and was followed by a series of others until the Baath cemented its power a decade later. When we were there in force, we constituted a security guarantee to Maliki that allowed him to make senior military appointments on the basis of ability. As Dave Petraeus can tell you, it was not easy but we could do it. After we left, Maliki's fears took over and commanders were not appointed on the basis of proven combat experience or leadership qualities. They were chosen on the basis of one quality only – loyalty. These were the commanders who fled the field as ISIL advanced.

The post-ISIL phase in Iraq is significantly different and more encouraging than that which prevailed before ISIL swept through the country. Iraqi security forces, with new commanders, performed well through a long, hard ground campaign. They took significant casualties but morale and commitment remained significantly high. The United States has reinvested in Iraq. Our advisors, air power and enablers had a meaningful impact on the campaign, and the Iraqis know it. We have some leverage, and the opportunity to use it.

Why is this important from a homeland security perspective? Simply put, we are more secure if we are dealing with potential threats well before they reach our borders. Ultimately, it is good governance in the region that will prevent the re-emergence of terrorist organizations that target Americans, whether at home or abroad. In the interim, doing what we can to insure that the Iraqi government does not take actions that will further alienate its Sunni Arab population and give space to those who wish us harm is an imperative. If the Iraqis can get the politics right with our help, the military/terrorist threat ISIS has posed can be contained. If the politics are not right, we will be facing new security challenges in the region and at home.

Here, I would like to say a word about terrorism. Over a long career in the Middle East, I have seen a lot of it. It's part of life in the Foreign Service. I was an ambassador six times. In three of those countries, a predecessor as the American ambassador was assassinated. One of those was Frank Meloy in Lebanon. He and another Embassy officer were kidnapped and then killed in Beirut. The organization that murdered them was the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Was that an Islamic terrorist organization? No – its communist ideology was

the antithesis of any religion, including Islam. But perhaps its leader harbored secret Islamic tendencies? Its leader was George Habash, a Palestinian Christian.

I make this point as a reminder that terror is a tactic, not an ideology. When there are major unresolved political problems in a society or a country that cannot be dealt with through the political process because of a lack of institutions and the absence of rule of law, the chances increase that some in that society will use terror to pursue their agenda. Von Clausewitz was right – war, whether regular or irregular, arises from politics and to politics it must return. There are no more purely military problems any more. This includes ISIS. Its roots lie in politics, and unless those political problems are addressed, it – or something like it – will be back.

In Iraq, we have something to work with. By all accounts, Iraqi government forces have avoided retaliatory actions against the overwhelmingly Sunni civilian population. It will be important to stay politically engaged with the government and support a stabilization process that will be political as well as economic. Revitalization of the 2008 Strategic Framework Agreement would be a good place to start. It provides a broad basis for bilateral cooperation in the economic, political, technological and security fields. On the latter, it is vital that we continue the robust train and equip mission with Iraqi security forces that we began in 2014. We must not repeat the mistake we made in 2011 of disengaging from Iraq. That created the conditions that ISIS exploited so effectively three years later.

Iraq has just completed its fourth national election since 2006. The process of government formation is likely to be long and difficult. We should support principles in this process, not individuals. In so doing, we will demonstrate a sharp contrast with Iran whose direct interference is likely to anger and alienate the Iraqi people. The Iranian influence in Iraq is a challenge to some of our core interests in the development of an inclusive, capable government that can address some of the ills of bad governance that has plagued the country for many years. Our best defense is the kind of constructive engagement that will offer an alternative to the heavy handed effort by Iran to create clients, not partners.

SYRIA

If Iraq is hard, Syria is harder. The military defeat of ISIS will not end the civil war, nor will it lead to disengagement and withdrawal by Iran and its proxies. Iran is in Syria for the long haul, as it has demonstrated virtually since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The U.S. and Israel paid a terrible price in Lebanon when Iran solidified its strategic partnership with the Asad regime and both worked to establish Hizballah. It is against this history that we must determine the future of our own military presence. Do we stay or do we go? If we stay, for what purpose and at what risk? If we go, with what consequences?

The Syrian conflict is as complex as it is dangerous. An unprecedented number of international, regional and local actors are involved. The United States and Russia. Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Israel,

Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Hizballah and other Iran-supported Shia militias, al-Qaida, the Syrian Free Army, Syrian Democratic Forces, the YPG, Ahrar al-Sham and many others, including ISIS. ISIS may be on the verge of a military defeat, but that will not eliminate them as a future force. We saw the same thing in Iraq a decade ago. In Syria as well as in Iraq, we can expect ISIS to go to ground and wait for more favorable circumstances. And in the chaos that is Syria, there will be plenty of places to hide.

I spent a number of years in Lebanon during its civil war. The constellation of actors in Lebanon mirrored those in Syria, but on a smaller and less complex scale. The hot phase of the Lebanese civil war lasted 15 years, and ended only when the Syrian army occupied the Lebanese Presidential Palace. No army is going to occupy the Peoples Palace in Damascus to end that conflict.

THE UNITED STATES

Mr. Chairman, this is a moment to consider the role of the United States in the region and the world. Again, I will take you on a brief, 100 year journey. At Versailles in 1919 and after, The United States played no significant role in the Middle East or the world. The 1918 elections returned an isolationist Congress that would not ratify our membership in the League of Nations, Wilson was ill and the British and French did not want the U.S. challenging their influence.

What the world effectively got was a two decade truce in the middle of one horrific world war. America played a very different role after World War II. The post-war international order was largely created by the U.S. The United Nations was born in the San Francisco conference. The international financial order was created at Bretton Woods. We led on the establishment of NATO. We faced down the Soviet Union in Berlin, in Iran, in Turkey and in Greece. We launched the Marshall Plan. We rebuilt the economies of allies and adversaries alike. In short, we not only created the new order, we led it. There was broad agreement among Republican and Democratic Administrations that the U.S. could and should lead. There were setbacks, certainly. But almost seven decades of U.S. leadership brought broad prosperity and averted another massive ground war.

But beginning in 2009, we called into question our own leadership role. The slogan that we can't do everything became a byword for not doing much of anything. America first came to be translated as America alone.

Mr. Chairman, American leadership made the world a safer place. I know the American people are tired of wars. I get that. I spent seven years of my life post 9/11 in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan. I was in Iraq and Afghanistan beginning in 2001. I returned to all three countries as the American ambassador. So I get it about being tired. But there are worse things.

Mr. Chairman, in my judgment American leadership is vital to homeland security. I hope very much we will reassert that role. The Middle East and the world will not run by themselves.