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Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
On Securing the Peace After the Fall of ISIL

US Policy Toward Iraq

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Madame Chairwoman and distinguished Members, I am honored to be able to appear before you to discuss U.S. policy toward Iraq.

Every year since 2003, knowledgeable Americans have been warning that the current year is absolutely critical in Iraq. They have been right every time and 2018 will be no exception. The next year is likely to see the final defeat of ISIS and national elections that will be crucial as both bellwether and determinant of Iraq's future course. As we look to the next phase of American policy toward Iraq in light of these impending events, we must remember that the United States has made too many mistakes in Iraq in the past, and both Americans and Iraqis have paid too high a price for those mistakes, for us to make yet another.

Iraq remains a complicated country. Its military, bureaucracy, politics, economics, and civil society are all weak, contested, and in desperate need of reform. Its constitution is flawed, in part because of the enforced inclusion of the Kurds in a country where they are a liability, not an asset. It is beset by stronger neighbors seeking to dominate the Iraqi state and manipulate its multiplicity of constituent groups.

Yet all is not lost in Iraq. Indeed, there are many useful building blocks from which to erect a strong new state and society. When I was last in Baghdad this spring, I was struck by how many Iraqis are unhappy about their present, but optimistic about their future. Many are proud of their military forces in defeating ISIS, confident that their upcoming elections will produce a more functional political system, and committed to avoiding another civil war. None of that is a guarantee against future problems, but taken together, it can be a starting point for future progress.

Consequently, U.S. policy toward Iraq after the defeat of ISIS demands close attention and careful planning. It cannot be made up on the fly. It should not be made by tweet. It will not work if done slapdash. However, if it is handled properly, and in close coordination with America's allies in Iraq, elsewhere in the region, and among the wider international community, there is every reason to believe that Iraq can eventually be brought to a stable and peaceful new equilibrium that will allow it to become a force for positive change in the region and a benefit to America's interests. If not, we are likely to find ourselves sucked back into yet another Iraq war.

U.S. Interests in Iraq Today

As always at seminal moments like this, it is important to remind ourselves of what our interests are in Iraq. The first is that we need an Iraq that is stable and at peace—with itself and its neighbors. Because of its location and oil wealth, Iraq remains a critical nation in the Middle East and a critical element of the international economy. Before 2003, a reckless and aggressive Iraq under Saddam Husayn created one set of *external* threats to American interests. After 2003, an endless parade of American mistakes produced reinforcing civil wars that created a different, but equally dangerous set of *internal* threats to U.S. interests.

So peace and stability in Iraq are our paramount interests there. But we need to be careful about what that means. For decades in the Middle East, there has been an addiction to the intertwined notions that “stability” is best achieved by dictatorship, and that dictatorship is

therefore the easiest solution to instability. The Arab revolts of 2011 and the instability and civil wars they spawned ought to be sufficient evidence of the fallacy of this idea. Nevertheless, in the specific case of Iraq, it should be understood that autocracy will not create the peace and stability we seek.

For the past century, Iraq has suffered through a staggering list of coups, internal revolts, domestic massacres, and civil wars. Even the totalitarianism and genocidal levels of violence employed by Saddam were not enough to prevent constant internal conflicts—from his many wars with the Kurds (including the 1989 Anfal campaign), to the 1991 Shi'a Intifada, to his violent suppression of Sunni tribes in the 1990s. Since then, we have seen how Nuri al-Maliki's efforts to consolidate autocratic power triggered the ISIS invasion of 2014 and the latest Iraqi civil war.

Instead, ensuring peace and stability in Iraq requires pluralism. Only a democratic system of some kind, one governed by the rule of law and incorporating formidable protections for groups not in power, will reassure Iraq's fractious and fearful communities. Likewise, only a system with a high degree of representation and transparency will ensure that Iraq's economic wealth is equitably distributed, eliminating that as another source of conflict and corruption. In short, when we think about peace and stability in Iraq, it is critical to recognize that both require a pluralist system and while dictatorship might seem like the easier path, it will not get us to where we and the Iraqis need to go. It is a blind alley leading nowhere but back to civil strife.

For that reason, functional pluralism in Iraq must itself be seen as an American objective there, because it is the only realistic way to secure our interest in a peaceful, stable Iraq.

Finally, the United States should seek an Iraq that is not dominated by Iran or Iranian proxies as Lebanon and now Syria increasingly are. At the most obvious level, it would be a humiliation for over 4,500 Americans to have given their lives to make Iraq safe for Iranian dominion. In a more tangible sense, despite repeated American efforts to begin a rapprochement with Iran—including most recently under the Obama Administration—the Iranians continue to define their foreign policy as one of explicit enmity with the United States.

