

Managing the Crisis in Iraq

Michael Eisenstadt

Senior Fellow and Director, Military and Security Studies Program
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Testimony submitted to the United States House of Representatives
Subcommittees on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade and the Middle East and North Africa
July 15, 2014

The rapid capture of large swathes of northern Iraq last month by a relatively small, lightly armed force of Sunni Arab militants fighting under the banner of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)—now known as the Islamic State (IS)—has altered the strategic landscape of the Middle East. The successor to al-Qaida in Iraq, IS has ridden a wave of resentment felt by Iraq's Sunni Arabs at the exclusionary, sectarian policies pursued by Iraq's Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

The rise of IS was greatly facilitated by Syria's civil war, which enabled it to establish a base of operations in eastern Syria and to transform itself into a lightly armed, mobile force with thousands of experienced fighters (including thousands of freed prisoners and foreign volunteers). Over a year ago, IS began shifting resources back to Iraq, operating openly in the western part of the country, launching a suicide bombing campaign focused on Baghdad that heralded its return, and early this year seizing control of several towns in Anbar province, including Fallujah.¹

The IS capture of Mosul and large parts of northern Iraq, then, is part of a multi-phased plan to establish an Islamic state that extends from Lebanon to Iraq. The next big target for IS is Baghdad.

But IS is not likely to replicate these spectacular military achievements in the Baghdad area. If the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) were seen by many locals in northern Iraq as an army of occupation, in Baghdad it is defending home turf and it can rely on the support of thousands of Shiite militiamen that have been mobilized to fight IS, as well as most of the population. Despite a number of additional gains since the fall of Mosul (Tel Afar, al-Qaim, and Tikrit, among others), IS's efforts to take the cities of Samarra and Baquba, north and northeast of Baghdad, respectively, and to move on the capital, seem to have stalled.

The conflict has effectively settled into what is likely to be a prolonged and bloody war of attrition. There will be no more easy victories for IS, though its ability to wreak havoc in the capital and elsewhere through suicide bombings and sectarian killings remains undiminished.

Neither will it be easy for the ISF to reclaim many of the areas that were lost to IS. It has been trying to do so in Fallujah for months now, without success—even though that city is a mere 25 miles west of Baghdad. For the ISF to succeed, it will need to find allies among the Sunnis, to reprise the tribal uprising that helped defeat al-Qaida in Iraq in 2006-2007. But having been used and abandoned once before, and targeted by both government forces and al-Qaida since, the tribes won't come around so easily this time.

IS also faces challenges. It is spread thin throughout northern Iraq. If it is to hang onto its territorial gains, it will have to hold together the loose military coalition that it leads, which includes Baathist insurgent groups and tribal militias whose interests diverge from those of IS. This won't be easy. And it will have to avoid the tendency to alienate the very Sunni constituency it claims to represent by its harsh application of Islamic law. These dynamics will create opportunities for the al-Maliki government (or its successor) if it is smart enough to seize them.

¹ *Threat Posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)*, Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary Brett McGurk, House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing: Iraq, February 5, 2014, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20140205/101716/HHRG-113-FA00-Wstate-McGurkB-20140205.pdf>; *The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq*, Testimony of Michael Knights, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Non-Proliferation and Trade, and Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, December 12, 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/testimony/KnightsTestimony20131212.pdf>.

Given how much blood and treasure the United States has already invested in Iraq (nearly 4,500 killed, more than 30,000 wounded, and well over \$1 trillion spent), why should Americans care about what is going on there now? Simply because, ‘if you do not visit the Middle East, it will visit you.’ The U.S. experience in the region since its forces withdrew from Iraq in 2011 shows that the United States needs to shape and influence developments in the region—to the degree it is able to do so—as vital U.S. security interests are affected by what happens there.

What are these interests? They are: 1) containing terrorist threats; 2) oil; 3) nonproliferation, and; 4) preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon.

Containing terrorist threats: civil wars in Iraq (2006-2007, 2014-present) and Syria (2011-present) have been major catalysts for the sectarian polarization of the region and the radicalization of Muslims worldwide, through the formulation and export of radical Islamic doctrines and the mobilization of fighters from around the world to participate in these conflicts. The Syrian civil war in particular has attracted thousands of foreign fighters who will almost certainly wreak havoc when they return home. And Iraq is now the place where all these developments converge, as the seat of a radical Islamic ‘caliphate’ that is likely to become a springboard for aggression against Jordan and Saudi Arabia and for terrorist attacks around the world.

