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Moving Beyond Fear:
Addressing the Threat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

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The establishment and expansion of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (IS) represents a step-change in the threat to American homeland security and national security generally. This is the first time that an al Qaeda-affiliated group has made the leap from stateless terrorist organization to a quasi-state with a combat-effective army and the resources of a modern urban region at its disposal. The Islamic State has declared its intention of attacking Americans and is actively recruiting U.S. and European passport holders. It has acquired radioactive material from Mosul University and many millions of dollars from banks in Mosul and Anbar. We have never seen an al Qaeda threat of this magnitude before and we must face it squarely now—or face the consequences later.

The Islamic State's relationship with al Qaeda and its leader, Ayman al Zawahiri, is complex and fraught. The IS evolved from the organization known as al Qaeda in Iraq, which was a formal and recognized al Qaeda affiliate. The group changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006, and al Qaeda leadership accepted that change, although grudgingly. When it began calling itself the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) in 2013, however, asserting its control over the operations of al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra in Syria, Zawahiri balked. Jabhat al Nusra protested vigorously and appealed to Zawahiri, who ruled on its behalf and ordered ISIS to confine itself to Iraq. The ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdad (now styling himself as Caliph Ibrahim), rejected Zawahiri's order, leading to an escalating rhetorical fight that ended with Zawihiri expelling ISIS from al Qaeda —at least, the portion of ISIS that was in Syria in early 2014. It was never clear that Zawahiri was denying the continued validity of the al Qaeda franchise in Iraq.

This dispute led to commentary suggesting that ISIS was no longer part of al Qaeda, which has led to a certain confusion in policy discussions. But the intra-al Qaeda tensions are actually of interest only to students of al Qaeda and those who parse the 2001 Authorization to Use Military Force (AUMF) with a microscope. In reality, IS remains a part of the global al Qaeda movement. It is pursuing the same ideology—the argument, in fact, was over the fact that Zawahiri thinks that Caliph Ibrahim is moving too fast along the path toward the global caliphate. It continues to draw on the same pool of financial supporters, recruiters, and would-be suicide bombers or transnational fighters. It remains, in other words, a serious threat to the U.S. and the West.

Other groups within the larger al Qaeda-associated family have established statelets and armies before. The Afghan Taliban had both in the 1990s. Al Shabaab had much more constrained versions in Somalia after 2009. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula briefly ruled parts of Abyan and Shabwah Provinces in Yemen, although its rule and its conventional military capabilities proved too tenuous to hold. None of these situations were remotely as dangerous to the U.S. as the Islamic State is today.

The Afghan Taliban ruled Afghanistan, to be sure, a fact that has made fighting its insurgency more difficult. But it was not an al Qaeda franchise and did not espouse or pursue goals beyond Afghanistan. The country it ruled, moreover, was a war-shattered, poverty-stricken land that offered little in the way of advanced resources, or even basic resources, for that matter. Al Shabaab was an al Qaeda affiliate (although a secret one until 2012), but it also ruled one of the poorest regions of the world and, at that, its rule was heavily contested. Iraq is an advanced, urban society with a highly literate and technically-educated population, vast natural resources, and excellent infrastructure, even after many years of war. And the Islamic State has already demonstrated that its aims transcend Iraq and even Syria. It has set its immediate sights on Jordan and Lebanon and threatened Iran and us. The danger is unprecedented.

Recognizing the danger is not the same as seeing a solution, however. The IS was able to advance rapidly because hollowed-out and demoralized Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in the north collapsed. Its advance was halted in large part because of the mobilization of Iranian-backed Shi'a militias and an armed populace. Even so, Iran has had to deploy probably hundreds of members of its own Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), the commander of its Qods Force, Qassem Soleimani, and elements of the IRGC Air Force as well to stave off the Islamic State's attacks. The situation remains tenuous and the security of Baghdad is by no means as certain as many appear to believe. The Islamic State is not ten feet tall, but neither is it negligible.

The Iranian presence and obvious fear of the IS has led some Americans to muse on the feasibility of either letting the Iranians fight this fight for us or even actively cooperating with Tehran against a common enemy. This superficially plausible strategy will not survive contact with the reality that the Iranian leadership sees the IS as an American-created and –supported tool for retaining U.S. influence in the region having abandoned Iraq and Afghanistan and lost in Syria. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his closest associates have categorically rejected cooperation with the U.S. in Iraq—even in the midst of the nuclear negotiations when friendly overtures might have been expected—and ceaselessly repeat the mantra that the U.S. is backing the Islamic State.