Although Iranian and American interests overlap in important areas despite this, we need to accept that the Iranian regime regards us as their principal adversary and treats us as such. We may not like it. We may wish to change it. We may think it gratuitous or misguided, but we cannot change it. We have tried repeatedly, but the leadership in Tehran is not interested. And as a result, all across the Middle East, Iran aggressively pursues policies harmful to the United States. The Iranian regime is not our friend, and it works hard to do harm to us in a range of venues. We should be loath to see Iraq fall under Tehran's sway.

Moreover, abandoning Iraq to the Iranians would terrify and infuriate our regional allies. The Israelis would be alarmed that Tehran's possession of a contiguous land route from Iran to Lebanon and the Golan Heights would presage new Iranian attacks on Israel—especially once the last embers of resistance to Iran's Syrian ally have been snuffed out. Indeed, the recent Israeli airstrike against Syrian regime bases appear intended to deter and diminish future Syrian-Iranian attacks on Israel as the regime regains control of Syria.

Likewise, the Saudis and other Gulf Arabs would fear that if Iran were allowed to dominate Iraq, it would use Iraqi territory as a base (and Arab Iraqis as agents) to expand its influence, stoke internal unrest, and intimidate them and other Sunni-dominated Arab states like Jordan and Egypt. In the past, we have consistently seen that when our Gulf Arab allies feel threatened by Iran and fear that the United States is not adequately protecting them, they generally overreact and take aggressive actions themselves. In many cases, like the GCC

intervention in Yemen since 2015, they lack the capability to execute the missions they take on, making the situation far worse, rather than better. Especially at this moment, when it is so important to American interests that Saudi Arabia and other Arab states concentrate their resources and energy on domestic reforms, we cannot afford to create potentially ruinous external distractions.

Walking away from Iraq to risk renewed internal conflict and/or Iranian domination could only be a tragic, and utterly unnecessary mistake for the United States, especially when we have just achieved so much and could use this opportunity to do so much more to secure American interests in the Middle East.

U.S.-Iraqi Security Assistance after ISIS

As this committee understands well, fashioning a future American policy toward Iraq has to begin with security cooperation and an enduring American military commitment. President Trump was absolutely correct when he argued that the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq in 2011 was a critical element in Iraq's slide back into civil war with the ISIS invasion of 2014. His Administration cannot afford to make the same mistake all over again.

Accordingly, even after the defeat of ISIS, the United States should aim to retain a considerable military mission in Iraq, ideally on the order of at least 10,000 troops. Truth be told, going back to General Lloyd Austin's plan to retain 20,000-25,000 troops would be better still, although I recognize that that may be a bridge too far for both Washington and Baghdad.

Although there are useful military missions that a force of roughly 10,000 U.S. troops can and should perform, it is important to understand that its primary function would be political: Their presence in country would serve as the ultimate guarantee that any Iraqi government would be unable to oppress its people and would reassure all Iraqis that they do not have to fear their security forces, their government, or one another. Especially in current circumstances, with the Hashd ash-Shaabi militias out there and not always responsive to Baghdad's control, such reassurance is critical to Iraq's security and stability. Indeed, this peacekeeping function of U.S. troops is the most important ingredient that was removed from Iraq after 2011. It is a role that scholars have repeatedly identified as critical to preventing the recurrence of civil war.

As part of that, a future American military presence in Iraq needs to be employed to prevent future Iraqi governments from politicizing the Iraqi security forces (ISF) the way that Saddam did and Nuri al-Maliki tried. Here again, Maliki's actions after 2009 are instructive. From 2006 to 2009, the United States painstakingly rebuilt the Iraqi officer corps, identifying good, honest, nationalistic commanders and promoting them, while weeding out the corrupt, the incompetent, and the agents of foreign governments. This effort resulted in an Iraqi military that was not only more capable, but more professional and apolitical. It was a key and underappreciated element of the success of the Surge. It is why predominantly Sunni units of the Iraqi army were welcomed in Basra in the spring of 2008 to eject the Shi'a Jaysh al-Mahdi militia. However, as soon as he had the political space to do so, Maliki went about deliberately reversing that process to ensure that the Iraqi military was wholly subservient to him. He systematically removed the officers the U.S. had appointed, and put in their place those who had been sidelined by the Americans—which ensured their loyalty to him. As a result, by 2012, the Iraqi security forces (ISF) were widely derided as “Maliki's militia.” He was able to use them in unconstitutional fashion against his political rivals. To make matters worse, the political hacks Maliki put in charge allowed the ISF to simply stop training, and as a result they lost all cohesion and capability.

