



Statement before the

House Committee on Foreign Affairs

Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

“U.S. Policy towards the Islamic State after its Seizure of Ramadi  
and Palmyra”

Michael Rubin, Ph.D.  
Resident Scholar  
American Enterprise Institute

June 3, 2015

*The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author alone and do not necessarily represent those of the  
American Enterprise Institute.*

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, Honorable Members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on an issue so important to U.S. national security.

On September 10, 2014, against the backdrop of the Islamic State (ISIL, ISIS, Daesh)'s murder of American journalists, President Barack Obama addressed the nation. "Our objective is clear," he declared, "We will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy."

Recent Islamic State victories in Ramadi, the capital of the al-Anbar province, and in Palmyra, a central Syria town straddling strategic crossroads and home to ancient ruins, show that almost nine months later, the U.S. objective is not on track to being met. Talk of an offensive against Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, common just a few weeks ago, now seems fantastic. Indeed, it seems more likely that the Islamic State will move this summer against Kirkuk, an oil-rich and multi-ethnic city in northern Iraq or try to strike at pilgrims or shrines in the Shi'ite holy city of Karbala, than retreat from Iraq as American policymakers hoped just a few weeks ago.

Clearly, the President's stated strategy is not working. Questions to consider are why, and what policies could strengthen the fight against the Islamic State.

### **A Strategy Based on False Assumptions**

First, the theories upon which the White House bases its fight against the Islamic State and other militant Islamist groups are often wrong. False assumption lead to ineffective strategies. In his September 10 address, Obama declared, "Now let's make two things clear: ISIL is not 'Islamic.' No religion condones the killing of innocents. And the vast majority of ISIL's victims have been Muslim. And ISIL is certainly not a state."<sup>1</sup> Secretary of State John Kerry likewise opined that the Islamic State is neither "a state nor truly Islamic."<sup>2</sup> Both the president and the secretary may seek to deny the religious basis of the Islamic State so as to avoid antagonizing Muslims, but their concern is misplaced and counterproductive. The religious exegesis underpinning the Islamic State's actions is both real and legitimate, even if it is a minority interpretation which many Muslims eschew. To deny the religious basis for the Islamic State is to ignore the battle of interpretation which underpins Islamic State actions and more moderate Muslims' efforts to counter such extremism. It is not the place nor is it helpful for any American president, secretary, or diplomat to serve as an arbiter of what true Islam is or is not. For the sake of setting American policy, we must take our adversaries at the word.

Second, the United States wastes time debating terminology. Lt. Gen. James Terry, commander of Combined Joint Task Force- Operation Inherent Resolve, the U.S. mission to defeat the Islamic State, declared, "Our partners, at least the ones that I work with, ask us to use [the Arabic acronym *Daesh*], because they feel that if you use ISIL, that you legitimize a self-declared caliphate."<sup>3</sup> Put aside that *Daesh* is simply the Arabic acronym for *al-Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham*, literally the "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria." There is conceit in such concern. No militant Islamist considers the United States

---

<sup>1</sup> "Statement by the President on ISIL," The White House, September 10, 2014. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>

<sup>2</sup> John Kerry, "Remarks at 3rd Annual Transformational Trends Policy Forum," U.S. Department of State, November 17, 2014. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/11/234156.htm>

<sup>3</sup> "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Lt. Gen. Terry in the Pentagon Briefing Room," The Pentagon, December 18, 2014. <http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=5559>

an arbiter of their religion. Debate about what to call the Islamic State does not advance victory. Rather, it is a distraction, one that costs lives by substituting political correctness for progress and bureaucratic machination for battlefield success.

Third, the White House and State Department continue to interpret the rise of the Islamic State through the lens of grievance. With regard to the Islamic State, a center pillar of U.S. policy has been to pressure Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's government to provide Iraq's Sunni community with greater concessions and power. This may be comforting to diplomats, because if grievance rather than ideology motivates terrorists, then diplomacy can resolve such grievances. But if the reason for the Islamic State's existence is perceived injustice in Baghdad, then why has the Islamic State spread so rapidly outside of Iraq in Libya, the Sinai Peninsula, and perhaps Yemen as well? Scapegoating former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki or his successor for the current instability suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of what motivates the Islamic State.