Oil: despite the fact that Persian Gulf oil accounts for less than 30% of U.S. petroleum imports, and that imported oil accounts for only 40% of total U.S. petroleum consumption (a proportion that is likely to decline further due to the U.S. shale oil revolution), Middle Eastern oil—which accounts for about half of the world’s oil and gas reserves—is still critical to the world economy. Iraq, moreover, was until recently expected to account for 45% of all future growth in world oil supplies. Thus, Iraqi oil in particular and Middle Eastern oil in general, are still critical to the health of the U.S. and world economies, though renewed conflict means that Iraqi oil is unlikely to meet previous growth projections.²

Nonproliferation: while the Middle East has seen a number of positive proliferation trends in recent years with the dismantling or destruction of the known weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs of Iraq, Libya, and Syria, developments in the region will very much influence the future of the global nuclear nonproliferation regime. Even if Iran accepts long-term caps on its nuclear program, its status as a nuclear threshold state could be sufficient to spur a nuclear cascade in an unstable region wracked by political violence and terrorism. (The crisis prompted by Syria’s use of chemical weapons and concerns that this stockpile could fall into the hands of terrorists have demonstrated the dangers posed by WMD in a region convulsed by unrest.) Yet, IS’s recent successes could make Iran even less amenable to accepting constraints on its nuclear program.

Preventing a regional hegemon: the U.S. tilted toward Iraq during the latter’s war with Iran in the 1980s and it went to war with Iraq in 1991, to prevent either Iraq or Iran from becoming a regional hegemon and dominating the world’s oil supply. Preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon remains a vital U.S. interest, yet the administration’s policies in Syria and Iraq have contributed to the consolidation of a pro-Iranian bloc (the so-called ‘axis of resistance’) that stretches from the Levant to the Gulf, and that has been a primary driver of sectarian polarization and instability in the region. By dint of geography, Iraq is a land bridge that can facilitate or hinder Iran’s efforts to project influence in the Levant; accordingly, preventing the full integration of Iraq into the ‘axis of resistance’ remains a vital U.S. interest. This will take an active effort on the part of the United States. One thing that Washington should have learned from the experience of recent years, is that contrary to the conventional wisdom popular in some circles, Iranian influence in Iraq and the region is *not* ‘self-limiting,’ and must be actively countered.³

Thus, Iraq has the potential to have a major impact on U.S. security interest in the Middle East in the coming years. Given these realities, the United States should respond to the threats posed to these interests by recent events in Iraq by pursuing several objectives:

² Meghan L.O’Sullivan, “Future of Oil Hangs on Iraqi Politics,” *Bloomberg View*, July 9, 2014, <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2014-07-09/future-of-oil-hangs-on-iraqi-politics>.

³ Vali Nasr, “Why Contain Iran When Its Own Aims Will Do Just That?” *Bloomberg View*, October 31, 2011, <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2011-10-31/why-contain-iran-when-its-own-aims-will-do-just-that-vali-nasr>.

- Contain, then roll-back IS—though this will not be easy and will take time;
- Limit Iranian influence wherever possible, while cooperating with Tehran when it serves U.S. interests;
- Press Prime Minister Maliki (or his successor) to accept a cross-sectarian power sharing formula to reduce instability, and;
- Pursue indirect approaches to containing IS and undermining the ‘axis of resistance’ via Syria.

Given the lack of popular support in the United States for military intervention in the Middle East,⁴ and the seemingly intractable nature of the problems that the United States faces in the region—which can perhaps be managed, but not solved (at least not anytime soon)—this translates to a policy consisting of the following elements:

Don’t over-react and don’t intervene—at least not yet. By all appearances, ISF and the sectarian militias fighting by its side have stabilized the battlefield and are keeping IS at bay—at least for now. The U.S. should continue quietly providing intelligence and advice to the ISF, and keep the forces it has recently deployed to the region to provide military options (including 300 military advisors to help the ISF, 500 personnel to secure the embassy and airport, reconnaissance and armed drones and Apache attack helicopters in Baghdad, and the Bataan Amphibious Ready Group in the Persian Gulf).