American military forces are also needed in Iraq to balance the Iranian (and Lebanese Hezbollah) presence that will inevitably persist, along with their allies and proxies among the Hashd ash-Shaabi militias. One of the most important battles Iraq will wage in coming years will be over the status of the Hashid, whether they are properly integrated into the ISF or they become an Iraqi version of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards: a separate military standing apart and reporting to their own masters through a discrete chain of command. The latter would be disastrous, but it cannot be ruled out at this time.

Because of their domestic power and Iranian backing, the Hashid cannot simply be handled by fiat. They need to be slowly assimilated into Iraq's security forces at the individual level. Most of their leaders need to be rewarded for their service to Iraq and given respectable positions within the Iraqi government or else significant pensions for their service. Any attempt to break them or disband them, let alone punish them, could break Iraq instead. But a key will be to build up the power and popularity of the Iraqi government to the point where its leaders can negotiate with the militia leaders (and the Iranians) from a position of much greater leverage. The best way to do that would be to accomplish this will be to take the steps enumerated below to help strengthen the Iraqi government. However, in this area as well, retaining a significant American military presence in country will make it infinitely easier for the Iraqi government to integrate the Hashid into the ISF, and will limit the Hashid's ability to cause mischief (and so cap their political power) if they aren't.

With all of this in mind, Washington should plan to have U.S. troops perform missions in Iraq for at least a decade both to build Iraq's military capabilities and ensure that they are not used against the Iraqi people. A basic list of their specific missions and responsibilities should include:

- U.S. troops need to continue to train the Iraqi military. This means not only those Iraqi brigades that have not yet been retrained by the current U.S. military mission to Iraq, but the entire force repeatedly, in perpetuity. Unfortunately, in the past, whenever the U.S. has ceased to oversee (if not run) the training, the Iraqis have stopped training altogether.
- U.S. advisers should be deployed down to at least army battalion and air force squadron level across the entire ISF, both to help them learn, increase their combat capability, and serve as governors on their behavior. I can remember in 2005 when Iraqi civilians told me that they were always frightened when Iraqi army or police would show up in their towns because they never knew who the soldiers might kill; but they were always reassured if Americans showed up with them, because they knew the Americans would prevent the Iraqi soldiers from causing any harm. Iraq's military has gotten much better since those dark days, but the reassurance function of American forces remains critical as Iraqi society slowly rebuilds trust among its communities.
- U.S. military personnel should continue to assist the Iraqis with tactical intelligence, not only because it will greatly improve its accuracy and utility, but also because it will help the U.S. to monitor developments and prevent internal problems from recurring.
- U.S. military personnel will be necessary to help train the Iraqis with new weaponry, but even more than that to help with the logistics and maintenance of the security forces more broadly. Although in the past the Iraqis were quite adept at logistical operations, since

2003 they have proven utterly hapless (in part because of the computerization of their logistical system by the United States) and without Americans to help, the entire system might grind to a halt.

- It would also be useful to retain some American combat formations in country. The most obvious role they could play would be to assist counterterrorism missions, the need for which is likely to persist for some years to come. More than that, it would be extremely helpful to have American brigades, battalions, and air squadrons rotate into Iraq for lengthy training missions to work with Iraqi forces in realistic exercises, provide the American forces with exposure to the Iraqi operating environment, and serve as an on-hand reserve in the event of foreign aggression or domestic conflict.

Although many of these missions could be performed by relatively small numbers of troops and there is a lot of flexibility in the range I noted above, the number of American troops committed to an enduring, post-ISIS security relationship is very important. The force needs to be big enough to convince Iraqis that the United States remains committed to their security and stability, and committed in ways that it was not after 2011. It is also important because too small a training mission will not be able to maintain (let alone improve) the capabilities of a military as large as the ISF, prevent the re-politicization of the Iraqi military, or monitor developments across most of the country. Such a force would be unlikely to convince any Iraqis that it could keep the peace or strengthen their own military enough so that it could do so itself. That would represent mission failure. It would also create the circumstances for yet another round of civil war.

As a final point regarding a new security cooperation agreement, the U.S. should not get wrapped around the axle about having the Iraqi parliament ratify a Status of Forces Agreement as the Obama Administration did. There are many ways to skin that cat, most entailing far fewer political obstacles, starting with just retaining U.S. forces under the current exchange of letters between Baghdad and Washington from 2014.

Beyond the Security Sector

I am heartened by the fact that it has become a cliché to say that military victory will not be enough to achieve lasting results in Iraq. But I am disheartened that the statement never seems to translate into meaningful U.S. policy. Even the Obama Administration, which so easily could have learned from the mistakes of the Bush 43 Administration, set up 11 “lines of effort” for the Coalition war against ISIS but only fully pursued the two military lines.