### **Is Baghdad to Blame?**

Indeed, while there is much to criticize with regard to governance in Baghdad, some of the demands the U.S. government makes on Baghdad are counterproductive to the broader fight against the Islamic State. Take, for example, calls to reintegrate former regime elements into the Iraqi political structure. The reported death of Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, Saddam Hussein's deputy, on April 17, 2015, while fighting alongside the Islamic State highlights how the Baath Party has effectively merged with the Islamic State. The two ideologies are not opposite. The idea that Baathists were secular ignores the post-1991 evolution of the party (as well as State Department reporting on the Fedayeen Saddam who executed educated women in the years before Operation Iraqi Freedom on the grounds that they had acted against Islam). Indeed, Baathism and the Islamic State are united both by their embrace of tyranny and their sectarian hatred of Iraqi Shi'ites.

Scapegoating Baghdad is easy, but such blame distracts from the larger problem: There is a vacuum of leadership in the Sunni Arab community in Iraq which the Islamic State's rise has only made worse. Too many Sunni politicians, tribal leaders, and former regime elements sought to utilize the Islamic State as a wedge against Baghdad in order to extract greater political concessions. Essentially, they played with fire and their constituencies got burned. Should the central Iraqi State be forced into retreat, the loyalty former constituents have toward leaders that gambled with their lives will be tenuous at best. Further, Islamic State control over some Sunni constituencies means Sunni leaders in Baghdad elected to represent those communities have had little or no ability to communicate with their constituents for over a year.

It is easy to talk about support for Sunni Arabs, but identifying their leadership is a Sisyphean task. The chief demands of almost every would-be communal leader is that Baghdad should not work with or recognize any competing leader. If the United States wants to resolve a chronic sense of political grievance in Baghdad, it is essential to help the Sunni Arabs build grassroots support and cross-communal coalitions rather than simply forcing sectarian quotas on the Iraqi government. It is also essential to recognize that the basis for Iraqi instability is a refusal by so many Sunni leaders to accept an end to their own minority dominance over Iraq.

Some Sunni leaders might be trying to manipulate the United States in order to reinstall themselves into power, but that does not mean that the Sunni Arab community does not have legitimate concerns regarding Shi'ite (or Kurdish) dominance. American reliance on Iran and Iranian-backed proxies exacerbates the problem. The best way to assuage these concerns is to minimize rather than encourage

the role of Iranian forces in Iraq. After the defeat of the Islamic State, there is a possibility of cross-sectarian consensus. Former regime officials, Sunni tribal leaders, and Shi'ite government officials are all willing to acquiesce to greater empowerment over daily affairs at a local level. Administrative federalism—devolving down to a district or sub-district level most decision-making with regard to resource allocation could ease concerns.

Ironically, one of the problems Iraq faces in its fight against the Islamic State might be too much generosity toward Iraqi Sunnis. The Iraqi government continues to pay salaries of state workers and civil servants in those communities under Islamic State control. Baghdad's logic is both to assert sovereignty and blunt hardship. But the Islamic State taxes inhabitants and money is fungible, so such funds can augment the Islamic State's coffers.

With regard to arming Sunnis separately, or in order to punish the central government for perceived transgressions, the United States cannot be more sectarian than the Iraqis. Some Sunnis do serve alongside their Shi'ite compatriots in the Iraqi Army. That integration is what must be rewarded; it is to these units that American aid and assistance should go.

### **The Problems and Possibilities of a Kurdish Strategy**

Given the paralysis in Baghdad and recent gains by the Islamic State, some policymakers have revisited the idea of supplying weaponry directly to Iraqi Kurd and Sunni Arab tribes. While well-intentioned, such proposals often misconstrue the relationship between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil, as well as intra-Kurdish rivalry. Kurdish representatives repeatedly tell Congress that the Kurdish *peshmerga* do not have weaponry to fight the Islamic State and suggest that the Iraqi central government does not distribute the weaponry which it receives from the United States. Therefore, they argue, the United States should send weaponry directly to the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil.