But the United States should not intervene militarily in this nascent civil war—at least not yet. As long as Nouri al-Maliki continues with his past policies, force should be used only if the U.S. embassy in Baghdad is threatened by IS and its allies. The last thing the U.S. needs is to become an active participant in this fight. Extremists often rely on their enemies overreacting. Direct U.S. intervention in the fighting in the mixed areas in Baghdad, Diyala, Babil, and Salah al-Din provinces could be a recruiting windfall for IS overseas. Don’t grant it this favor.

And while the U.S. should expedite the delivery of Hellfire missiles, it should slow-roll the delivery of large, advanced systems, such as Apache helicopters and F-16 fighters (which Iraq currently lacks the pilots to fly anyhow) to signal that more significant support will come only if the Prime Minister takes a different political tack toward the Sunni Arabs and Kurds, whom he has gratuitously antagonized time and again—most recently in the past week.⁵

Thus, the U.S. should allow Prime Minister Maliki to twist in the wind as long as he is not willing to work to achieve a cross-sectarian coalition government, while quietly pushing for an alternative to him who would be willing to work on that basis. It should, however, hold out the prospect of expedited weapons deliveries, and even U.S. drone and air strikes against IS positions in Sunni-only areas in the north as an incentive.

The United States risks marginalizing itself by adopting such a policy of restraint, and for that reason, the United States should continue to provide intelligence and advice so as to not completely sever ties with the ISF, and to give the Iraqi government a taste of what it can expect in abundance if it were to change its ways. But it also maximizes U.S. leverage at this crucial time in the government formation process in order to achieve a political outcome that could pave the way for a truly effective military campaign against IS. At any rate, it is preferable to enabling a sectarian conflict and being seen as complicit in the barrel-bombing of towns like Falluja.

Continue to press Prime Minister Maliki (or his successor) to ally with Sunnis opposed to IS, to reprise the coalition that defeated al-Qaida in Iraq in 2006-2007. During this crisis, al-Maliki has shown that his instinctive response is to play the sectarian card, calling on Shiite militias to rally to the side of the ISF against IS. While that may yield short-term political dividends, in the long run it is a losing bet. The United States should therefore condition the expedited delivery of major weapons systems on his reviving a cross-sectarian strategy—but it should have no illusions that these efforts will succeed, or that al-Maliki will not abandon this strategy once he has achieved his goals (as he has done in the past). Because this strategy is unlikely to succeed, given Maliki’s personal and political instincts, the U.S. should simultaneously explore other paths to defeating IS.

⁴ Public Sees U.S. Power Declining as Support for Global Engagement Slips, *Pew Research Center*, December 3, 2013, <http://www.people-press.org/2013/12/03/public-sees-u-s-power-declining-as-support-for-global-engagement-slips/>.

⁵ Borzou Daragahi, “Iraq’s Maliki blasts Kurds in hard-hitting speech,” *Financial Times*, July 9, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/dc1953ac-076d-11e4-81c6-00144feab7de.html#axzz37NxFn3GV>.

IS has exploitable vulnerabilities that will likely become manifest in the coming weeks and months. Its recent rapid gains were the result of the collapse, rather than the military defeat of the ISF. (This was the very problem that complicated swift U.S. military victories in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, and that made the occupation of these countries so difficult. As the U.S. learned in both cases, the hard part is what comes after victory when one hasn't defeated the enemy in detail.) As a result, many soldiers and police fled south to Baghdad or east to the KRG, and at least some of those who survived are likely to fight another day—if they are not arrested for desertion.⁶

Moreover, the coalition IS leads is inherently unstable, with former Bathists, Naqshabandis, and tribal militias likely to eventually bridle against the rule of extreme Islamists who have relied heavily on foreigners for so much of their muscle. There are already signs of tension in the IS military coalition, with IS trying to marginalize its partners in some places (arresting former military officers and Bathists), and clashing with Naqshabandi elements in others. Furthermore, the degree of control it asserts in many areas is unclear. And while IS has been ruling with a light touch thus far, its aforementioned tendency to alienate the constituency it claims to represent is likely to eventually reassert itself, creating options in the future. Indeed, there are already signs that IS is reverting to form in this regard.⁷