This is a shame because Iraq is doing surprisingly well in some areas, even as its basic problems linger ominously in the background. There is still a lot of good material to work with, and some very important positive trends. For instance, most Iraqis want an end to the sectarian violence and are wary of the fearmongering of warlords and militias that led them to civil war twice in the past. Prime Minister Abadi appears to know what has to happen to move Iraq forward and has shown real courage in pursuing it at numerous times in the past, even if his lack of political experience means he sometimes missteps. Moreover, many Iraqis know that the liberation of northern Iraq from Da’ish and the stabilizing of Iraq’s economy were only possible because of American assistance and there is a noteworthy consensus among Iraqi leaders (including those most closely tied to Iran) that a residual American military presence and continued American assistance are useful, if not essential.

The Iraqi economy has even shown some modest, positive developments. On my most recent trip to Baghdad in late April 2017, life in the capital had improved noticeably since my previous trip in 2016. The city felt vibrant. There were fewer checkpoints and those I saw appeared to be manned by members of the Iraqi security services, not the Hashd ash-Shaabi as in the past. Billboards thanking Iran for saving Iraq from ISIS were largely gone. The stores appeared to be doing reasonably good business throughout central Baghdad. Goods were flowing in. There were people in the streets and lots of cars on the road. While traffic was bad, it was not crippling. What's more, Iraqis treated it as an inevitable annoyance and rarely let their anger get out of hand. All of this reflects a sense among Iraqis that things are economically okay. Even the usual Iraqi grumbling about shortages seemed diminished—and even when it came to electricity.

The Iraqi oil sector is expanding at a prodigious pace. Production has reached 4.6 million barrels per day (mbd), although Baghdad is keeping its exports below 4 mbd to remain within the current OPEC agreement. By most accounts, the Iraqis plan to keep expanding production to try to reach 5 mbd by the end of the year, although they also insist they will continue to respect any OPEC agreement as long as everyone else does too.

Iraq's financial sector is stable for the moment, but remains problematic and could worsen in the future. The recent financial infusions arranged by the Obama Administration from the World Bank, IMF, and the Coalition, coupled with U.S. loan guarantees have collectively taken the pressure off the Iraqi budget. This has been hugely important. Most civil servants (who represent an excessive percentage of the work force) are getting paid, albeit at lower levels than before 2014. The government is also able to pay key costs for many of its contracts, which has similarly restored salaries for many in the private sector who live off government contracts.

But the loans will prop up Iraq's finances for only a few years. Iraq can't keep borrowing at this rate, and the U.S., IMF, and World Bank shouldn't let it. All need to continue to monitor Iraqi debt carefully to ensure that Iraq doesn't push itself into crisis by overborrowing. Moreover, as a result of corrupt currency exchange policies, Iraq is suffering from a crisis of liquidity. There simply isn't enough money in circulation and the Iraqi central bank is part of the problem, not the solution. As a result, many Iraqis do not have money to purchase anything beyond basic needs, and there is virtually no domestic investment because it is more profitable for the banks to trade currency than to loan money to entrepreneurs. In addition, because of the widespread corruption in the bureaucracy, successful entrepreneurs are systematically fleeced by civil servants unless they have a powerful political figure who can protect them—although in that case, the protector typically robs them to an only slightly lesser degree.

What Iraq Needs from the U.S. Moving Forward

Over the next ten months and the next ten years, where Iraq requires the greatest assistance is in the realm of politics. Iraq's political dysfunctions have been the primary drivers of its internal conflict. They threaten to derail the significant progress made on security matters and the more modest alleviation of Iraq's economic problems. If Iraq cannot get its politics right, then nothing else will matter.

Iraq's political problems can be overcome, but it will be difficult and unlikely that the Iraqis will be able to do it themselves. They need considerable external assistance, principally from the United States, as one of the very few actors with both the capability and the potential willingness to do the right thing for Iraq. That is why the security assistance plan I have outlined above is primarily focused on achieving political goals, not strictly military ones.

Iraq remains badly divided—both in organization and perspective. Its minority Sunni community desperately needs help rebuilding its key towns and cities after their destruction under ISIS. Moreover, they need to see real political reconciliation if they are going to trust Baghdad not to oppress them as the Maliki government did in 2009-2013 (which paved the way for ISIS in the first place). In stark contrast, Iraq's majority Shi'a population is fixated on the need for political, bureaucratic, and economic reform so that they can live the better lives they have been promised since 2003. For their part, Iraq's Kurds are focused on the longer term goal of independence from Iraq and the near-term desire to extract more resources from Baghdad to address their own (even-more-severe) economic problems.