Even if we could somehow persuade Khamenei to work with us in Iraq, the results would not be satisfactory. Iranian rhetoric is pan-Islamic, but its tools and techniques are narrowly sectarian. Khamenei is now backing Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki for a third term, despite the insistence of the U.S. and all but the most sectarian Iraqi actors that he step aside. The Shi'a militias that are Iran's primary action arm in Iran also conduct sectarian killings that fan the flames of Sunni resentment and are important elements of the Islamic State's recruitment efforts. Iranian involvement in Iraq will make the situation worse, not better, and rapidly.

The prospect of sending American ground forces back into Iraq is distasteful, to say the least. Some have argued for a sort of expanded drone campaign (expanded from nothing, by the way, since the U.S. had not been targeting al Qaeda in Iraq or Syria at all before the fall of Mosul) or direct air support to Iraqi forces instead. This approach will fail. To begin with, air campaigns alone have never done more than disrupt terrorist organizations. Even the extremely aggressive drone program that decimated al Qaeda in Pakistan was unable to destroy the group. But the IS is not a terrorist organization anymore. It is a small state and it has a small army. Targeted strikes will have even less effect on it, and they are likely to backfire.

The Iraqi Security Forces (to say nothing of Bashar al Assad's Syrian troops) have become sectarian. Iraqi social media refers to them as "Jaish al Maliki," Maliki's army, simultaneously dismissing the notion that they are Iraqi forces and equating them with the Jaish al Mahdi, the sectarian and Iranian-backed Shi'a militia formed by Moqtada al Sadr. If the U.S. simply provides air support to the ISF we will be seen as taking Maliki's (and Iran's) side against the Sunni. It is far from clear, moreover, that the ISF could retake the territories it has lost even with U.S. air support and without U.S. support on the ground. The U.S. had an extremely hard time, we should remember, driving al Qaeda in Iraq from Baghdad and Mosul with 150,000 troops on the ground. The Iraqis will find it harder, not easier, because the ISF is regarded with such suspicion by many Sunni.

We may well face a simple and extremely unpalatable choice: send at least some U.S. ground forces back to Iraq or watch the consolidation of the first ever effective al Qaeda state and army. There is no

guarantee at all that sending U.S. forces back would eliminate the threat. Neither is there any reason for confidence that an al Qaeda state in Iraq and Syria will not launch a campaign against the U.S. homeland and interests abroad.

Some will no doubt argue that the wisest course is to tend our own garden and focus on our own defenses rather than trying to intervene in an insanely complicated struggle. The trouble is that we are rushing to dismantle our defenses and make ourselves more vulnerable to the threat even as it grows exponentially. We are in the process of gutting our military in the name of an austerity that has not affected the parts of the government that actually account for the massive increases in U.S. spending projected over the coming years. And we are dismantling our intelligence apparatus in the name of protecting privacy and civil liberty.

The defense of American civil liberties, including privacy, is of paramount importance. It can never be ignored or simply pushed aside in the interests of expediency. It must be balanced, however, against the need to defend American lives and homes, which is the first responsibility of government. We are not currently striking that balance properly. We have allowed highly colored and selective leaks to instill fear in our hearts about what our intelligence community is doing, while ignoring the very real external threats that community is actually focused on watching.

There is no easy solution to the dilemmas posed here and I will not offer any. But the mandate of this committee requires it to evaluate all of the threats objectively and unemotionally and come to considered conclusions about how to strike the right balance. That evaluation must proceed, however, from an accurate and clear-eyed assessment of the actual threat. That threat is large and growing while our ability to defend ourselves is shrinking. We must reverse both trends, lest we face attacks in the future that may well change our society fundamentally. We can start by restoring defense cuts and re-considering the rush to outlaw specific intelligence programs whose merits cannot be debated publicly. This committee should, in fact, take the lead in developing and proposing expansions in U.S. intelligence capabilities that are coherent with the protection of civil liberties and privacy that is so vital to our democracy.

The challenges we face are great, but we must avoid taking counsel of our fears—fears of the enemy, fears of an unchecked government, fears of overseas involvement, or simply fears of the complexity of the problem. There is no certainty in acting, but there is no safety in passivity. I thank the committee for the opportunity to consider these challenges at this important moment in history.