

Securing the Peace after the Fall of ISIS
Testimony Prepared for House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Dr. Marc Lynch, Professor of Political Science at The George Washington University and Nonresident Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Middle East Program
27 September 2017

Thank you, Chairman Thornberry and Ranking Member Smith of the House Armed Services Committee, and Chairman Hartzler and Ranking Member Moulton of this Subcommittee, for this invitation to speak about the critically important question of Iraqi stability after the fall of ISIS. The U.S.-led coalition has made impressive progress over the last three years towards containing, degrading, and ultimately defeating the Islamic State in Iraq. It is heartening that this committee is paying serious attention to what comes next. Nothing could be more important in order to consolidate these successes and avoid yet another recurrence of insurgency and state failure in Iraq. Representative Moulton has led the way on this with his presentation last year of a “Plan to Secure the Peace in Iraq.”¹

The campaign against ISIS has benefited from impressive bipartisan support. The Trump administration wisely chose to continue the strategy against the Islamic State designed by the Obama administration. The Global Coalition against ISIS has effectively coordinated a broad international and regional group, while the CJTF of Operation Iraqi Resolve has executed an effective military strategy of building and supporting the Iraqi Security Force. The campaign stopped the Islamic State’s advance, and then systematically closed off its borders, degraded its capabilities and steadily recaptured its territory. Critically, it worked to create both Iraqi and regional political support for the campaign, paying careful attention to the urgent needs of civilians in the areas liberated from ISIS and worked closely with a wide range of international NGOs to assist the displaced. The pace of military advances has accelerated since the liberation of Mosul in July and of Tel Afar last week. It is likely that in the relatively near future the remaining ISIS strongholds in Iraq will be recaptured. The accelerated pace of the campaign in turn increases the urgency of addressing numerous looming challenges to stability and peace in a post-ISIS Iraq.

There is a near consensus among analysts that military victory against ISIS must be followed by a political and economic reconstruction strategy in order to prevent another resurgence of insurgency or Iraqi state failure.² The U.S. should assume that

¹ Rep. Seth Moulton, “A Plan to Secure the Peace in Iraq,” 13 September 2016.

² Several major recent reports make this point. For examples, see Shelly Culbertson and Linda Robinson, *Making Victory Count After Defeating ISIS* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2017); International Crisis Group, *Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight Against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid* (Special Report #3, 22 March 2017); Amb. Ryan Crocker, *Report of the Task Force on the Future of Iraq* (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, 31 May 2017).

after its territorial defeat, ISIS will attempt to re-embed, regroup, and continue a violent insurgent campaign at a lower level.³ If the defeat of ISIS leads to another round of Shi'ite sectarian governance, unmet promises of political accommodation to the Iraqi Sunni community, and reconstruction aid siphoned off into corruption, then this insurgency is more likely to gain traction and the Iraqi state is likely to prove far less resilient.

The military success against ISIS has created a political opening to strike a new political compact. In an April 2017 survey carried out by the leading Iraqi polling organization IIACSS and just published in the *Washington Post*, 51% of Sunnis say Iraq going in right direction and 71% of Sunnis say they support Prime Minister Al-Abadi.⁴ This is a far cry from the alienation reported in the summer 2014 survey, carried out just before ISIS swept through Mosul, in which only 5% of Sunnis said they supported then Prime Minister Maliki. But this optimism is fragile: in the IIACSS survey, 61% of Sunnis fear ISIS could return to liberated areas. There are rampant reports of sectarian abuses against Sunnis in these areas and of shortcomings in reconstruction and governance. Furthermore, the Sunni political class has been decimated, the Shi'ite political landscape is fragmented, and there are widespread indicators of youth alienation from the political process.⁵

There are innumerable issues confronting the Iraqi state in the coming months and years. In addition to the immediate crisis over the future of the KRG within Iraq, I would like to highlight three other issues critical to the post-ISIS period: institutionalizing relations between the U.S. and Iraq in a conditional partnership; helping to anticipate and address persistent failures in governance and state capacity, particularly given the possibility of reduced presence by international humanitarian organizations; and balancing competition and cooperation with Iran in the Iraqi theater.

(1) Managing the Kurdish Referendum Fallout: While Iraq's Kurds have a powerful case and strong internal support for national independence, the independence referendum held on September 25, 2017, risks significantly disrupting the anti-ISIS campaign and the stability of the Iraqi political system. The United States was correct to oppose the referendum on strategic grounds, but at this point the imperative must be to mitigate its impact on Iraqi stability. Politicians in Baghdad have been engaging in highly inflammatory rhetoric and escalatory actions which could spin out of control. Regional actors such as Turkey have also inflamed

³ Michael Knights, "Predicting the Shape of Iraq's Next Sunni Insurgency," *CTC Sentinel* (August 2017).

⁴ Munqith Dagher and Karl Kaltenthaler, "Iraqi Sunnis Are Impressed by the Defeat of ISIS. Here's What That Could Mean." *Washington Post (Monkey Cage)*, 11 September 2017.