Yet Iraq's political class, particularly its Sunni and Shi'a Arab leaders, are focused on something else entirely: national and provincial elections expected to be held in spring 2018. As a result, most are wholly absorbed with electioneering and political maneuvering and very few actually want to do the hard work of governing—both because it is a distraction and because failure would undermine their election prospects. Consequently, Iraq's communities are all focused on very different goals, all of them difficult to attain on their own, far more so given the lack of unity among them.

There are a welter of other political and politically-inspired problems in Iraq. For instance, the absence of Iraqi security forces has left southern Iraq largely in the hands of tribal militias, organized crime rings, and branches of the Hashd ash-Shaabi militias. This in turn has led to pervasive corruption and growing levels of violence across the south. But all of these other issues, serious as they are, ultimately derive from the core political problems described above. Moreover, they can only be addressed in a meaningful way if Iraq's core political problems are resolved.

The need to help Iraq address these core political problems should therefore guide the formulation of a new, post-ISIS American policy toward Iraq. Moreover, it automatically establishes a set of short and long term goals around which a new American Iraq policy should be organized.

Immediate Priorities

In the near term—the next 6-12 months—the United States should focus on four critical political objectives:

1. Ensuring that Iraq has fair and free elections in spring 2018.
2. Beginning a process of national reconciliation between Sunni and Shi'a to give both a reason to continue negotiations rather than pursue unilateral solutions to their differences.
3. Beginning a process to determine a final, sustainable status for Iraq's Kurdish population.
4. Convincing the Iraqi people that it is possible to reform their corrupt and sclerotic bureaucracy, as well as the wider political system.

After ISIS has been militarily defeated, Iraq's elections are the next critical item on the agenda. They need to be fair and free and that will mean working with the United Nations, our Coalition partners, and the Iraqis themselves to ensure that Iraq's Independent High Election Commission is truly independent—and is seen as such by the Iraqi people and political

leadership. Of even greater importance is that the United States cannot make the same mistake it made in 2010. As Emma Sky has so eloquently and passionately explained in her book *The Unraveling*, in those elections, the United States failed to insist that Iraq abide by its own democratic regulations in forming a new government. That failure to stand behind Iraq's rule of law convinced all of Iraq's leaders that the new rules no longer applied and power would instead be apportioned according to Iraq's old rules: corruption, bribery, coercion, and extortion. That is what enabled Nuri al-Maliki to remain as prime minister and freed him to act in ever more extra-constitutional or unconstitutional fashion.

At virtually the same time, Iraq's Sunni populace needs to be reintegrated into its political system, its administrative apparatus, and its economy. It was Maliki's alienation of that Sunni community—his arrest of so many of its political leaders, his exclusion of a great many Iraqis from jobs in the government and security services, his deprivation of Sunni provinces of funding and government services—that drove them into the arms of ISIS in the first place. Preventing a recurrence of civil war will mean doing the opposite, or at least getting started to the extent possible, to give Sunnis a reason to remain patient and not take other precipitous action. Consequently, in the short term, until a wider national reconciliation and political restructuring can take place, that is likely to mean apportioning ministries and other key positions to Sunni leaders, integrating more Sunnis into the security services, designating various public sector jobs for Sunnis, allocating funds via provincial governments for reconstruction, and initiating government contracts (particularly infrastructure development) in predominantly Sunni areas of the country.

Beyond this, it is critical to the interests of both the Iraqi and American governments that Baghdad be seen as addressing the most pressing needs of all of its people and doing so in the next 6-12 months, preferably before the Iraqi elections. That does not mean that Baghdad needs to fix every problem. Just that they need to be seen as *trying* to fix the most important ones. The best way to do that would be for the U.S. and Iraqi governments to identify a handful of important, high-profile projects that can show tangible progress in a year or less and that would have a meaningful impact on Iraqi lives.

To their credit, some within the Iraqi government are thinking in smart and creative ways about how to make such moves. Prime Minister Abadi has made this a priority, and the economic reform planning team in his office is looking at further subsidy cuts, pro-growth policies, and anti-corruption measures including the introduction of extensive “e-government” practices that would improve efficiency. The Ministry of Planning is pushing forward a scheme to build several major roads, including a new super highway from Baghdad to Amman, Jordan that would include tributary roads to connect the many towns of Anbar province, and financing for business development to turn the entire network into a major economic pathway, something like an Iraqi “Route 66.” (This would also be a great example of a government infrastructure project in the Sunni areas.)

