

SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE HEARING

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Iraq After Mosul

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Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, Members of the Committee, thank you for the honor and the opportunity to discuss the situation in Iraq. The battle to retake the country from ISIS is one of the most dynamic foreign policy challenges confronting the new administration. Iraqi and coalition forces have already liberated most of their country and are now engaged in a fierce fight to recapture the western half of Mosul.

But major questions remain regarding what comes next. Indeed, we stand at an inflection point in our policy on Iraq. Much of the military task will soon be accomplished. The next phase will be more complicated – to help Iraqis recover, reconcile and seek solutions to what at its root has always been a political problem. As we enter this phase, I want to touch on four urgent priorities and two enduring challenges the US will now face in Iraq.

The four urgent priorities are:

- 1) The humanitarian situation
- 2) Post-liberation governance of Mosul
- 3) Stabilization in liberated communities
- 4) Negotiating a follow-on military mission

The two enduring challenges include:

- 1) National reconciliation
- 2) The future of Shia militia in Iraq

Why Iraq Matters

First, let me be clear on one point. My remarks are premised on the assumption that the United States maintains a significant interest in the future of Iraq – one that merits continuing U.S. leadership and investment. As of last year, the U.S. had spent over \$10

billion to combat the ISIS in Iraq and Syria and deployed over 5,000 troops in Iraq alone to support that effort.ⁱ We made this investment because of the terrorist threat posed by ISIS to the United States and our allies. Once ISIS has been defeated militarily, a key objective should be to foster the degree of stability in Iraq necessary to prevent the reemergence of similar transnational terrorist threats. In this case, an ounce of prevention truly is worth a pound of cure.

A second US objective in Iraq should be to balance Iranian influence. The 2003 invasion of Iraq ended the US policy of dual containment of Iraq and Iran. It is not possible to return to the status quo ante. Iran will maintain significant sway inside Iraq for the foreseeable future, however, we can take steps to reinforce Iraqi sovereignty and independence and minimize the opportunity for Iraq to disintegrate or serve as a proxy in the regional competition for power. Working with long-standing partners in the Middle East to ensure that we are developing regional support for efforts to reinforce Iraq's sovereignty is vital for long-term U.S. interests.

None of this requires the U.S. to nation build or reconstruct Iraq, but it does mean that we should be prepared to protect the significant investment of the last two years through a continued military presence and targeted civilian assistance. We should share this burden by leveraging the resources of extensive membership of the counter-ISIS coalition and our partners in the region. This will only be possible if the US remains engaged and willing to lead.

Four Urgent Priorities

1) The humanitarian situation: While the number of those displaced by the Mosul operation has not been as high as many feared, the humanitarian situation remains serious. To date, roughly 160,000 civilians have been displaced due to fighting to retake the eastern half of Mosul and surrounding villages. Some 700,000-750,000 civilians remain trapped in areas still controlled by IS. The UN estimates that as many as 250,000 people could flee escalating fighting in the west of the city.ⁱⁱ

Two weeks ago, UN relief operations were temporarily paused to the liberated eastern half of Mosul because of a deterioration in the security situation. Significant shortages of drinking water remain a primary humanitarian concern in eastern Mosul. The UN has also announced that food, fuel, and other humanitarian supplies are unable to reach western Mosul and ongoing military operations have closed off possible access points for aid.

More needs to be done to address the immediate humanitarian needs of those impacted by the fighting. First, the Iraqi Security Forces need to secure the distribution of aid in and provide evacuation routes from western Mosul as the offensive continues.ⁱⁱⁱ Second, international coalition partners and other donors will need to increase their humanitarian assistance. The good news is that ninety-seven percent of the July 2016 Mosul Flash Appeal has been funded. But the UN estimates it will need another \$570 million for the next phases of the Mosul operation.^{iv}

2) Post-liberation governance of Mosul: Perhaps the biggest challenge facing a liberated Mosul will be governance. The plan to restore governance is to be led by the current Ninewa governor in exile. This mirrors the process in other liberated cities, but he is not from Mosul and has no indigenous powerbase. Former governor Najafi remains a controversial and possibly disruptive figure. The Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government have discussed post-liberation arrangements at length, but have not yet reached a shared understanding, and Turkey's presence has complicated the situation. The lack of an agreed plan creates incentives for those fighting to create facts on the ground from whence they can negotiate on the day after.

The key will be to find an arrangement that gives the people of Mosul confidence, restores the relationship with the government in Baghdad and reassures the KRG that Kurdish equities will be protected. One option would be for the Iraqi government to announce a political transitional period lasting up to 18 months once combat operations have ceased. A high-level committee could then be established to support the governor and help oversee the administration of Mosul and surrounding areas during this period. That committee could include representatives from Baghdad and Erbil. A senior U.S. official – probably of Ambassadorial rank - should support the committee and help serve as a broker.

3) Stabilization in liberated communities: ISIS has left much of Iraq in ruins. Iraqis returning home have found their communities destroyed. The Iraqi government is overwhelmed by the task of rebuilding in areas already liberated from ISIS. As Special Envoy Brett McGurk stated last year, “Stabilizing areas after [ISIS] can be even more important than clearing areas from [ISIS].”^v He's right: After the fighting stops, there will be a crucial window to begin humanitarian aid and establish some basic services and governance. Failure to do so risks squandering battlefield sacrifices.

Coalition diplomats often point to the return of displaced people as the metric of success for stabilization. The total number of people displaced by the ISIS crisis grew to 3.3 million people in 2016 and now hovers at just over three million. While ISIS has lost

over half its territory in Iraq, only one-third of those who fled their homes appear to have returned. This suggests that efforts to stabilize liberated areas lag dangerously behind the military campaign. To date, the UN has led on stabilization, and while its efforts have been commendable, the counter-ISIS coalition should bolster its role in this line of effort.

