

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS
COMMITTEE**

IRAQ

**JAMES FRANKLIN JEFFREY, PHILIP SOLONDZ
DISTINGUISHED VISITING FELLOW, THE WASHINGTON
INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EASTERN POLICY**

The turn of events in Iraq over the past month, leading to the establishment of the Islamic State (IS) by the Al Qaeda in Iraq offshoot group Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), is a stunning blow to US policy and objectives in the Middle East. The creation of an extremist quasi-state, analogous to Afghanistan under the Taliban, carries the risk of further escalation including a regional Sunni-Shia conflagration, and a dramatic loss in US influence in the region. Simultaneously, in part as trigger, in part as reaction to this development, we are facing a militant Iran on the march, allied with Syria's Assad, Hezbollah, and some in Iraq. The US government must counter both the IS threat and the overall deterioration of stability throughout the region. This is an emergency, not an everyday crisis, and the caution which characterizes US actions often is inappropriate. The costs of doing nothing significant now are greater than the risks of most actions short of committing ground troops.

The significance of this situation can be seen by juxtaposing it with President Obama's description of America's vital interests in the Middle East in his September, 2013 UN General Assembly Speech: responding to external aggression against our allies and partners, ensuring the free flow of energy from the region, dismantling terrorist networks that threaten our people and not tolerating the development or use of weapons of mass destruction. The rise of the IS, with control over up to six million people and massive military equipment and funding, in close proximity to some of the largest oil fields in the world, and bordering our NATO ally Turkey and security partners Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, threatens three of the President's four vital interests. The situation if it deteriorates further will likely threaten the fourth, development of weapons of mass destruction, as Iran is even less likely to forego such weapons in the face of a possible regional conflict arising from the IS threat.

The President's course of action outlined in his Iraq speech of June 19th is sensible: protect our Baghdad embassy, strengthen our intelligence and military presence in and around Iraq, increase assistance to the Iraqi military, and press the Iraqi political system to support a new, inclusive government which can reach out to estranged Sunni Arabs and Kurds and maintain the country's unity; only then with our help can it begin to retake areas held by the IS. Consider this Plan A. While this remains the best option, and actions to achieve it are discussed below, it is not clear if we still have time to achieve it. Iraq is functionally split into three states—the IS, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and rump Iraq governed out of Baghdad, which is almost entirely cut off from the KRG by the IS and marauding Sunni insurgents. Mass murders of Sunni and Shia prisoners and civilians by Shia militias and ISIL respectively exacerbate the divisions further. The Administration thus must focus on a Plan B in case Iraq's current divisions grow even deeper.

PLAN A

To achieve the President's objective of a unified, inclusive Iraq to which we can provide significant new military assistance including air strikes, the following needs to occur in the days ahead:

--The Iraqi parliament, charged with forming a new government after the March elections, must decide on a prime minister other than Nuri al Maliki. There is absolutely no chance of Iraq remaining united, or of the Iraqi security forces performing effectively, or of an inclusive government appealing to Kurds and Sunni Arabs, with him still at the helm. The ink in written commitments by Iraqi leaders to reach out to other communities over the past 11 years would fill several bathtubs; what is needed is not new promises, but concrete action. The most convincing such action would be for Maliki to step down, failing that, for the Shia parties to coalesce behind essentially any alternative candidate to force him out. Maliki is rightly associated with the worse forms of sectarianism, and only his departure would convince now highly skeptical Kurds and Sunni Arabs that a Shia Arab-dominated political system will take their concerns into account. Removing Maliki is a job for the Iraqis, not the US, and Washington has to be careful not to advocate his departure openly, as that will only strengthen him. But we must make clear that serious US military engagement, now desperately needed, will come only with a different leadership.

--The Kurds must be brought back into the Iraqi camp. Their dispute with Maliki and on a larger level Baghdad has grown more serious since Mosul fell, due to serious errors by both Erbil and Baghdad. Finding a replacement for Maliki is necessary but not sufficient to win the Kurds back. This will require further compromises on Kurdish oil exports and building on a December 2013 agreement not carried out, and Baghdad needs to restart payment of the Kurds' 17% share of southern oil exports. In turn the Kurds, as they have acknowledged, will have to share their oil proceeds 17-83% between themselves and Baghdad, and exercise restraint on the status of the Kirkuk field now in their military power. The US, once the above measures are taken, should pressure both the Kurds and their not-so-silent patron, Turkey, to participate fully in the central government, and cease threatening an independence referendum. What's in this for the Kurds? Full independence is a chimera given not only Iranian but Turkish sensitivities, a 17% share of all Iraq's oil exports will earn Erbil more money than exporting from the north, even with Kirkuk, for the next few years at least, and tranquility between Erbil and Baghdad will allow both to focus on the greater threat—IS.

--The new Iraqi leadership should make clear that it will institute similar oil earnings distribution policies to the Sunni provinces, along the lines seen to some degree with the KRG and oil producing provinces. While politicians' promises to distribute wealth equitably and promote economic development are fine, they have been heard many times with little results, especially in Sunni areas. Only such a dramatic, concrete commitment will win credibility in the Sunni areas.

