

**Testimony**

**House Foreign Affairs Committee**

**Joint Sub Committees**

**Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade**

**Middle East and North Africa**

**By**

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**on**

**ISIL: Political Turmoil in Iraq**

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**Full Committee Room 2172**

Thank you Chairman Poe, Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, ranking members Sherman and Deutch and members of the committee for inviting me to testify today on ISIL and political turmoil in Iraq. Permit me to acknowledge the distinguished panel of which I am honored to be a member.

ISIS as we at the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) reference it will for the purposes of my testimony be referred to as ISIL to be consistent with your desires.

ISIL is the new face of the Al Qaeda and the larger radical Islamist movement. ISIL has already accomplished what the 9/11 Al Qaeda, only dreamt about, but forfeited, when they over reached and attacked the American people. As we know, ISIL in 3 short years has managed to take control of a vast swath of territory, essentially villages, towns and cities from East of Aleppo in Syria through the Iraq / Syria border, rendering that border non-existent, to Anbar province in Iraq, west of Baghdad, to Mosul north of Baghdad, with fighting outside of Baghdad ongoing within a one hour drive. They have declared this territory “The Islamist State”, a bonafide caliphate, with al Baghdadi as the head of state. How did this happen? Was it a surprise? Absolutely not.

U.S. intelligence agencies have been quite aware of this threat, this is the failure of policy makers who ignored it. ISW has been monitoring and reporting on ISIL for almost 3 years as it systematically took control of territory in Syria, preferring this territorial control and imposing its own very harsh form of governance to actually fighting the Assad regime. Indeed rarely was there an occurrence where ISIL attacked Assad regime forces or even more bizarre that regime forces ever attacked ISIL, even when ISIL

was within striking distance by regime forces. This unusual reality may be explained by the fact that ISIL was the former organization, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) which the Syrian regime facilitated the movement of foreign fighters from Damascus airport to the Syrian / Iraq border into the hands of AQI. AQI was defeated in Iraq by 2009, an admission they made repeatedly in message traffic, calling off the flow of the foreign fighters.

Two years ago ISIL began a concentrated terrorist campaign in Mosul, Anbar province and in Baghdad. Mosul received particular attention with frequent suicide bombings, attacks on police stations and military outposts and last summer they began an assassination campaign to kill prominent government and military officials. These terrorist activities were a prelude to the army like conventional attack that ISIL made to seize Fallujah, eventually Mosul and much of northern Iraq.

ISIL represents the most menacing threat to Middle East stability that I have ever observed with stated objectives to expand to Jordan and beyond. Obviously, ISIL is a threat to US national security objectives in the Middle East and eventually a threat to the American people as it becomes a vast breeding ground for foreign fighters to include Americans, some of which has already occurred, as reported by Mr. Clapper, the Director of National Intelligence. In my view, this will only get worse.

ISIL must be stopped, it should be our top priority and it will only be done with the US in the lead in cooperation with our allies in the region. The US challenge is that we have never had a comprehensive strategy to stop radical Islam or to defeat it. As such it is on the rise throughout the Middle East and

Africa. We desperately need that strategy now and we must begin with ISIL before it doubles and triples in size. This is not an impenetrable force; it is relatively small, under ten thousand, and because of their harsh rule, they are very unpopular. ISIL's rapid success is due to its army like conventional tactics which is also its major vulnerability. ISIL can be effectively attacked in Syria and Iraq using air power to destroy known sanctuaries, staging bases, lines of communication and command and control facilities. Special operation forces should be clandestinely employed to attack high value targets particularly in Iraq but eventually expanded into Syria. The White House decision to assist the Free Syrian Army (FSA) is a step in the right direction. Before the recent Iraq invasion the FSA was the only force in Syria that fought ISIL.

Iraq needs our help certainly. Key policy decisions in 2009 to disengage from Iraq politically and to no longer help shape Iraq's political future was disastrous. Particularly in light of previous success in other post conflicts; Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Bosnia Herzegovina. Equally damaging in 2011 was leaving no counter terrorism force to pounce on the AQ if they reemerged or advisors to continue with the unfinished business of growing the capacity of the ISF. These US policy failures along with Maliki's political incompetence and malfeasance in undermining his opponents directly contributed to the alienation of Sunni tribes and the success of ISIL.