Such a narrative borders on deliberate falsehood. It is true that the United States does not send weaponry directly to Erbil, preferring instead to work through the Iraq central government, in which Kurds are amply represented. Iraq's president is Kurdish, and Kurds also hold a deputy premiership and the finance ministry among other portfolios. Baghdad has continued to supply Kurds with their share of weaponry; and shortages affect *both* Baghdad and Erbil. With regard to some capabilities, the Kurds are better off than Baghdad. The Kurdistan Regional Government has imported weaponry directly from Iran and several European states.<sup>4</sup> In fact, in the wake of Ramadi's fall, a senior State Department official acknowledged the Kurdish Regional Government had anti-tank weaponry in its own arsenal which the Iraqi government lacked and had repeatedly requested so as to disable the truck and bulldozer bombs which the Islamic State used to such great effect.<sup>5</sup>

Nor will provision of arms directly to the Kurdistan Regional Government necessarily translate into their use against the Islamic State. For weeks prior to the Islamic State's assault on Sinjar, Yezidis had petitioned the Kurdistan Regional Government for *peshmerga* reinforcements and, upon receiving a

---

<sup>4</sup> Isabel Coles, "Iran provided weapons to Iraqi Kurds," Reuters, August 27, 2014; "German weapons delivery heads to Iraqi Kurdistan," DW, September 25, 2014; Ernesto Londoño, "Kurds in N. Iraq Receive Arms From Bulgaria," *Washington Post*, November 23, 2008; and "Hungary to Send Weapons to Kurdistan Region," *KurdPress*, September 15, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> "Background Briefing on Iraq," Office of the Spokesperson, U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC, May 20, 2015. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/05/242665.htm>

rejection, for weaponry so that they could defend themselves. Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani's government refused to provide weaponry, leaving the largely unarmed Yezidis to their fate. Weaponry remain warehoused. History now repeats as Mr. Barzani refuses to provide weaponry to *peshmerga* in Kirkuk which has traditionally supported Barzani's Kurdish rivals. In short, just as Iraqis tried to involve the United States in tribal squabbles at the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, disunity risks a similar dynamic in Iraqi Kurdistan. What should the United States do?

The Pentagon should continue to designate some of the weaponry it supplies Baghdad for the Kurdish front, but it should specify distribution of such weaponry to the units and areas that need it, so that it is not simply used to bolster one Kurdish political faction at the expense of efficiency in the war against the Islamic State.

The United States must also recognize that Iranian influence is as great in Iraqi Kurdistan as it is in southern Iraq despite the warmth ordinary Kurds show toward Americans and the gratitude which most Kurds hold for the American sacrifice in ending Saddam Hussein's reign. For the Kurdish leadership, cooperation with Iran is more a matter for the brain than the heart, just as cooperation with Saddam Hussein once was. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is as active in Sulaymani and Erbil as it is in Basra and Baghdad. The United States should continue to work with the Kurds, but not embrace the simplistic and inaccurate narrative which describes Kurds are pro-Western and Shi'ites as agents of Iran. Rather, all Iraqi communities including the Kurds will be Machiavellian in their approach to and interaction with both Washington and Tehran. Excessive trust can be lethal.

Perhaps the greatest American oversight with regard to Kurds involves Syria. To date, no group has had more consistent success against the Islamic State than the Popular Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG), a Kurdish militia affiliated with the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD). Boycotted by the Turkish government and the Syrian government, and fighting radical Islamists simultaneously, these Syrian Kurdish *peshmerga* have carved out a federal entity in northeastern Turkey which they call Rojava. Like Iraqi Kurdistan, it protects freedom of religion and plays host to tens of thousands of displaced Arabs. I visited Rojava last year and saw schools and a judiciary functioning, municipal trash pickup, and other signs of normalcy. Yezidis from Sinjar have turned to the YPG for protection against the Islamic State rather than the Iraqi Kurdish *peshmerga* because it is less compromised by politics, nepotism, and tribal concerns.

It is inexcusable that the United States would turn a blind eye to the only stable, secure, and secular region in Syria when the only alternatives are the Islamic State, a Syrian opposition that is moderate by no measure other than comparison to the Islamic State, and Bashar al-Assad's murderous regime. Deference to Turkey because of Ankara's fear of Kurdish autonomy or because of Turkey's previous struggle against Kurdish insurgency should not be reason to sacrifice secured territory to the Islamic State.

The State Department suggests that they will not work with Rojava until Syrian Kurds accept the opposition umbrella group assembled in Istanbul. The problem with this demand is two-fold: First, the Istanbul-based opposition has little real influence inside Syria. Secondly, it refuses to acknowledge Syrian federalism. The Kurds in Syria, however, having fought too hard to defend themselves, are as loath to subordinate themselves again to Damascus, as Iraqi Kurds have been to Baghdad.