--The U.S. should begin very limited strikes against ISIL elements to support Kurdish Peshmerga, Sunni Arab tribal fighters, and Iraqi central government security forces when the latter are defending the approaches to Baghdad or other majority Shia population areas. Such strikes could shift the military momentum away from IS, and show all those fighting it that the US, under the right conditions, not only will strike IS, but will strike it much harder. Given prior Administration reluctance to use military force, such demonstrations now are necessary. Limited US strikes could leverage our efforts for an inclusive central government. But we would have to be careful, as the President said, not to give the impression that we are taking sides with a sectarian government against the Sunnis. The strikes thus

would have to be coordinated with friendly Iraqi Sunni Arabs and regional partners.

--Simultaneously, the US should rapidly deploy its \$500 million committed to train and equip the Syrian opposition. The US should begin strikes against IS in Syria, and once significant US-trained and equipped forces are in the field, strike against Syrian government forces opposing them.

--Once these steps have been taken, the U.S. can plan with the Iraqi government, KRG, friendly Iraqi Sunni Arabs, and regional partners, to retake those Iraqi areas now held by the IS. Such a counter-insurgency plan would include aggressive US training, equipping, and coordinating, intelligence, and air strikes, along with action by Sunni Arabs willing with our help to take on IS.

PLAN B

While the above offers the best way forward, it may soon be too late to implement it, as the divisions between the various Iraqi groups deepen, the KRG moves towards virtual independence, and Maliki entrenches himself in office.

Were this to occur, the US must deal with three separate entities, all posing significant problems for American interests: an IS threatening us, as well as our allies and partners, and a magnet for jihadist supporters world-wide; a KRG moving ever more towards a de jure breakup with Baghdad, raising the specter of a Near East-wide quest for a Kurdish nation state, and undermining existing borders; and a rump Iraq, dominated by Shia religious parties heavily influenced by Iran, and controlling what the International Energy Agency believes could well be exports of six million barrels of oil by 2020—almost two thirds of Saudi Arabia's exports.

Under these circumstances, the US should:

----deter and if necessary defeat IS attacks on Jordan and other partners and allies. This is the sine qua non of any effective American role. To carry it out the Administration must concede that its policies have generated huge doubts about America's military reliability. Thus actions, not just words.

--coordinate policies with Turkey, Jordan, Israel, and the Gulf States. That is easy to write but hard to implement. It would have to include more active US support for the Syrian opposition, agreement with other states on whom to support within it, and caution with the KRG, neither endorsing a independent status anathema not just to Baghdad but to Arab states, nor opposing KRG-Turkish cooperation on oil exports and security.

--conduct strikes against IS in both Iraq and Syria.

--recalibrate US policy towards Baghdad; to the extent it is willing to cooperate with us, and avoid provoking the Kurds and the Sunni Arabs further, then limited US military support under the FMS program should continue, as should direct US military action against IS attacks against Shia population centers. This policy will require constant review depending upon how influential Iran becomes in Baghdad, and how relations develop between Baghdad and its Kurdish and Sunni Arab citizens.

IRAN

The US should maintain limited exchanges with Iran on Iraq, as at a superficial level (unity of the state, fight against IS), there are common interests. But there are no common goals, and the Administration must be cautious in giving any impression that there is one. Here the mess that the Middle East has become severely hampers US freedom of action. Essentially, we see not one but two hegemonic Islamic radical forces intent on overthrowing the prevailing nation state order in the region—Al Qaeda especially IS, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Importantly, our allies in the common struggle for stability—Turkey, Israel, and the Sunni Arab states—see Iran as at least an equal threat to their survival as Al Qaeda, and we must respect that to gain their essential cooperation.

On the other hand, we should not be drawn into a regional “Sunni versus Shia” conflict. Such a conflict would tear the region apart, and any US involvement would have us violating our “we fight for liberal principles, not sectarian interests” policy that we have been able to maintain in the region and elsewhere, such as in the Balkans.

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

Much has been written blaming this or the last Administration, or this or that decision, for the crisis in Iraq and in the region. But the situation is so serious now that any way out of it will require decisive, difficult US action predicated on support from the American people. Thus, the less polemics about the past, the better. But there are certain lessons from our regional involvement since 2001, and earlier, that we should heed:

--As we've experienced, from Al Qaeda before 9/11 to Iraq since 2011, problems in the region absent decisive, heads up engagement by the US will keep getting worse to the point when, very late, and at great cost, the US will be compelled to act at far greater cost and risk than if acting earlier.

--Dramatic efforts to transform the underlying historical, political, social, ethnic-religious and ideological fundamentals of the Middle East are bound to fail. We have to deal with a dysfunctional region as it is.

--Putting American ground troops into Middle Eastern conflicts, as seen from Beirut and Mogadishu to Kabul and Baghdad, is a recipe for disaster unless they have as in 1991 a clear, achievable, purely military limited mission.

--But using limited force, from the air or sea, or through our allies, special operations, or other surrogates, must remain a major element in our response to regional instability, crisis and war. Such limited actions do not incur major costs, have limited escalation risks, and have repeatedly been tolerated or supported by the American people.

--Such measures are much in demand now. The Administration's 'not doing stupid stuff' admonishment is defined so broadly that any use of limited or indirect force is rejected as tantamount to another Iraq level 'adventure.' This thinking has brought us to the brink of disaster.