

**Statement for the Record:
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**House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing:
Terrorist March in Iraq: the U.S. Response**

23 July 2014

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to discuss the U.S. response to the crisis in Iraq. I just returned from Iraq after spending the past seven weeks in Baghdad and Erbil helping to manage our crisis response with Ambassador Beecroft and our diplomatic and military team on the ground, which is serving with courage and dedication. We were assisted by the tireless efforts of Secretary Kerry, including a visit to Iraq at a critical moment, and the entire national security team, including the daily attention of the President and Vice President.

My testimony today will provide a first-hand account of the U.S. response in Iraq to date, and the foundations we are building to protect U.S. interests over the months ahead.

I. The Fall of Mosul

I arrived in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region, on June 7, three days before Mosul fell to militants led by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). We had been concerned about Mosul for the past year, as it had become the primary financial hub for ISIL, generating nearly \$12 million per month in revenues through extortion and smuggling rackets. From all of our contacts in Mosul, including Iraqi security and local officials, the city by day would appear normal, but at night, ISIL controlled the streets.¹

One of my first meetings in Erbil on the morning of June 8th was with the Governor of Ninewa province, Atheel Nujaifi. His news was alarming. Over the past 72 hours, he told me, hundreds of ISIL gun trucks, carrying fighters and heavy weapons, had crossed the Iraq-Syria border near the town of Rabiya, then passed north of Tal Afar, before staging on the outskirts of west Mosul. The Iraqi Army agreed to provide assistance to Mosul, but Iraqi commanders did not seem to appreciate the urgency of the situation, and stated that reinforcements might not arrive for a week.

We checked this information with sources in western Ninewa near the Syrian border crossings, and confirmed that ISIL appeared to be coming across in force. We also met immediately with Karim Sinjari, the Minister of Interior of the Kurdistan Regional

¹ For additional background on ISIL, its operations in Iraq, and the vital threat posed to U.S. interests, please refer to my February 5, 2014, testimony before this Committee, entitled, "Threat Posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (<http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20140205/101716/HHRG-113-FA00-Wstate-McGurkB-20140205.pdf>).

Government (KRG), who confirmed with real-time information that neighborhoods in western Mosul were under immediate threat, as well as reports from the border regions about a steady stream of ISIL reinforcements crossing into Iraq from Syria. During this meeting, Minister Sinjari spoke to President Masoud Barzani and received authorization to deploy Kurdish Peshmerga units into eastern Mosul to help reinforce Iraqi forces and deter any ISIL advance east across the Tigris. He said the Peshmerga were ready to help, but under the constitution, first required authority from the Government of Iraq.

We sent an immediate and urgent message to Baghdad, including to the acting Minister of Defense, and directly to Prime Minister Maliki through his Chief of Staff. They responded that the situation was under control, and that nine Iraqi army brigades would soon be relocated to Mosul. We questioned that information, and encouraged Baghdad to request assistance from Peshmerga forces immediately, as the Peshmerga was able to reinforce the city rapidly, and there was precedent for their helping to protect Mosul, including many years ago against ISIL's earlier incarnation, al Qaida in Iraq (AQI). The Minister of Defense ultimately agreed, but the Prime Minister asked for a confirmation from Erbil that any deployed Peshmerga units would withdraw after army units arrived.

On June 9th, the situation remained static, and the Government in Iraq expressed confidence that Mosul was not under a serious threat. Throughout the day, however, Mosul's western-most neighborhoods began to fall to ISIL. Its fighters began attacking checkpoints and killing resisters, seeking to establish psychological dominance over Iraqi security units in the city. Together with the United Nations team in Baghdad, we worked to help establish a mechanism whereby Peshmerga units would be authorized to reinforce the eastern half of the city pending the arrival of Iraqi units from the south, and then withdraw after the situation stabilized. Baghdad asked to further review the proposal.

In the early morning hours of June 10, ISIL detonated a suicide truck bomb at a checkpoint across a strategic bridge and began to flow forces into the eastern side of the city. The next few hours would prove fateful. Iraqi units abandoned their posts, and ISIL swept through the city, seizing control of the provincial council building, the airport, and then, ultimately, Iraqi military bases. Nearly 500,000 – out of a total population of 2 million Iraqis – fled, seeking refuge in Kurdish-controlled areas. Around 3 a.m., we received distressed messages from Iraqi officials in Baghdad, requesting the Kurdish Peshmerga to move into Mosul as soon as possible. The Iraqi request came too late.