**Has Turkey Become "Pakistan on the Med"?**

Turkey has become the weak link in both Western and Arab efforts to counter the Islamic State. Most foreign fighters traverse Turkey to enter Syria. The support offered by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Turkey intelligence agency (*Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı*, MİT) to militant factions in Syria often contradicts assurances offered by Turkish diplomats to their American counterparts. U.S. policy must be based on reality rather than on an illusionary memory of the ally that Turkey once was.

In April 2015, Turkish authorities arrested 17 Turkish soldiers and issued warrants for five more who had in January 2014 intercepted a truck carrying weaponry to the Nusra Front in Syria.<sup>6</sup> Rather than reward those who stopped an arms shipment to an Al Qaeda-linked faction, the Erdoğan government instead punished them. Leaks of MİT documents suggest many more Turkish weapons convoys reached their intended recipients.<sup>7</sup>

While Turkish authorities will sometimes detain a Westerner traveling to Syria, these arrests are the exception rather than the rule. In the late 1990s, Turkey largely sealed its border with Syria; it could do so again if it so chose. That said, the breakdown of foreign fighters in the Islamic State suggests a simple, no-cost policy prescription that Washington should demand and that Turkey could implement if it was sincere in its efforts to stem the flow of foreign radicals into the Islamic State: Thousands of Moroccans and Tunisians have entered Syria through Turkey, but few Algerians have. The reason is not a lack of radicals in Algeria, but rather Turkey's visa regimen: Turkey does not require visas for Moroccans, Tunisians or, for that matter, Libyans, Lebanese, and Jordanians. It does, however, require Algerians to acquire visas in advance. Hence, few Algerian radicals travel to Syria. If Turkey wanted to stop the flow of foreign fighters into Syria, it could tweak its visa rules for those countries that are the source to require visas for those under the age of 40. This wouldn't impact most businessmen, but would stop the impulsive recruit or the Jihadi bride.

### **Countering Shi'ite Militias**

Shi'ite militias pose as great a long-term challenge to Iraqi stability and security as does the Islamic State. The Islamic Republic of Iran is not a *status quo* power, but a revisionist, ideological one. To believe that Iran acts altruistically in Iraq and does not demand anything in return is foolish and naïve.

The United States is right to be concerned about Shi'ite militias, but it should not create a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Badr Corps, Jaysh al-Mahdi, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'eb Hizbullah remain Iranian proxies. Not all Shi'ite volunteers in the Popular Mobilization Forces (*al-Hashd al-Sha'abi*) are, however. This past autumn, I spent a week at a compound outside of Karbala in which Shi'ite volunteers answering Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani's call to arms received training. They ranged in age from perhaps 15 to 60. Most were sincere, geopolitically innocent and only wished to defeat the threat posed by the Islamic State to their country and community, although Iranian agents or their proxies did try to co-opt some or infiltrate units. Iraqi Shi'ites are largely nationalistic and most resent Iranian attempts to dominate Iraq, although some will follow the Iranian lead for ideology or more material benefit.

To treat all Shi'ites, however, as under Iran's thumb risks a self-fulfilling prophecy. Sunni refugees from al-Anbar prefer refuge in Najaf and Karbala to shelter in Iraqi Kurdistan for the simple reason

---

<sup>6</sup> "Turkish court arrests 17 soldiers who stopped Syria-bound intelligence trucks," *Hürriyet Daily News* (Istanbul), April 10, 2015; "Arrest warrant issued for five over Syria-bound intelligence trucks case," *Hürriyet Daily News*, May 6, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> "More Evidence Turkey Supports Al Qaeda," *Commentary*, May 7, 2015.

that sectarian discrimination by Shi'ite communities is less a problem than anti-Arab ethnic discrimination in Iraqi Kurdistan. Americans do not visit southern Iraq with the frequency that they travel to Iraqi Kurdistan but, if they did, assumptions with regard to Iraqi sectarianism might be diminished. Sunnis occupy Shi'ite *hosseiniyehs* [congregation hall for worship and ceremonies] lining the highway between Najaf and Karbala and receive meals courtesy of the various ayatollahs' offices in the holy shrine cities. Shi'ite children attend school with supplies provided by local charities and provincial officials and are not subject to sectarian proselytization.