⁵ On the importance of Iraqi youth alienation, see the report by the International Crisis Group, *Fight or Flight: The Desperate Plight of Iraq's Generation 2000* (Middle East Report 169, 6 August 2016).

the situation with military and political threats. Calming down the situation and laying foundations for a longer-term political process now must be a top priority.

U.S. efforts to leverage its strong military and political relationship with the Iraqi Kurdish leadership, including unusually public U.S. warnings, against holding the referendum failed to prevent it. Rather than retaliate, at this point the U.S. should focus on managing the fallout. It should urge Kurdish leaders to avoid provocative moves in the aftermath of the referendum, to engage directly with Baghdad on future steps, and to remain focused on the need to finish the campaign against ISIS. At the regional level, the U.S. should urge neighbors such as Turkey to restrain from military threats and show restraint, and to scale back threatened economic boycotts and air travel bans. The U.S. should also engage with Iraqi politicians across the political and identity spectrum to calm the sharply spiking anti-Kurdish politics, urging the Iraqi Parliament and government to avoid the extreme forms of retaliation which are currently being publicly discussed.

(2) Conditional Partnership: Looking beyond the immediate crisis, the United States should make clear its commitment to supporting a durable and sustainable post-ISIS Iraq. This commitment should not be open-ended, however. It should be defined through a conditional partnership which reinforces positive trends without enabling destructive possible paths. Such a conditional partnership, cemented in a mutually agreeable Memorandum of Understanding and Status of Forces Agreement, should allow the U.S. to constructively support the Iraqi government without being drawn ever deeper into unsustainable military commitments.

This partnership should be based on clear expectations about political reforms. Such political reform is inextricably linked with enduring security. A primary driver of the return of the Islamic State as a potent insurgency after 2012 was the opening created by former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's sectarian and failed governance. Both before and after the U.S. withdrawal, Maliki consistently resisted U.S. pressure to incorporate Awakening and Sons of Iraq fighters into the security forces and the implementation of agreements towards political accommodation.

The situation today is more conducive to an effective, conditional partnership. The U.S. military returned to Iraq at the invitation of the Iraqi government to meet a common threat, and its strategy is designed to support the Iraqi military rather than taking the lead role. This has reduced the salience of anti-American sentiment, offering greater freedom of political maneuver for defining the U.S.-Iraqi relationship. After the bitter experience of 2014, Iraqi political leaders today can have few illusions about the costs of losing American military and political support.

Prime Minister al-Abadi has proven more sympathetic to the needs for political reforms, despite his relatively weak position and the significant challenges from competing Shi'ite parties and movements. Victory over ISIS has given Abadi a significant if fleeting political boost, and the opportunity to take a stronger position within Iraq's fragmented political system. This will not last long, however. Political

rivals such as former Prime Minister Maliki have been exploiting the Kurdish referendum and other contentious political issues to undermine Abadi. The U.S. should reward Abadi's partnership with a commitment to a long-term, institutionalized relationship which allows him to translate success against ISIS into more enduring reforms. Conditioning future military support on clear political expectations will give the U.S. greater leverage, while allowing it to remain actively engaged in Iraq without either endlessly expanding military commitments or unconditional support to a corrupt and unaccountable political elite.

U.S. expectations and contributions should include continued support for building state capacity in vital sectors. Security sector reform remains essential, including rebuilding Iraq's depleted elite counter-terrorism forces and reorienting training of conventional forces to deal with a low-level insurgency in ways that do not alienate local populations.⁶ The U.S. should also help find a path for properly integrating, and professionalizing portions of the Shi'ite PMF (Hashd) within the structures of the Iraqi state, to avoid a replay of the costly failure to manage the Sunni Awakenings and "Sons of Iraq" after the Surge. The PMF represent a variety of political and institutional interests and should not be treated as a monolithic grouping of pro-Iranian militias. Some PMF units provided essential manpower in the early days of the campaign against ISIS when the Iraqi Security Forces were in disarray, and continued to play a role in subsequent campaigns. Indeed, their future has become a key dimension of intense intra-Shi'a political battles which should be carefully followed. The U.S. should support efforts to integrate those PMF units willing to be included within a unified and nonsectarian state, while supporting state efforts to disarm and demobilize those aligned with hardline sectarian forces.⁷

The priority of political accord should inform the execution of the final stages of the anti-ISIS military campaign. The careful attention to civilian casualties, careful pace of military advance, and preparation for post-liberation security and assistance over the first few years of the campaign were key to the building of popular support. The rising civilian casualties in recent months are driven by multiple factors: an intensifying air campaign, ISIS strategy of preventing civilian flight, the nature of urban combat in populated areas. Whatever the cause, these well-publicized civilian casualties risk undermining the political support which has been so essential to the long-term durability of the campaign and feed support for a revived insurgency. The U.S. should redouble its efforts to sustain a cautious and patient approach designed to minimize civilian casualties and to deny effective propaganda to future insurgents.

(3) Governance and State Capacity: Weak state capacity and failed governance has long been at the root of many of Iraq's problems. The inability of the state to

⁶ On the degradation of the elite counterterrorism forces, see Kirk Sowell, "Mosul and the Limits of State Capacity," *Sada* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 30 March 2017).