The fall of Iraq's second largest city to ISIL was combined with a social media campaign indicating that ISIL columns would soon be heading down the Tigris River Valley to Baghdad with no mercy for anyone who resisted. The result was a devastating collapse of the Iraqi Security Forces from Mosul to Tikrit. Nearly five Iraqi Army and Federal Police divisions (out of 18 total) would disintegrate over the next 48 hours. This snowballing effect immediately threatened Baghdad, with serious concern that Iraqi forces guarding its northern approaches might also collapse.

Over the next three days, in meetings with our embassy team and videoconferences with President Obama and the National Security Council, we immediately prepared and executed our crisis response. We also worked closely with Iraqi officials to organize the defenses of Baghdad and restore some of the confidence that had been battered.

II. U.S. Response

Our response to the immediate crisis proceeded along three parallel tracks. First, and most importantly, we worked to ensure the security of our own personnel and facilities. Second, in parallel, we both relocated and surged U.S. diplomatic, intelligence, and military resources to develop strategic options for the President with real-time and accurate information. Third, we worked with Iraqi officials to strengthen their defenses of strategic locations, and set the political process on track, with a focus on forming a new government following national elections.

The key elements of this response plan included the following eight steps, which, taken as a whole, encompassed security, intelligence, political, and diplomatic measures:

1) Ensuring the Safety of U.S. Personnel and U.S. Citizens

Our first priority was ensuring the safety of U.S. personnel. This required relocating some personnel and adding additional security capabilities at the embassy compound and the airport. Additionally, there were a number of American contractors at Balad Air Base working on Foreign Military Sales (FMS) cases. Reports from near Balad, which later proved false, suggested the base faced an imminent ISIL attack. After the contractors encountered delays securing their own charter aircraft, the Iraqi Air Force helped evacuate nearly 500 U.S. citizens and third-country nationals on June 14 aboard Iraqi C-130 aircraft. All contractors left safely, and we are grateful to the Iraqi Government and its pilots, most of whom we trained, for their assistance during this crisis period, particularly given their own competing demands.²

At the same time, we took extraordinary measures to ensure the safety of our Baghdad-based personnel. The entire National Security Council team, from the President on down, focused intensively to deploy Department of Defense security assets from elsewhere in the region while the Country Team worked intensively with Washington to relocate some personnel to safer areas. Within 72 hours we brought significant defensive capacity into our facilities and rebalanced staff to help manage

² This cooperation is one of many examples of why it remains a vital interest for the United States to maintain our relationships with the Iraqi Security Forces, whether through our foreign military sales programs or training and advisory missions. The Iraqi Security Forces today face an existential threat, yet the quality of units varies widely from the highly proficient and professional to the incompetent and corrupt. The Iraqis recognize the serious work they must do to further professionalize the force, and they have asked for our assistance. It is in our interest to provide such assistance where we assess it can be effective, both to help confront the immediate crisis more effectively, and to build the long-term partnerships that are essential to maintaining strategic influence.

the crisis. These early moves proved essential to ensuring that U.S. diplomats could continue to do their jobs and protect U.S. interests.

Today, even as the immediate crisis has passed, we are constantly reviewing our footprint to ensure the safety and security of our personnel and facilities.

2) Improving Intelligence Picture on ISIL

Another immediate need was to get a better intelligence picture. From Erbil, even before Mosul fell, I was in touch with General Austin who recognized the urgency of the situation and prepared to deploy additional intelligence assets. In the earliest days, however, when asked about the situation, we had to acknowledge that we were operating in a fog. Rumors of ISIL convoys approaching Baghdad could not be discounted and there were tense moments as we sought to separate rumor and propaganda from fact without immediate eyes-on-the-ground. Today, this fog has lifted – quite dramatically – thanks to immediate decisions taken by the President.