That said, Iraqi resilience is not reason to whitewash Iranian objectives. Tehran is far more effective with its messaging than is Washington. Iran's major theme is that the United States seeks to return Shi'ites to repression and re-empower Baathists or even Islamic radicals. Indeed, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has himself promoted the calumny that the United States created the Islamic State.<sup>8</sup> Recent American proposals to supply weaponry directly to Sunni tribes and Kurds plays into the Iranian narrative and not only enhances Iranian efforts to recruit inside Iraq, but also undercut moderate and Iraqi nationalist Shi'ites like Abadi whom Iranian-backed rivals now criticize as having hurt Iraq with misplaced trust in the United States. Indeed, so long as the United States resists more active assistance to the Iraqi military and its fight against the Islamic State, the more the real danger becomes not only Iranian-backed militias, but the success of harder line Shi'ite parties in the next Iraqi elections.

### **Will the Iraqi Security Forces fight?**

From the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom until September 2012, the United States spent approximately \$25 billion to train the Iraqi army. Some of the most prominent American generals led the effort and spoke of its success.<sup>9</sup> Pentagon assessments often exaggerated the numbers of competent trained forces. Just as during the Cold War-era "zero defects" policy, perhaps they felt that acknowledging failure might undercut both mission and promotion. *Peshmerga* failures in and around Mount Sinjar suggest U.S. officials cannot simply blame sectarian discord; after all, U.S. forces also trained the *peshmerga* which last year performed as poorly but are far more homogenous in their ranks.

While there should be a public accounting of the training mission failure, it is also important not to bash Iraqi forces unfairly or undercut them while they are under fire. To suggest that the Iraqi army did not fight at Ramadi ignores months of the Iraqi army defending Ramadi prior to the Islamic State breaking its line. Had the United States contributed air support at a crucial time in the battle, Ramadi might not have been lost. Its loss was as much a U.S. political decision as an Iraqi military failure.

As the Iraqi army lost Ramadi, it once again seized Beiji, a city that has changed hands several times. This highlights another point with regard to the fight against the Islamic State: Given the Iraqi Army's capabilities, Stalingrad is much more likely than shock-and-awe. The Iraqi counteroffensive will not be clean and it will not be pretty. Cities will be destroyed and human rights violated. Diplomats should do all they can to mitigate this, but outside observers must hold their nose unless willing to provide air support and capabilities necessary to give the Iraqi army a qualitative military edge and the ability to strike with precision.

---

<sup>8</sup> "Remarks in a Meeting with Participants in the World Conference on Extremism and Takfirism from the Perspective of Islamic Scholars," Khamenei.ir, November 25, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Jim Garamone, "Training the Iraqi Security Forces, Tough, but Worth it," American Forces Press Service, January 10, 2015.

There is an unfortunate tendency in Washington to navel-gaze, and assume that the United States and Iraq are alone in the sandbox. Unspoken during Prime Minister Abadi's trip to Washington was that he was giving the United States right of first refusal on the military relationship. If the White House plays hardball or attaches onerous conditions, he might as easily cast his lot with Tehran or Moscow. Should the United States seize the opportunity and continue to arm the Iraqi security forces, then they provide not only potential military capability, but also enable Abadi to peel Iraq further away from Iranian domination.

### **What Should the U.S. Military Posture Be?**

The question American policymakers must consider is whether the United States can afford to let the Islamic State win. A lesson both of the pre-9/11 era and the rise of the Islamic State is that ceding territory to terrorist groups poses a grave risk to U.S. national security. If the Iraqis are not capable of victory on their own, withdrawal from the theater simply allows the cancer to metastasize. Reliance upon the Iranians under the current regime simply swaps one flavor of terrorism for another. While the Obama administration might be cautiously optimistic with regard to rapprochement with Tehran, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has not bought into the process and remains committed to a more militant interpretation of the Islamic Republic's ideology.

American airpower successfully augmented the capabilities of ground forces to liberate the Mosul Dam. Many military analysts argue that airpower is not enough. It may not be, but the frequency of sorties against the Islamic State is an order of magnitude less than that used in Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. That the Islamic State can hold parades of men and equipment in newly-conquered territory suggests either an intelligence failure or a lack of American resolve.