⁷ Renad Mansour and Faleh Jabar, *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future* (Carnegie Middle East Center, April 2017)

provide security, services or accountable government feeds public alienation and undermines economic recovery. Pockets of state failure strike particularly hard in Sunni-majority areas, rural areas, and in communities with large numbers of Internally Displaced Persons. Persistent electricity shortages, water problems, and inadequate services have driven popular protests. Budget shortfalls, administrative incapacity, rampant corruption, and ongoing violence and displacement have impeded even well-intended efforts to improve state services.

The shortcomings of the Iraqi state have proven resistant to external solutions. Corruption, sectarianism, and ineffective bureaucracies erode the state from within, and undermine state legitimacy. In a 2013 survey carried out by the highly respected Arab Barometer, 88.3% of Iraqis agreed that there is corruption in state institutions. This complicates international efforts to build state capacity, since external money for reconstruction risks being lost into a vast pit of corruption or misdirected for the purposes of political patronage. Even without such corruption challenges, Iraqi oil production is barely sufficient to cover government operating costs, much less to finance reconstruction.⁸

The very urgency of the challenges has provided a strong incentive for the Iraqi state to work effectively with their international counterparts. The anti-ISIS coalition has done an impressive job coordinating the humanitarian response with international non governmental organizations. Nearly 150 international NGOs have supported civilians displaced from Mosul and other areas liberated from ISIS, but the needs remain overwhelming.⁹ The Office for Coordinating Humanitarian Affairs in Iraq estimates that there currently 3.4 million displaced overall, with more than 11 million Iraqis in need of assistance.¹⁰

The very success of the international humanitarian response creates another potential risk, however. Their high level of commitment has alleviated the burden on the Iraqi state. But the high level of international assistance could easily dry up as international attention and funding moves on to other crisis areas. This could be fatal for post-ISIS Iraq, if these areas experience a precipitous decline in essential services following liberation. The United States and the Global Coalition must work to ensure continuity in services, so that such a vacuum does not appear and that Iraqis in liberated areas experience improved lives rather than abandonment and heightened misery. These services must be connected directly and visibly to the Iraqi state, not only to NGOs, in order to help build the legitimacy and accountability of local and national government.

The focus on state capacity and governance should emphasize the importance of decentralization and local autonomy. Prime Minister al-Abadi has been receptive to

⁸ A recent evaluation of Iraq's oil production found systematic shortfalls in its ability to cover regular government operating expenses, with no surplus for capital investment. See *Inside Iraqi Politics* 159 (21 July 2017), p.8.

⁹ IOM-Iraq Sitrep #30, 10-23 August 2017.

¹⁰ Most recent figures from OCHA-Iraq Humanitarian Dashboard (July 2017)

such moves, which command significant support across the Iraqi political spectrum and the international community alike. Drafting a new provincial elections law has proven challenging, however, and the elections have been postponed until 2018.¹¹ Such a focus on local governance could help to meet the urgent demands of youth protestors who complain of persistent unaccountability and dysfunction of the central state, and could also facilitate more systematic addressing of the needs of the internally displaced.

(4) Finding the Right Balance With Iran: Iraq's relationship with Iran should not be allowed to become a fatal obstacle to the anti-ISIS campaign or the long-term relationship with Iraq. Given the urgency of the threat posed by ISIS after the fall of Mosul, the U.S. wisely chose to prioritize the battle against ISIS over competition with Iran in the Iraqi theater. Forcing the government of Iraq to choose between Iran and the United States would have guaranteed failure in the campaign against ISIS. It would be natural for the Iranian-US tacit cooperation to fray as the IS threat diminishes, but this would be a critical mistake which would undermine all which has been so patiently achieved. The commitment to prioritizing the fight against ISIS should extend to the post-ISIS struggle to support a sustainable Iraqi political accord. The potential for deterioration of relations with Iran over the JCPOA is beyond the scope of this testimony, but must not be allowed to spill over into Iraq.

More broadly, the United States should contest Iranian influence in Iraq, but it can not end it. A sharp deterioration of relations with Iran, whether over compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Agreement or over its proxies in Iraq, would have devastating and rapid effects on the anti-ISIL campaign. The U.S. must therefore continue to seek an appropriate balance between contesting Iranian influence in Iraq and working with Iranian-backed forces towards a common interest in defeating ISIS and sustaining a stable Iraq. The restoration of Saudi presence in Iraq could be a positive, as long as it contributes to the rebuilding of the Sunni community as part of a shared political project and not towards harnessing them to a destructive confrontation with Iranian-backed groups in Iraq.

In conclusion, the campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq has produced significant positive results, with bipartisan support. A comprehensive approach to partnership with Iraq should now prioritize institutionalizing that relationship, protecting Iraqis in newly liberated areas, encouraging political reforms, building state capacity, and sustaining international humanitarian assistance. These steps will be essential to building the resilience of the Iraqi state in the face of the Islamic State's likely return to new forms of insurgency following the collapse of its state.

¹¹ Kirk Sowell, "Wrangling over Iraq's Election Laws," *Sada* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 April 2017).