In response to these early developments, we dedicated a substantial amount of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets to fly over Iraq. These missions have enhanced our intelligence picture and provided critical information to Iraqi forces defending strategic locations, while at the same time helping to establish a foundation from which the President can assess the merit of additional measures.

3) Assessing the Capabilities of the Iraqi Security Forces

In the early hours of the crisis, we worked quickly to reverse the collapsing morale of Iraqi Security Forces, reconstitute key units, and ensure the units deployed around Baghdad could adequately defend the capital. Our sight picture was imprecise, and the prerequisite to concrete action was acquiring a first-hand, eyes-on accounting of the situation. In my meetings with Iraqi officials, they said they would welcome U.S. Special Operations Forces to assess Iraqi force capabilities.

The President authorized the deployment of six Special Operations Forces “assessment teams” to augment efforts that were previously underway through our Office of Security Cooperation. These teams have recently completed an initial, two-week assessment of Iraqi units in and around the greater Baghdad area, examining each unit’s capabilities and potential for a closer U.S. partnership. This mission has already provided greater visibility into the situation on the ground, and will help the national security team calibrate additional and tailored measures.

The Department of Defense is currently reviewing this comprehensive assessment, which, as the President has said, is designed help determine “how we can best train, advise, and support Iraqi security forces going forward.”

4) Establishing Joint Operations Centers in Baghdad and Erbil

To harness an improving intelligence picture, we have stood up two combined Joint Operations Centers (JOCs) in Baghdad and Erbil. These JOCs help ensure a constant 24/7 flow of real-time intelligence information from across Iraq. We are now able to coordinate closely with Iraqi Security Forces, the Ministry of Defense, and the Baghdad Operations Center (BOC).

The Baghdad JOC is fully functional and has dramatically improved our ability to understand and assess the situation on the ground. I visited the JOC shortly before departing Baghdad last week, and it is an impressive operation, which began from scratch only six weeks ago. Most of our military personnel operating the facility have extensive experience and relationships inside Iraq. They report that their Iraqi counterparts have fully embraced our assistance and are asking for more, hoping that the United States will serve as their essential partner in the fight against ISIL.

The Government of Iraq has also made some welcome decisions in recent weeks to improve this bilateral coordination, including appointment of new commanders, many with longstanding ties and relationships with their U.S. military counterparts.

5) Positioning U.S. Military Assets in the Region

In the immediate wake of the crisis, the Department of Defense reinforced assets in the region to prepare for multiple contingencies, including the possibility of targeted and precise military action against targets associated with ISIL. On June 16, Secretary Hagel ordered the USS Mesa Verde, carrying a complement of MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft, into the Gulf. Its presence added to that of other U.S. naval ships in the Gulf – including the aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush, a cruiser, and three destroyers. These assets will provide our senior leaders with additional options in the event military action is deemed necessary to protect U.S. interests as the situation develops. They also complement the substantial defensive capabilities now on the ground to ensure the safety and security of our personnel and facilities.

6) Getting the Political Process on Track

ISIL attacked Mosul at a time of extreme political volatility. On April 30, two months before the crisis, Iraq conducted credible national elections, in which 62 percent of Iraq's eligible voters participated. This high turnout included Ninewa, where Mosul is the capital, with nearly 1.1 million voters turning out (54.4 percent), despite explicit ISIL threats to kill anyone who participates in the political process.

When ISIL moved in force into Mosul on June 10, the votes had been counted but not yet certified. The four-year parliament's term had ended, and a new parliament, with its 328 members chosen in the election, had yet to convene. The attack, thus, took place during a political vacuum, and purposefully so. ISIL clearly took a play from its earlier incarnation, AQI, which led the devastating Samarra mosque attack

shortly after December 2005 elections, triggering years of sectarian conflict. Their long-stated aim has always been to spark a collapse of the political process.³

We worked immediately to ensure ISIL could not succeed in destroying the Iraqi political process. First, we urged Iraq's government to finalize the election results, which would set in place a series of timelines for forming a new government. This required judges who had fled Baghdad to return. They did so, and ratified the election, on June 16. The next day, Iraqi religious and political leaders from all major communities declared ISIL "an enemy of all Iraqis" and requested international assistance to combat the threat. Second, we worked with the UN to press Iraqi leaders to convene the parliament on time, no later than July 1, which it did. Third, we pressed all newly elected political blocs to choose their leaders for key posts, pursuant to the constitutional timeline for forming a new government.