Other Iraqi technocrats are pushing for a major overhaul and upgrade of the banking system, to shut down the corrupt currency exchange practices, create an electronic banking system, and push cash back into the economy to revive both consumption and investment. Some Iraqi expatriates have argued for an international effort to build hospitals and health clinics across Iraq. Iraq's healthcare sector has been decimated by the wars and sanctions and it would make a major and immediate impact on people's lives if they had access to better quality healthcare. However, all of these plans remain in their infancy and all will be major lifts for Iraq's weak bureaucracy and paralyzed political system. Given Baghdad's record over the past

14 years, no one should bet heavily that any of them will come to fruition without major assistance from the international community.

Broader Goals of a New U.S. Policy Toward Iraq

Over the longer term, the United States needs to invest its resources and energy into three related but overarching issues:

1. Mediating a national reconciliation process among senior Iraqi leaders (primarily Sunni and Shi'a);
2. Helping to reform the Iraqi bureaucratic and political systems to improve the effectiveness of Iraqi governance and enable a decentralization of authority and resources from Baghdad to the provinces;
3. And overseeing talks between Baghdad and Erbil over the status of Iraqi Kurdistan.

National Reconciliation, Power-Sharing, and Decentralization. Iraq's communities have (once again) lost their trust in one another. Trust is always the first casualty of civil war, and Iraq had only started to rebuild it in 2007-2009 before the American withdrawal allowed Maliki to pursue a sectarian agenda and destroy Sunni trust of the Shi'a all over again. Now and for the foreseeable future, rebuilding that trust must be a top priority.

In part for that reason, Iraq will almost certainly need to transition (eventually) to a combination of federalism and either confederation with the Kurds or, more likely, eventual independence for an Iraqi Kurdish state.

As with the short term, so over the long term, the United States needs to take on board the difficult task of helping the Iraqis forge a new national reconciliation agreement, either formally or informally. There is simply no way around this foundational requirement. Iraqis need a new power-sharing agreement that will allow all of the rival communities, but particularly the Sunni and Shi'a Arabs, to begin cooperating again. Without this, the military successes against ISIS will evaporate.

In recent months, both the United States and the government of Iraq have trumpeted local reconciliation efforts as a bottom-up substitute for a top-down process of national reconciliation. While such grass-roots efforts can be very useful, historically they are no substitute for high-level reconciliation. Without the latter, local efforts are typically undone by rivalries among senior leaders and the result, once again, is renewed civil war. Yet the United States has made far too little effort to bring Iraq's senior leadership together, hiding behind Baghdad's desire to handle this itself and the self-fulfilling prophecy that Iraq's leaders are too fragmented. The current, Iraqi-led "process" has so far achieved nothing. On the other hand, it is worth noting that in 2007-2008, my friend and co-panelist today, Ambassador Ryan Crocker, faced a similar problem of fragmented leadership, yet he and his team brokered exactly the kind of (informal but effective) national reconciliation that Iraq desperately needs once again.

As part of such an agreement—and because the opposite approach had failed miserably by 2014, paving the way for ISIS—Iraq will have to develop a federal structure (as envisioned in the current Iraqi constitution) that delegates greater authority and autonomy to its various ethnic, sectarian and geographic components. The traumatic experiences of three and a half decades of Saddam's tyranny, two bouts of civil war, and Maliki's brutal attempt to consolidate power in

between, have made it inconceivable that Iraq's communities will accept a return to an all-powerful, highly-centralized Iraqi state.

However, in fittingly ironic fashion, the goal of a more decentralized, federal political system now requires a dedicated effort to *strengthen* Iraq's central government. The problem is best understood this way: Decentralization can take two forms, empowerment or entropy. Obviously, the latter is a positive that can produce a functional state, the latter a disaster likely to produce war and misery. Decentralization via empowerment requires a reasonably strong and functional central government that grants specific authorities and the power to execute those tasks to subordinate and/or peripheral entities. Decentralization via entropy, in contrast, occurs when the central government lacks the strength to control its constituent parts—let alone to empower them—and so subordinates, peripheral entities, and actors outside the system altogether simply grab authority and resources and do with it whatever they like. Not only does such anarchy invariably dissolve into chaos and conflict, but the actors arrogating power to themselves are rarely as strong as they would be if their power were delegated by an effective central government. One example of the distinction is the United States created by the Articles of Confederation compared to the United States created by the U.S. Constitution. Under the former, the central government was too weak and so the federal structure did not work, even though the states were far more powerful than they were under the Constitution. The result was anarchy, chaos and internal conflict. The Constitution provided for a stronger central government, which paradoxically made a stable federal system—with still strong states—both practical and functional.