The first step would be for counter-ISIS coalition to strengthen its leadership for stabilization efforts. Currently, the coalition working group in charge of stabilization has few responsibilities beyond information sharing. One option would be to appoint a Baghdad-based coalition ambassador to serve as the civilian lead for stabilization on the ground. A coalition civilian lead could help integrate stabilization into coalition military campaign plans to ensure that there is a plan for the day after liberation.

Second, the United States should lead by example in supporting stabilization. The administration should deploy civilian contingency assets like the State Department's Bureau for Conflict and Stabilization and USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) to support UN efforts. OTI, in particular, has extensive experience working next to the military and through local authorities in conflict zones.

4) Negotiating a follow-on military mission: Finally, the single most pressing decision will be whether to keep U.S. soldiers in the country for a follow-on mission. The U.S. military presence in Iraq has expanded incrementally since mid-2014, and now includes more than 5,000 personnel at three air bases in Anbar and Ninewa and two Joint Operations Centers in Baghdad and Erbil.^{vi} The overall mission has also expanded to include close air support, fire support, logistical assistance, high-value targeting, and embedded U.S. forces behind the frontlines.

But even after Mosul has been liberated, Iraq will still require U.S. support to ensure enduring security. With help from the American-led anti-ISIS coalition, the Iraqi security forces have made impressive gains against ISIS after suffering a breathtaking collapse in mid-2014. But Iraqi forces will need help to protect both their battlefield and organizational gains for some time to come. Unfortunately, negotiations over a U.S. follow-on force will take place at a time of declining American leverage. Iraqi leaders are already under pressure to reduce the U.S. military footprint. Prime Minister Al-Abadi has signaled his intent to do so immediately after the liberation of Mosul, so we need to start talking to the Iraqis now about the future of a U.S. military presence.

A follow-on mission should continue to train and equip our partners – especially the Counter Terrorism Service. But the final troop number must carefully balance military requirements against political realities in Baghdad. Insistence on a large force with a broad mandate and expansive rules of engagement could trigger Iraqi political backlash.

A force somewhere between 3,000 to 5,000 troops should be sufficient. The key will be to maintain the US footprint in both Anbar and Ninewa to reassure Sunni Arab communities that they will not once again be abandoned. The timeline for agreement is short: Iraq's 2018 elections could produce a prime minister less willing to cooperate with Washington.

Two Enduring Challenges

1) National reconciliation: Over the long term, the key to lasting victory over the Islamic State and stability in Iraq will be national reconciliation. We have learned the hard way that American troops cannot provide long-term stability if Iraqi leaders cannot heal their divided politics. Sunni Arab communities must be offered a tangible stake in the future of the country. To date the U.S. strategy has been to nurture reconciliation through support for the devolution of authority to local government, the mobilization of Sunni Arabs into the security force, and legislation like the amnesty law that passed last August.^{vii}

Ultimate success or failure for reconciliation will rest with Iraqis. Outside actors like the United States should approach such efforts with humility and measured expectations. And yet the fact that these non-military dimensions are so vital to Iraq's future security and the fight against ISIS means that much more must be done.

First, the administration should consider additional resources to accelerate government decentralization.^{viii} Second, it should also accelerate efforts to recruit Sunni Arabs into the security forces through the U.S. Department of Defense's Iraq Train and Equip Fund. Finally, the embassy in Baghdad should encourage recent local attempts at reconciliation. Two Shia leaders and a Sunni Arab political bloc have launched competing reconciliation initiatives. If these efforts are genuine, the United States should be prepared to nurture them where possible through increased diplomatic engagement and presence in Iraq.

For their part, the Kurds have been amongst the most steadfast and effective partners against ISIS. They will want to be rewarded at a time that aspirations for independence are running high. While this ultimate Kurdish objective does not appear realistic at this time, there needs to be a channel of communication with the KRG to discuss how they can be compensated for their sacrifice.

2) The future of Shia militia in Iraq: One of the biggest threats to reconciliation remains sectarian Shia militias. Estimates of the total Shiite militiamen in Iraq vary widely from 100,000-120,000 – mostly organized under the banner of the Popular Mobilization Front (PMFs). Roughly half of the PMF units were formed out of pre-

existing Iraqi militias, while the rest are new formations mobilized in response to Grand Ayatollah Sistani's 2014 fatwa.^{ix} A large proportion receives direct Iranian backing. Many of the Iranian-backed militia were responsible for killing some 500 U.S. troops from 2003-2011.^x

U.S. policy towards the PMF has evolved. In 2014, U.S. refused to provide them military support, but since mid-2015, American policy has evolved to include air and other support for those PMF units not beholden to Iran.^{xi} On November 26, the Iraqi government passed legislation making the PMF an official component of Iraq's security forces with equal status to the army,^{xiii} but there has been little movement by the Iraqi government to implement the November legislation. Iraq's president has indicated that there are several possible options including turning the PMF into a reservist force, or full integration into the existing structure of the Iraqi armed forces.

However, PMF leaders exercise considerable political influence inside Iraq. There is a very real risk that the PMF could take root as a Hezbollah-style Iranian proxy. Such a development would threaten Iraqi sovereignty and undercut attempts at national reconciliation. There are no easy solutions to managing the threat posed by Iranian-backed PMF units, but the U.S. could play a constructive role in facilitating the demobilization or integration of the remaining PMF units into the ISF.

Endnotes

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- ^x Kenneth Katzman, “Iran’s Foreign and Defense Politics,” Congressional Research Service, February 6, 2017, available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44017.pdf>
- ^{xi} Kenneth Katzman, “Iran’s Foreign and Defense Politics.”
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