This process now has some traction. On July 15, the parliament confirmed a new speaker, which is the first position to be named pursuant to the constitutional steps required to form a new government. The moderate Sunni leader, Salim al-Jabouri, received votes from all major political blocs and was confirmed overwhelmingly, together with two deputies. The next step is confirming a president, which may happen as early as this coming week. Once there is a president, there will be a fifteen-day deadline to charge a prime minister nominee to form a government.

It is not the job of the United States to choose Iraq's leaders. We neither want to, nor have the power to do so. Iraq has a parliamentary system, and the next prime minister of Iraq must secure a 165-seat majority to form a new government. We do have an obligation, however, pursuant to our Strategic Framework Agreement, to "support and strengthen Iraq's democracy." Thus, from the moment this crisis began, we have actively prodded the process forward, serving as a neutral broker, and encouraging all Iraqi leaders to form a new government with leaders who reflect a broad national consensus between component communities.

The administration has been engaged on this issue from the outset, including the visit from Secretary Kerry to Baghdad on June 23, and to Erbil on June 24. The Secretary and the Vice President have also made regular phone calls to Iraqi leaders and to our regional partners to discuss the emerging situation and to help broker compromises where necessary to advance the political process and keep the system on track.

³The AQI attack on Samarra came at precisely the same moment in the political process as the 2014 ISIL move into Mosul: two months after national elections, after the expiration of full-term institutions, and before the selection of new leadership. The pace of signature AQI (now ISIL) attacks – measured by suicide and vehicle bombs – were also nearly identical in the months before the 2006 and 2010 elections, running at nearly 80 per month. In the 30 days prior to the April 2014 elections, ISIL launched over 50 suicide attacks inside Iraq with nearly all of the suicide bombers, according to our assessments and ISIL's own statements, foreign fighters who enter Iraq from Syria.

As President Obama has made clear, the Iraqi people deserve a government that represents the legitimate interests of all Iraqis. We are cautiously hopeful that Iraq's newly elected leaders are on their way to forming such a government, and as they do, they will find a committed partner in the United States.

7) Building Regional Coalescence Against ISIL

At its root, ISIL is not strictly an Iraq problem. It is a regional and international problem. The Government of Iraq has requested international assistance, and it has stated clearly that it cannot manage this problem on its own, particularly with an open border and ISIL safe havens and staging areas in Syria. Accordingly, we have been regularly engaged with Iraq's neighbors and our key partners. The UN Security Council, European Union, Arab League, and NATO have strongly condemned ISIL's actions and expressed strong support for the people of Iraq.

Secretary Kerry's extensive trip to the region, capped by a quadrilateral meeting in Paris with the Foreign Ministers of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and UAE, and then a visit to Riyadh for a meeting with King Abdullah, led to a new commonality of effort against ISIL. Shortly after Secretary Kerry visited Riyadh, Saudi Arabia pledged \$500 million to UN relief agencies managing the humanitarian response in Iraq. In parallel, we are working with all of our regional partners to close down foreign fighter networks that continue to send thousands of terrorists into Syria, many of whom make their way to Iraq, with up to 50 per-month becoming suicide bombers.

We are also mindful of Iran's influence in Iraq and have seen Iran and Russia work to fill a security vacuum in the early weeks of the crisis. These activities are part of our daily conversations with Iraqi political and military officials, and we are confident that most Iraqi leaders want to retain strategic independence, while also grappling desperately with the serious threats to the Iraqi capital and the Iraqi people.

8) Coordinating Humanitarian Relief Efforts and Protecting Religious Minorities

Finally, ISIL's advances have exacerbated a humanitarian crisis. The UN estimates that more than 1.2 million Iraqis have been displaced in fighting since ISIL moved into major cities in Anbar earlier this year. More than 300,000 Iraqis have fled to the Iraqi Kurdistan region since the fall of Mosul on June 10th. We have praised the efforts of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in dealing with the situation, and call on the KRG to continue these efforts, as well as the Government of Iraq to assist the KRG with additional resources.

