

Testimony of Ryan Crocker before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
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Madam Chairwoman, Ranking Member Moulton, members of the Subcommittee, It is a great honor to testify before you on a matter of vital concern for our national security, the need to secure the peace after the fall of ISIL.

The military defeat of ISIL is assured. It is a question of time, and people of the region have been asking themselves for the past year or more a fundamental question: then what? Iraqis and Syrians have understood for some time that what happens after ISIL's defeat may be more important than the defeat itself.

It is roughly a century since the modern middle east was created from the rubble of the Ottoman Empire. The region has witnessed turmoil throughout this period, but nothing on the scale of what we see today. Coups and revolutions always have been part of the landscape. But what we are seeing today is the collapse of states and the parallel rise of non-state actors such as ISIL. In this sense, ISIL is the symptom of a deeply rooted problem, not the problem itself. That problem is a chronic failure of governance.

Another way to look at the issue as a failure of isms, beginning with imperialism. The French and British, who divided the region between them at Versailles in 1919, had no interest in the development of stable institutions, respect for the rule of law or the preparation of the peoples of their for self-governance. The United States, on the other hand, was focused on precisely those issues through the report of the King-Crane Commission in 1919 which recommended that the sole purpose of a mandate should be to prepare the people of the region for self-determination. It recommended a single mandate held by the United States for a finite period. The Commission's report never saw daylight, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Other isms followed: monarchism in countries like Iraq, Egypt and Libya where links to the mandatory powers compromised their legitimacy, Arab nationalism personified by Nasser in Egypt, Arab socialism (Baathism) in Iraq and Syria, communism in south Yemen, and undiluted authoritarianism followed. All failed to provide good governance and its benefits. Now we are witnessing the emergence of yet another ism, Islamism. It too will fail, and it too has failed to provide good governance. Interestingly, ISIL seemed to understand this during its brief ascendancy seeking to take over health clinics in Syria and projecting a focus on rule of law in Mosul. These efforts soon fell by the wayside, victims of coalition pressure and ISIL's own extremist ideology.

When I was ambassador to Iraq from 2007 - 2009, a key coalition and Iraqi government priority during the surge was the elimination of Al Qaida in Iraq, the predecessor of ISIL. We could

never quite get there. Small pockets remained, in Mosul and up the Euphrates river valley. Why? Elements of the Sunni population feared the Shia - led Iraqi government more than they feared AQI. This was at a time when significant progress had been made toward stabilizing the country politically as well as militarily, Sunnis had rejoined the political process, and a second provincial council election left defeated incumbents crying fraud, but also cleaning out their desks and vowing to do better next time.

Conditions are far less propitious now. Budget shortfalls have severely impacted reconstruction efforts in predominantly Sunni cities. Our absence has been filled by an Iranian presence, both direct and indirect through the activities of Iranian backed Shia militias over which the Iraqi government has very little control. These are not circumstances favorable to the establishment of good governance.

I understand that the American people are tired of US involvement in distant wars that consume blood and treasure and that seem to have no end. I understand that. I have spent seven years since 9/11 in Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan, so I know what tiredness feels like. But there are worse things than being tired. These are issues that directly affect our national security.

I learned several lessons very painfully in the middle east. They are simple but have profound impact. One is be careful what you get into. Military interventions in the region have major and extended consequences, consequences of not just of the third and fourth order but of the thirtieth and fortieth order. I learned this not in Iraq but in Lebanon when I was posted to Beirut in the early 1980s including the Israeli invasion of 1982. It is widely believed that the US gave a silent nod to the Israeli plans. And who could argue with the aim of ending Palestinian terror attacks across the Israeli-Palestinian border? But the consequences were enormous. This was the catalyst for a strategic partnership between Syria and the new Islamic Republic that endures to this day. Out of that partnership came Hizballah and its precursors, far more deadly than the PLO ever was. I am a survivor of the April 1983 bombing of the American Embassy in Beirut, and was present when the Marine barracks were blown up six months later. We often speak of intelligence failures. I tend to see most such instances as failures not of intelligence but of imagination. We are unable to imagine such unintended consequences.