Unfortunately, what has been happening in Iraq for the past several years is largely decentralization by entropy, not empowerment, and that is another factor that could produce renewed conflict in the future. It is this entropic pull that is causing the fragmentation that is now the leitmotif of Iraqi politics. The Sunnis have long suffered from a badly atomized leadership, but even that has worsened in recent years, exacerbated by Maliki's brilliance in targeting any moderate, capable and charismatic Sunni leader who might have unified that community. Yet the Shi'a leadership is also fracturing. Iraqis often like to argue that the Marja'iye (the Shi'a religious establishment centered in Najaf) provides the Shi'a with a unified voice, but if that were ever true, it is proving less and less so. Now, dozens of Shi'a figures can claim leadership over important constituencies, including dozens of new militias, many of which operate outside the control of the central government. This centrifugal trajectory simultaneously paralyzes the Iraqi political system and pushes the country toward chaos and renewed conflict.

The Kurdish Question. Although I am certainly open to the prospect of a Kurdish-Iraqi federation or confederation if the Kurds truly want it, I strongly suspect that Kurdish secession is the only real solution to the problem. The Kurds constitute a separate nation who have made clear for the past century that they do not want to be a part of Arab Iraq. Their forced inclusion in the Iraqi state has resulted in nothing but conflict and misery for *both* the Kurds and the Arabs. I say that as someone who considers himself a friend to both, and believes that Kurdish secession would benefit both peoples. As I noted earlier, Kurdistan is a liability to Iraq, not an asset.

If Iraq and the Kurds would both be better off with an amicable divorce, ensuring that such a separation does not provoke a war of its own is going to be a challenge. The Kurds and Iraqis have a great deal to hash out and both sides have conflicting claims and passionate attachments to their own positions. Likewise, as we have seen in the latest drama over last

week's Kurdish referendum, the Iranians are likely to oppose Kurdish secession, and the Turks and Sunni Arab states may do so as well.

Thus, ensuring the amicability of a Kurdish-Iraqi divorce will take time, goodwill and constructive diplomacy that seem in short supply right now. The United States has important interests in seeing this separation happen peacefully, but little else. How the Kurds and Arabs will choose to define their borders, handle territorial issues (including the status of Kirkuk and the distribution of oilfields), and decide the fate of displaced persons are not issues on which the United States needs to take a position. However, it will be critical that Washington serve as honest broker in helping the parties find solutions that both can accept. It may also be necessary for the United States to help each side make painful concessions, in part by providing bilateral or multilateral aid as compensation. Allowing the Kurds to opt out of Iraq would also increase the demographic (and therefore electoral) weight of Iraq's Shi'a Arab community, which will make it all the more important for the United States to help Arab Iraq devise a more stable, equitable and self-regulating political system of its own.

The Obama Administration put considerable effort into handling the pressing troubles between Baghdad and Erbil, and this helped achieve a certain political stability and some remarkable military cooperation. However, without the framework of a long-term plan that creates the circumstances for peaceful Kurdish secession (along the lines of the Czechoslovak model) these near-term gains will erode and eventually collapse as they have so regularly in the past.

Consequently, the United States should inaugurate Iraqi-Kurdish talks on two parallel, simultaneous tracks: One focusing on a long-term process for eventual, peaceful Kurdish secession, and a second focusing on Baghdad-Erbil relations in the short term, to include sticky issues like security cooperation, administration of Kurdish occupied territory, oil revenues, and fiscal policy. The latter might produce an agreement on a new federal or confederal structure by which Kurdistan would remain part of Iraq until the longer-term process produced a workable solution that all sides could accept.

Leverage

None of this can happen if the United States doesn't preserve and continuously rebuild its leverage with Iraq. Many Iraqis and some foreign governments will oppose aspects of the short and long-term agendas outlined above and the United States will have to be able to push back on them directly or empower Iraqis to do so. Similarly, few Iraqis will embrace the tasks that are needed to build a better Iraq—and secure America's interests by doing so—if they are not given the help they need and the tools they lack.

Part of preserving America's influence in Iraq comes from preserving a robust American military presence there. There is no better way to “empower” the Iraqis we seek to aid than by protecting them, creating a peaceful environment in which they can work, and giving them the strength to take on the bad actors who seek to employ violence, ignore the rule of law, and otherwise work outside Iraq's democratic system. Other Iraqis will benefit from that presence in a variety of ways, from securing contracts with the U.S. to enjoying the security created by that presence. Indeed, many bad actors will *lose* influence as a result of that presence since it will be harder for them to use force as an element of their own leverage.

Economic assistance would be a superb adjunct to an ongoing American security commitment. As I noted above, the bilateral and international financial assistance arranged for Iraq by the Obama Administration have been very helpful in stabilizing Iraq's finances in the

short term, but they are not a long-term solution. Additional foreign aid could also have an outsized effect in Iraq because Baghdad is so inefficient, corrupt and bottlenecked that external assistance provided directly to those who will spend it comes faster and is of greater utility than trying to squeeze dinars through the Iraqi political process.