As noted, numerous countries have come forward and donated to the UN's appeal for humanitarian assistance. In addition to Saudi Arabia, other contributors include Kuwait, Japan, New Zealand, and a number of others. The United States to date has contributed \$13.8 million in humanitarian assistance in response to this crisis, and we are working closely with the UN team in Iraq to coordinate the response.

We are also particularly concerned about the state of the Christian community in Iraq, including in Mosul where this ancient community is being expelled by ISIL on threat of execution. There are now reports of the community's full scale departure, which saddens us deeply. We have also seen reporting of ISIL blinding and killing 13 Yezidi men when they refused to convert to Islam and the kidnapping of two Chaldean nuns and three teenage orphans in Mosul. We denounce these brutal actions vigorously. These actions by ISIL in Mosul – killing Christians, burning churches, killing moderate Sunnis, destroying Islamic tombs – prove to the world the barbarity of their objectives and why they must be stopped before their roots deepen.

Over the past two weeks alone, I met with the Christian leadership in Iraq, including Chaldean Patriarch Louis Raphael Sako in Baghdad, and Archbishop Bashar Warda in Erbil. I am always impressed by the deep faith and resilience of these leaders. In Baghdad, Patriarch Sako, shortly before my visit, presided over a mass with nearly 500 worshippers from across the capital. Both leaders also expressed detailed concerns about the plight of Christians in northern Iraq, and we are working with them and KRG leaders to ensure new Christian enclaves are protected and secured.

Finally, we are deeply troubled by ISIL's treatment of women as we receive a steady stream of reporting regarding women being deprived of their basic rights and subjected to gross violations of their freedom.

III. Current Situation

It is now seven weeks since this crisis began. Mosul remains in the hands of ISIL. Its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, gave a sermon on July 4th, at one of Mosul's oldest mosques, an act made possible after ISIL executed its moderate Imam and thirteen other leading clerics in the city. The Iraq-Syria border, hundreds of miles between the Kurdish region and Jordan, is controlled on both sides by ISIL. Weapons and fighters now flow freely between Iraq and Syria, resupplying ISIL units fighting on both fronts. To say this situation is extremely serious would be an understatement. The situation is dire, and it presents a direct threat to all the Iraqi people, the region, and to U.S. interests.

Our immediate response, however, helped provide a barrier against further deterioration, and may offer a new foundation on which to begin fighting back. Since the first week of the crisis, the Iraqis – working closely with us – managed to absorb the shock, restore some morale, and began to push back, albeit with halting and uneven steps.

On the security front, an immediate focus was restoring control of portions of Highway One, which runs parallel to the Tigris River from Baghdad to Mosul. Iraqi forces during the third week of the crisis managed to clear the highway from Baghdad to Samarra, ensuring a steady resupply for the historic shrine city. During the fourth week of the

crisis, they cleared most of the highway from Samarra to Tikrit, although sophisticated IED emplacements, ISIL snipers, and repeated suicide attacks have halted progress.⁴

These operations remain extremely challenging, and we have differed with the Iraqis on some of their tactical objectives, such as moving into the city of Tikrit, which did not seem militarily essential given the need to focus on supply routes. They have, however, gradually allowed the Iraqis to move out of a defensive crouch and pressure the ISIL networks north of Baghdad, which had been poised to advance further to the south towards the capital. We are also urging the Iraqis to immediately focus security efforts to the west, where tribes continue to hold out against ISIL near Haditha, blunting what had been a rapid ISIL advance following the fall of al Qaim, on the Syria border, on June 21.

The tribal situation in western and north-central Iraq remains fluid. Many tribes are now actively fighting ISIL – but lack the resources to do so effectively. According to our regular contacts in these areas ISIL is able to over-match any lightly armed tribal force. The complete withdrawal of the Iraqi army from these areas, together with the lack of coverage by Iraqi aviation in the border regions, provides ISIL free rein to move manpower and heavy weapons to areas where tribes resist.