There is much we can do to assist Iraq, diplomatically, politically and militarily.

- **DIPLOMATIC:** Secretary Kerry should lead an effort to work with Sunni leaders in the region (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar) who have relationships with Iraq's Sunni politicians and Sunni tribal leaders to move them away from ISIL, while their ISIL support may provide them with a shortsighted near term gain, it endangers the entire region and the very survival of Iraq.
- **POLITICAL:** Dispatch to Iraq a team led by Ryan Crocker and David Petraeus to work with the Iraq political and military leadership to move them toward a unity government who reconciles with the reconcilable Sunni tribes (former Saddam Hussein regime Bathists, so called JRTN, are not reconcilable.) It is a known fact that the US envoy team currently in Iraq are only communication facilitators and are not influential in changing behavior.
- **MILITARY:** General Petraeus who has critical Iraq relationships and can tangibly assist Ambassador Crocker, would be instrumental in assisting with the leadership restructuring of Iraq's military. While ISIL's growth and development is not a surprise and is well documented, the rapid collapse of the Iraq army in Fallujah and Mosul, and in the north in general, was a major surprise. What we did know is that while Maliki was systematically purging his political opponents he was doing much the same to IA leaders, many who had distinguished themselves during the "Surge" in 2007 and 2008. Maliki replaced them with cronies and hacks who over time, because of their incompetence as leaders, drove down the morale of their units, so much so, that in 3 years, some of the units that fled in the face of the ISIL advance were only at 50% strength. Unit cohesion is the glue

that binds successful ground units and in these IA units there was none. Additionally, some of the generals fled first, which produced a panic among their subordinates.

Some of what we are doing now to help the IA makes sense, but more can be done. Certainly providing teams to conduct assessment of the IA is essential. The NY Times reported Sunday on some of that assessment to include Sunni informants within the IA, Shia militias who are now part of the IA and about 50% of the IA is capable of receiving advisors. While this is disturbing it is not surprising and confirms what ISW has been reporting for a month. Some will conclude this is a hopeless situation, in fact, it is not. No one should underestimate this tough challenge but US military advisors and planners can assist the IA with the defense of Baghdad to include the Baghdad international airport. Air ground controllers from US Army special forces should be placed in key and selected Iraq units who are vital to the defense, considering the security and risk to those teams. As such, they would assist in employing US attack helicopters and US strike aircraft in a close air support role. Some of the IA units have malign actors in them both Sunni and Shia. Gen. Petraeus could influence an Iraq political decision to remove them. This was successfully done in the past.

U.S. advisors can assist with the reconstruction of IA units that disintegrated along with establishing and overseeing a necessary training program. Finally, if the IA can generate the necessary combat power, U.S. advisors and planners can assist with the plans and execution of a counter offensive to retake lost territory. Air ground controllers and air power should assist the IA ground units. Let me be clear I am not suggesting a return of combat troops to Iraq with the exception of air ground controllers who will be

assisting IA ground units and special operations forces who would conduct combat operations against high value targets. Even with these measures there is no certainty that Baghdad will be successfully defended, although it is likely, and there is less certainty that the IA can reconstitute disintegrated units, retrain, and execute a successful counter offense to retake lost territory.

To do nothing more, diplomatically, politically and militarily however, almost guarantees with certainty that the Iraq as the world knew it will be gone with the prospect of ISIL dominating most of the country. Iran and Russia see this upheaval as opportunity to advance their national interests in the region. Russia desires to be a key player in the Middle East and influence other actions as they are doing successfully in Syria and Iran desires Iraq to be a client state similar to Syria. Maliki has brought them in as significant international supporters to assist with operations against ISIL which only enhances Maliki's political position due to the lack of tangible support by the US.

Let me conclude by simply saying this is a time for less handwringing about how we got here and who is at fault and more focus on US resolve to lead a determined effort to push back and eventually defeat ISIL, which should be a part of a larger comprehensive strategy to assist our partners in the region to stop the rise of radical Islam. Iraq needs capable and sophisticated US assistance to reconcile its damaging political differences by moving towards a unity government.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.