Moreover, as with a 10,000-man military commitment, an economic aid program of (ideally) \$1-2 billion per year for five years would reinforce to Iraqis that the United States is making a long-term commitment to Iraq's stability and development. Symbolically, that is worth far more than the practical impact of the dollars spent. It is also the case that, if that money is spent wisely, it can be used to empower moderate Iraqi leaders looking to move past sectarian differences and break the deadlocks suffocating the Iraqi political system.

Beyond the possibility of American economic assistance looms the tantalizing prospect of GCC aid. Obviously, Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE, and conceivably Saudi Arabia could provide even greater economic support to Iraq, and do so more easily than the United States. The recent moves by the Saudis to dramatically expand their ties with Iraq are therefore an extremely hopeful development. Riyadh appears to have finally recognized that Iraq is not lost to Iran, and is now trying to ensure that it does not become another Iranian dominion. GCC economic aid guided by American know-how and secured by an American military presence would be an ideal way of providing Iraq with the resources it needs to succeed. Consequently, U.S. policy to Iraq should continue to push for GCC economic assistance to Iraq.

The Iranian Dimension

Although American influence in Baghdad has grown significantly over the past two years, Iran is still the most important foreign power in Iraq. We may not like it, but the reality is that the United States is unlikely to accomplish much there if Tehran is determined to thwart us. It would require a massive commitment of American resources to Iraq to allow Washington to replace Tehran as the most influential external player in Baghdad.

However, Iran has always demonstrated that it has a hierarchy of interests in Iraq and is nothing if not ruthlessly pragmatic. Without going into a long explanation of Iranian motives in Iraq and the evidence for them, what is most important is that Iran has not tried to stop the United States from doing what it has been doing in Iraq since 2014. Moreover, on several occasions Iran has provided critical, if tacit, assistance for those efforts. What Tehran appears to see as its principle interest in Iraq is having a unified Iraq under a democratic government—which is the best assurance that Iraq will be both stable and dominated by its Shi'a community, which will always want to be on decent terms with Tehran.

Although significant differences over Iraq could arise in future between the U.S. and Iran, especially over the role of the Hashd ash-Shaabi, there is nothing about the steps I have outlined above that runs contrary to Iran's core interests in Iraq, and much that is entirely consistent with them. It would even be useful for the United States to see if some degree of coordination out of shared interests may be possible. That would be especially helpful to try to secure Iranian buy-in for longer term American objectives such as a greater political role for the Sunni Arab community and eventual independence for Iraq's Kurds, both of which Iran opposes at present.

Moreover, influential as it is, Iran is not all-powerful in Iraq and has not been since the Battle of Qadisiyah in 637 AD. Left to their own devices, most Iraqis would shut out the Iranians altogether, and they have done so whenever they were strong enough, despite all of Iran's levers for wielding influence in Iraq. That then is the key for those seeking to diminish or eliminate Iranian influence in Iraq: building a strong, cohesive Iraq that has the confidence to

show the Iranians the door. And that, of course, is precisely the goal of the approach I have outlined above.

Doing the Right Thing. . . Finally

President Obama liked to intone that Americans cannot do what Iraqis need to do for themselves. At best, that statement was a tautology and therefore useless as a guide to policy. In truth, it was merely an incorrect excuse for American inactivity. Time and again since the 2003 invasion, we have seen that the Iraqis cannot do the most important things that they need to do on their own, but have been able to do them with American help.

It is equally wrong to believe, as many in the previous Administration once claimed, that American assistance allowed the Iraqis to indulge their worst habits and avoid taking the hard steps they needed to for the good of their country. These same officials insisted that removing the United States from the equation would force the Iraqis to finally do the right thing because they had no other choice. In reality, whenever the Iraqis have found themselves in such circumstances, they invariably have made the worst choice, to their detriment and ours.

They do so not necessarily because they are knaves or fools (although some undoubtedly are). They do so because they are caught in a Hobbesian state of nature, the war of all against all, in which self-preservation argues for taking actions that marginally improve one's own position at the expense of everyone else's. That, in turn, forces everyone else to do the same and so renders everyone less and less safe and secure. It is the common path to civil war.

Escaping such circumstances typically requires an external actor capable of creating better, more cooperative outcomes for everyone. That is the role the United States successfully played during the Surge of 2007-2008 and also at times since 2014. It is a role we must continue to play in the future if we are to prevent Iraq sliding back into the civil war trap.

I am very fond of Winston Churchill's famous quip that, "You can always count on Americans to do the right thing—after they've tried everything else." In Iraq, haven't we tried everything else? Isn't it finally time to do the right thing?