The result has been many longstanding enemies of ISIL and its earlier incarnation AQI – such as Albu Mahal tribe in western Anbar; Shammar in western Ninewa; Obeidi south of Kirkuk; and Jabbouri in central Salah ad-Din – risk making accommodations to ISIL due primarily to the reality of battlefield dynamics. These tribes may have issues with the central government, but that alone is not why ISIL infiltrated their areas. In al Qaim, for example, the Albu Mahal resisted ISIL for months, before the town ultimately fell after waves of attacks from across the Syrian border weakened Iraqi defense forces.

A tangible example of this dynamic is the Sunni town of Zowiya, near Tikrit in north-central Iraq. The residents there, a mix of Jabbouri and other tribes, resisted ISIL and would not accept their presence in the town. The result, as reported in the media and confirmed by our own contacts, was an ISIL military assault to kill all the residents of the village, starting with an hour-long artillery barrage. ISIL fighters then swept into the village, forcing surviving residents to flee, and sending the message to surrounding areas that any tribal resistance to their movement would be futile – and crushed.

As a result, absent some military pressure on ISIL, we are unlikely to see a broad-based tribal uprising against the movement, as happened between 2007 and 2008. This tribal uprising was enabled by U.S. military forces, which applied consistent and relentless

⁴ During this period of crisis, Iraqi forces have increasingly relied on volunteers from southern Iraq to hold stretches of the highway cleared by security forces. Many of these volunteers have affiliations with Shi'a militia groups, and in the earliest weeks of the crisis, they operated in the open for the first time in years. Since then, Grand Ayatollah Sistani has stated clearly that any volunteers should only join established state security services, and emphasized that militias or individual gunmen should not be accepted on the streets. The United States will continue to encourage Iraqi leaders to establish legal and practical mechanisms to incorporate volunteers, including tribal fighters, into the state security structures, where they can be trained to protect the population consistent with the rule of law.

pressure on then-AQI leadership networks, staging areas, and supply routes. While the Iraqis will never match this level of pressure, we must help enable their forces to better deny safe haven to ISIL within Iraqi territory. The Iraqis must also focus on training and equipping locally grown units to secure local areas. As the President said in his June 19 statement on the situation in Iraq, “the best and most effective response to a threat like ISIL will ultimately involve partnerships where local forces, like Iraqis, take the lead.”

The Iraqis recognize this principle, as well, and they have undertaken a reassessment of how their security forces are structured and might be reconstituted. Based on our most recent meetings with Iraqi security commanders, this effort will proceed in three phases. First, the Iraqis have begun to recall soldiers from dissolved units for re-training at two sites north of Baghdad. They report that nearly 10,000 have answered this call. Second, they are recruiting from existing units and from new volunteers for elite counter-terrorism forces, similar to those we train through our Office of Security Cooperation. Third, they are looking to dramatically restructure their security services, with units recruited locally to secure local areas, while the national army provides over-watch support.

Such a program may take many months to demonstrate results, and years to provide a lasting foundation for sustainable security. It will also be linked to the process of forming a new government, requiring a full national commitment and national resource base to ensure effective execution. It remains in our interest, together with such a national commitment from a new government, to provide appropriate assistance and help this process unfold in a manner that can eliminate space for ISIL over the long-term.

IV. Emerging Way Forward – a Functioning Federalism

The crisis response described above, together with Iraqi efforts over the past month, contain the elements of a longer-term strategy to deny space for ISIL. Any such strategy, to be effective, must be deliberate, long-term, and multi-faceted. In my discussions with Iraqi leaders from all communities over the past six weeks, there is an emerging political-military approach that might begin to address the root causes of the current crisis.

First, it is important to focus at the outset on why this matters. The situation we confront is not simply about stabilizing Iraq, though that alone is an important interest. Rather, it is about ensuring that a movement with ambitions and capabilities greater than the al Qaida that we knew over the past decade does not grow permanent roots in the heart of the Middle East. Flush with thousands of foreign fighters and suicide bombers, ISIL in Syria and Iraq increasingly represents a serious threat to U.S. interests.

Indeed, ISIL’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, seeks to follow in the footsteps of Osama Bin Laden as the leader of a global jihad, but with further reach – from his own terrorist state in the heart of the Middle East. After Osama Bin Laden was killed in May 2011, Baghdadi eulogized his death and promised “violent retaliation.” His audio messages routinely contain thinly veiled threats against the United States, and he has promised in a “message to the Americans” that “we will be in direct confrontation.” The ISIL suicide

bombers – still averaging 30 to 50 per month – are increasingly western passport holders. Days ago, ISIL boasted that an Australian and a German blew themselves up in Baghdad, and it is a matter of time before these suicide bombers are directed elsewhere.