When I arrived in Baghdad in March 2007, I had the eerie feeling of being transported back to Beirut a quarter of a century earlier. The same antagonists, Iran and Syria, were inflicting pain on us with the same instruments. The lesson they absorbed from Lebanon was that if you cause them pain, the Americans will leave. And it almost worked.

The other lesson I learned, therefore, is that if we need to be careful about what we get into, we need to be at least as careful over what we get out of. Disengagement can have consequences as profound and unpredictable as those set in motion by one's initial intervention. One does not end wars by withdrawing one's troops. That simply cedes the battle space to adversaries more determined and more patient, in this case to Iran and its proxies and to ISIL.

Let me say something about Iran. Some in this country believe that cooperation with Iran in confronting ISIL is possible and desirable. It is neither. Iran does not feel threatened by ISIL. They do see it as a valuable justification for actions such as the formation of the Popular Mobilization Units which are controlled by Tehran much more than by Baghdad. These units are potentially a greater threat to Iraqi stability and our interests than ISIL was. I would suggest to you that Iran's main strategic goal in Iraq is to insure that whoever rules in Baghdad will never again be able to threaten Iran's existence as Saddam did when he invaded Iraq in 1980. Few in this country remember that horrific eight year conflict; even fewer in Iran and Iraq will ever forget it.

So what do we do to secure the peace after ISIL is defeated? First, we need to understand this is in its essence a political problem, not a military one. There are some security issues on which there is remarkable continuity between the Trump and Obama Administrations. Unfortunately, one of them is treating ISIL only as a security issue. When the last bastion of ISIL falls, I fear we will declare our work in Iraq and Syria done. The reality is that it is the beginning of a complex political process, not its end. I very much hope that we will realize that US leadership is essential for any prospect of long term stability in Iraq. We need to make that commitment, much as the President did recently with Afghanistan. This need not involve the dispatch of substantial numbers of additional US forces. It does mean the need to signal that Iraq is a presidential level priority. It would mean substantial engagement by the Secretary of State with Iraqi leaders, with regional states and with the international community, and this engagement will need to be maintained for an indefinite period of time. We have the Strategic Framework Agreement signed by President Bush and Prime Minister Maliki in 2008 as a framework to work within. The agreement lays out the principles of US - Iraqi cooperation in a wide variety of fields, and we should use it as a guide for a long term relationship with Baghdad.

None of this is easy and it certainly won't be quick. But perceptions of US disengagement during the Obama Administration has not brought Iraq or the region to a better place. A century ago, a US withdrawal from the world effectively produced a two decade truce in one long world war and set the stage for the disfunction we are now witnessing in the middle east. The US did exercise a global leadership role after World War II, and it was that leadership over seven decades that brought about the collapse of the Soviet Union and prevented another global conflagration. The world is not yet ready to run by itself.

I have focused my attention primarily on Iraq where a political process is not only possible but necessary. Syria is clearly not at that point. It is a fire that will burn for some time to come, and we certainly need to do what we can to contain it. But the day when political solutions are feasible is far from dawning.

With our sustained commitment, and that of regional and international allies, the Iraqis may be able to achieve a degree of political and economic inclusion that will produce long term stability. Developments since our disengagement in 2001 make painfully clear that they will not get there on their own. Just as the absence of good governance fueled the rise of ISIL as Al Qaida in Iraq

version 2.0, so too will it lead to the emergence of something we cannot yet imagine. To paraphrase the great Irish poet William Butler Yeats, what rough beast, its hour come at last, slouches toward Baghdad to be born?

Madam Chairwoman, Ranking Member Moulton, members of the Subcommittee, I thank you again for the privilege of testifying before you today.