Should the U.S. insert ground forces to embed in Iraqi units to mentor or call in airstrikes and so augment the fight against the Islamic State? This might be necessary, but U.S. troops should never be inserted without a real and true consensus. American troops in harm's way cannot afford to be subject to campaign-year political winds and public opinion polls. Any American deployment must also have the support of an Authorization for the Use of Military Force, which allows rapid reaction and is designed to offer full flexibility rather than restrict and constrain military options. To send forces in with their hands tied both demoralizes and undercuts what may be necessary for victory. This is all the more important as both the United States government and public must also be prepared for any downed aircraft or captured American serviceman to face the most barbaric outrage.

While some military analysts argue that 25,000 to 30,000 American forces may be necessary to roll the Islamic State back and recapture Ramadi, Fallujah, and Mosul, it is also essential to consider what might happen upon those cities' liberation. The danger of mission creep is high, especially if those forces are then called upon to occupy and protect such liberated territory. That said, basing American forces in Iraq if only as trainers and mentors, will help Iraq maintain its independent space vis-à-vis Iran and enable both better intelligence and more rapid reaction during crises.

The fight against the Islamic State will be long. There is no magic formula or short-cut. Still, the United States does have actions it can take at a low cost and other actions which may look good at first glance, but can actually worsen the situation.

- U.S. diplomats should demand that Turkey revise its visa policies to end visa waivers or visas on demand for those under the age of 40 from countries which provide the bulk of Islamic



State recruits. Drying up the flow of recruits across the Turkish-Syrian frontier is a necessary first step to any strategy to defeat the Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria.

- The United States must coordinate arms deliveries through Baghdad, but monitor their distribution both from the central government to the Kurdistan Regional Government, and then from Kurdish authorities to the front where needed, regardless of intra-Kurdish political consideration.
- Rather than exacerbate Iraqi divisions by providing weaponry on an ethnic or sectarian basis, U.S. equipment should be designated for Iraqi army units which incorporate Iraqi diversity. Providing weaponry directly to Iraqi Kurdistan or to Sunni tribes empowers hardline, pro-Iranian political parties and factions, and undercuts Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and his more moderate allies.
- Syrian Kurds should be partners rather than diplomatic pariahs. Their links to the Kurdistan Workers Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK) may be of concern to both Turkey and U.S. diplomats, but Turkey and the PKK are actively in peace talks, and Syrian Kurds have proven themselves both political and on the battlefield. The United States should support the Syrian *peshmerga* and recognize the reality that whoever wins in Damascus, Syria's future is federal.
- The United States should consider the long-term cost of any Iranian military presence in Iraq to be far greater than the short-term gain derived from Iranian personnel battling the Islamic State. The Iranian track-record suggests American assessments of their military prowess to be exaggerated. The United States should consider Iranian Qods Force members in Iraq or Syria to be hostile combatants and inciters of sectarian strife.
- The United States must differentiate between Iranian-backed militias, which are a source of instability and destructive sectarianism, and Shi'ite volunteers. Not every Shi'ite is an Iranian puppet, but painting them all with the same broad brush drives volunteers putting their lives on the line to defeat the Islamic State them into Iranian hands.
- U.S. diplomats should work with the Iraqi government to create the bureaucratic reforms necessary to implement bottom-up, administrative federalism in sub-districts, districts, and provinces liberated from the Islamic State. Fortunately, these involve more changes in administrative law and procedure rather than the more difficult process of constitutional amendment or change.
- U.S. officials must avoid incentivizing sectarian violence by rewarding it with political empowerment even as they try to bolster the central government's efficiency and delivery of services across ethnic and sectarian lines. A grievance-based approach to the Islamic State ignores its rapid growth from Malaysia to Libya.
- The Iraqi military must maintain its qualitative military edge over the Islamic State. If U.S. authorities do not believe it wise to provide weaponry to the Iraqi army, then they must utilize U.S. airpower and perhaps Special Forces operators and U.S. army trainers and mentors to assist Iraqi forces.

- Unless and until, however, there is bipartisan consensus to do what is necessary to defeat the Islamic State before it spreads further or targets the American homeland and until there is an Authorization for the Use of Military Force that empowers rather than restricts American forces combatting the Islamic State, then it would be unfair to American servicemen to put them in harm's way. Nor does re-deployment of forces back to Iraq to defeat the Islamic State substitute as a strategy to keep order once Iraqi and any allied forces drive the Islamic State from major population centers.