To combat this threat, we must proceed along three tracks. First, ISIL must be starved of resources, manpower, and foreign fighters. This requires working with our partners around the globe and especially with Turkey to seal the Syrian border from ISIL recruits. Second, the safe havens and training camps in Syria must be isolated and disrupted, preferably by the moderate opposition, enabled by U.S. training. Third, Iraqis must be enabled to control their sovereign space and reconstitute their western border with Syria, through capacity development, tribal engagement, and targeted military pressure.

This third element is essential, and achievable. It will require commitments from Iraq and support from the United States. Our perspectives may not always be the same, but our efforts must be mutually reinforcing. This is because, while ISIL presents a serious counter-terrorism challenge to the United States, the Government of Iraq also faces a serious counter-insurgency challenge, and the two are inextricably linked. Our combined focus must be on isolating ISIL from the broader population and empowering tribes and other local actors to effectively combat it. This will require a combination of political and security measures, based on the principle of a “functioning federalism” as defined in the Iraqi constitution – but never fully and effectively implemented.

In our view, a functioning federalism would empower local populations to secure their own areas with the full resources of the state in terms of benefits, salaries, and equipment. The national army, under this concept, would focus on securing international borders and providing over-watch support where necessary to combat hardened terrorist networks. Other critical reforms, such as an amnesty for those detained without trial, amendments to the criminal procedure laws, and addressing other legitimate grievances from the Iraqi people including those related to de-Ba’athification, will also be necessary elements to strengthen and empower local actors to stand and fight ISIL.⁵

While these concepts remain embryonic, and ultimately will require a new government to flesh out and develop, the five core principles can be summarized as follows:

1. Local citizens must be in the lead in securing local areas;

⁵ There are three fighting groups in the Sunni areas of Iraq. To be effective, any political-military initiative must focus on each of them. First, and most prominently, is ISIL. While there is no political solution to ISIL, political initiatives can help isolate ISIL from other associated groups. The second group is Jaysh al-Tariqa al-Naqshabandi (JRTN). JRTN is a militant wing of the former Ba’ath Party, now led by Saddam’s former Vice President, Izzat al-Douri. While the most militant core of JRTN will remain non-responsive to political initiatives, such initiatives can help minimize that core and degrade the network. The third group includes national insurgent movements, such as the Islamic Army, with some associated tribes. These groups mostly want local security control, and rarely launch offensive operations outside of their local areas. For them, there is a political solution, and through some of the reforms discussed above, these groups can probably be harnessed to protect local areas from ISIL infiltration over time.

2. Local citizens defending their communities must be provided state benefits and resources (modeled along the lines of a National Guard type force structure);
3. The Iraqi Army will rarely deploy inside cities, but will remain outside in an over-watch posture and to carry out federal functions (such as protecting borders);
4. There must be close cooperation between local, regional (KRG), and national security services to gradually reduce operational space for ISIL;
5. The federal government must work diligently on a package of reforms that can address legitimate grievances and deny any pretext for ISIL activities.

These five principles can begin to address many of the core grievances in the Sunni-majority areas of Iraq, while also, importantly, denying space for ISIL to operate and thereby protect the Shi'a majority and other groups from ISIL attacks. Cooperation will be essential. The Government of Iraq from the center cannot restore stability in many areas that ISIL now controls, nor can local actors do so – without support and national-level resources – given ISIL's demonstrated capacity. Restoring stability and degrading ISIL will require a smart, integrated (central-regional-provincial) approach, led by a new Iraqi government with an appropriate level of U.S. support and assistance.

Conclusion

The situation in Iraq remains extremely serious. While our immediate crisis response may have blunted the initial security crisis, ISIL represents a growing threat to U.S. interests in the region, local populations, and the homeland. Countering this threat will require close coordination between the administration and the Congress, and between the U.S. and our regional partners. I look forward to working closely with this Committee to ensure that we are doing all we can to address this vital national security challenge.