IS may well have bitten off more than it can chew. In areas it has 'liberated,' reports abound of rampant unemployment and the collapse of services (water, electricity, and trash collection). And thanks to its rapid success, IS was transformed overnight from perhaps the richest terrorist group in the world, to one of the poorest (*de facto*) states in the world.⁸ Even if it is true that it purloined \$425 million from Mosul's Central Bank, that it earns \$1 million a day from oil smuggling in Iraq, and that it earns income from producing and selling oil in eastern Syria, it probably is not earning anywhere near enough to provide for the ten to fifteen percent of the country's population that it may now control. (By comparison, the Kurdistan Regional Government's budget has been perhaps \$12 billion a year, for a roughly comparable population.) This is likely to result in discontent with IS rule in areas that it controls.⁹

Stop the talk about working with Iran against IS. Such talk only feeds speculation that Washington and Tehran are conspiring at the expense of the Sunnis, and that the United States believes that the way to fight Sunni jihadists is by allying with Shiite jihadists. This perception will only further complicate the already polarized and fraught situation in Iraq, and foster additional distrust toward the United States among its traditional (Sunni) Arab allies, at a time that it needs their help in finding a middle way in both Syria and Iraq.

The enemy of our enemy is not necessarily our friend. The United States and Iran have a common enemy in IS, but the interests of the two are not aligned. The United States wants to retain influence in Baghdad, and to create a broad-based government built on cross-sectarian alliances that include the Sunnis as full participants. Iran wants to eliminate U.S. influence in Iraq and ensure that any government formalizes Shiite primacy and Kurdish participation—so that the Kurds have a stake in a unified Iraq and do not seek independence (a move that could influence Iran's own Kurdish minority). But Iran's support for Maliki and his divisive policies have jeopardized these efforts.

Iran has not resolved this contradiction at the heart of its policy, and if it were to eventually decide that Maliki must go (its support for him is not unconditional—he was not its preferred candidate in 2010), there might be a basis to

⁶ Mike Giglio, "Fear Of ISIS Drives Iraqi Soldiers Into Desertion And Hiding," *BuzzFeed*, June 23, 2014, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/mikegiglio/fear-of-isis-drives-iraqi-soldiers-into-desertion-and-hiding>; Yasir Abbas and Dan Trombly, "Inside the Collapse of the Iraqi Army's 2nd Division," *War on the Rocks*, July 1, 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/07/inside-the-collapse-of-the-iraqi-armys-2nd-division/>; Alexander Dziadosz, "Bruised Iraqi army leans on Shi'ite militias, volunteers," *Reuters*, July 10, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/10/us-iraq-security-volunteers-insight-idUSKBN0FF1HO20140710>.

⁷ Matt Bradley and Bill Spindle, "Unlikely Allies Aid Militants in Iraq," *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/unlikely-1402962546>; Hugh Naylor, "Signs of strain in militant ranks as ISIL alienates allies," *The National*, June 21, 2014, <http://www.thenational.ae/world/iraq/signs-of-strain-in-militant-ranks-as-isil-alienates-allies>; Maggie Fick, Ahmed Rasheed, et al, "Islamic State rounds up ex-Baathists to eliminate potential rivals in Iraq's Mosul," *Reuters*, July 8, 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/07/08/uk-iraq-islamic-state-mosul-idUKKBN0FD1AA20140708>; Ronen Zeidel, *How ISIS Controls the Occupied Areas in Iraq*, Tel Aviv Notes, vol. 8, no. 13, July 11, 2014, http://www.dayan.org/sites/default/files/Ronen_Zeidel_How_ISIS_Controls_Occupied_Areas_In_Iraq_11072014.pdf.

⁸ Personal correspondence with Michael Knights, July 2014.

⁹ "Inside Mosul: No Fuel, No Power in a City Under Siege," *Niqash*, June 18, 2014, <http://www.niqash.org/articles/?id=3466>; Shalaw Mohammed, "Visiting Hawija, a Town Controlled by ISIS Extremists," June 27, 2014, <http://www.niqash.org/articles/?id=3478>.

work with Iran, at least in principle, to find an acceptable alternative. But Iran is not there yet.¹⁰ And Iran enjoys a number of advantages (particularly its close ties to Iraq's Shiite parties) that ensure it will play a much more important role in the government formation process than will the United States. However, to the degree that many Iraqi parties do not want to be completely beholden to Iran, and that only Washington can deliver the arms and even the military muscle needed to defeat IS—in the form of U.S. drone and air strikes—there still is a (behind-the-scenes) role for the United States to play in the government formation process.

IS's defeat of the ISF was also a major setback for Iran. And IS's rise threatens the so-called 'axis of resistance,' from the Levant to Iran, as IS is active in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and its recent victories might inspire violent Salafists already active in Iran.¹¹ This is yet another reason, barring any major change in policy by Baghdad, not to move too quickly to lavish military support on the Iraqi government, as it is worth letting Tehran consider how its own policies have contributed to the current state of affairs there.

Finally, if the powers that be in Baghdad eventually settle on an alternative to Maliki and form some kind of cross-sectarian government, the United States should make long-term U.S. assistance for rebuilding the ISF conditional on the demobilization of the Shiite sectarian militias, and not their incorporation into the ISF—as happened between 2003-2008. These militias are Tehran's preferred approach for dealing with IS and serve as vectors of Iranian influence, and are sure to have a deleterious impact on Iraqi politics if allowed to remain in place after the current crisis passes (if it passes), and on the professionalism of the security forces if folded into the ISF.¹²

Rebuilding the ISF will prove a formidable task. Prime Minister Maliki remade the ISF in his own image—re-staffing its upper ranks with cronies and rewiring its organizational charts to serve his own purposes. In this sense, it is an extension of his person. It could take years to undo the damage he has done and for a new commander-in-chief to assert control over the ISF. The entire effort to rebuild the ISF will therefore be doomed from the start if the politics aren't right this time.

The road to liberating Iraq passes through Syria. IS has a major presence in eastern Syria and it is important to put pressure on it there, especially in light of its recent gains, which include quantities of arms taken from the ISF. The Obama administration has long debated whether to train and equip the moderate opposition in Syria, and it recently decided to ask Congress for \$500 million to fund such an effort—which is more important now than ever before. The revitalization of the moderate opposition will constitute a challenge to IS that could force the latter to redeploy at least some of its forces in Iraq to secure its Syrian sanctuary, thereby relieving some of the pressure on the al-Maliki government, and perhaps loosening IS's hold on ground recently taken, enabling disenfranchised elements in Iraq to shake loose of its grip. (It will also enable the moderate Syrian opposition to keep up the pressure on the Assad regime at a time that the latter's allies from various Iraqi Shiite militias have been called home to fight IS.) All this will take time, however, as what is required is not just a train-and-equip effort to enhance the moderate opposition's military capabilities, but the purging of corrupt and criminal elements from the ranks of these groups, and the creation of an effective opposition political organization. There is no time to waste.¹³

¹⁰ Jay Solomon, "Iran's Leaders Split Over Support for Iraq's Maliki," *Wall Street Journal Blog*, July 7, 2014, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2014/07/07/irans-leaders-split-over-support-for-iraqs-maliki/>.

¹¹ Mehdi Khalaji, *Salafism as a National Security Threat for Iran*, Washington Institute Policy Watch 2211, February 20, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/salafism-as-a-national-security-threat-for-iran>.

¹² Thus, Revolutionary Guard commander Brigadier General Massoud Jazayeri recently stated that Iran "is ready to provide (Iraq) with... the same winning strategy used in Syria to put the terrorists on the defensive... (which) is now taking shape in Iraq—mobilizing masses of all ethnic groups." Mehrdad Balali, "Iran general says ready to help Iraq against militants," *Reuters*, June 29, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/06/29/us-iraq-security-iran-idUSKBN0F407N20140629>.

¹³ Michael Eisenstadt and Jeffrey White, *An Enhanced Train-and-Equip Program for the Moderate Syrian Opposition: A Key Element of U.S. Policy For Syria and Iraq*, Washington Institute Policy Watch 2280, July 8, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/an-enhanced-train-and-equip-program-for-the-moderate-syrian-opposition>; Chandler Atwood, Joshua Burgess, Michael Eisenstadt, and Joseph Wawro, *Between Not-In and All-In: U.S. Military Options in Syria*, Washington Institute Research Note No. 18, May 2014, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyNote18_Atwood2.pdf.