The Day After: What the United States Can Do

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Brief Analysis

As the Nuri mosque, the place where ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdad declared his caliphate in 2014, appears in the crosshairs of advancing Iraqi troops, the military defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the Iraqi theater looks virtually certain. But as the end of the military stage nears, the urgency rises for the new U.S. administration to identify realistic steps for corresponding political progress.

After the U.S. troop surge in 2007 and the decision of Sunni tribes to turn on al-Qaeda in Iraq, the country witnessed an incredible reduction in violence. But subsequent U.S. disengagement and military withdrawal in 2011 left a vacuum in which the sectarian policies of former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki and the resulting disenfranchisement of Sunni Arabs created a downward spiral of protests and state violence. The rise of ISIS was fueled to some extent by the antagonistic attitude of Sunni regional powers, namely Saudi Arabia and Turkey, who saw Maliki as a dangerous Iranian ally. During Maliki's second term, from 2010 to 2014, Iraq lost a precious opportunity to consolidate stability and democratic politics. Instead, by the end of 2013, Iraq was once again staring down the abyss of civil war. A repetition of that relapse to violence is quite possible but does not have to be inevitable. Here are six recommended actions through which the United States can help Iraq on a positive trajectory after the defeat of ISIS.

First, the United States should start by discouraging its own allies from undermining progress. For years the United States and its Middle Eastern allies have had different priorities. Saudi Arabia and Turkey are wary of Iran's role and the predominantly-Shia Hashd al-Shaabi paramilitaries and fear Iran's allies will translate their expanded military role into an improved Iranian political standing in the regional power struggle. While the concerns are legitimate, the methods are counterproductive. U.S. military intelligence, for example, has been seeing evidence of increased weapons shipments to Sunni tribes in Anbar; this is undoubtedly Riyadh's preparation for the next chapter of the struggle for primacy in Iraq. It is critical for the United States to dissuade this course of action, which could end up producing the next generation of radical Sunni militancy. Arbitrarily arming tribes in Anbar will exacerbate the Shia Iraqis' security dilemma post-ISIS, strengthen sectarian polarization, and force Baghdad to stay close to Iran. As the new White House reevaluates traditional U.S. alliances, Saudi policy undermining the anti-ISIS campaign should act as a legitimate area of scrutiny.

Second, the United States should extend more technical assistance to help Baghdad fulfill its promises of economic and political reform. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's government was formed on a political agreement that

intended to fix the problems created by his predecessor's autocratic and sectarian policies. The United States should put the reform agenda back at the forefront and extend more guidance and technical support wherever possible, with priorities given to eliminating high-level corruption and supporting the rule of law. Recently, the World Bank started an initiative that would make Iraqi financial support contingent on progress by the Baghdad government in reconciliation. This idea would benefit from the development of clear parameters for evaluation and implementation and could then serve as an example for other supporting states and organizations to further advance reforms.

Third, the fragmentation of major political blocks has made national political consensus very difficult. Although it has been a problem among Sunni Arabs since 2003, it is increasingly impacting Shias and Kurds as well. The Kurds, who traditionally vote in unison in the federal parliament, broke this habit in 2016 when disagreements over the federal budget and commercial ties between their provinces and Baghdad split their votes in the Council of Representatives. More recently, they went as far as to threaten cutting oil flows by force if the economic situation does not improve.

There are several options for assuaging fragmentation. Enlarging a coalition of Shia parties that are opposed to Iran's influence in Iraq would fall in line with the Trump administration's stance on countering Iran. The United States should direct its diplomacy to shore up support for Abadi within the Shia political establishment and weaken Iran's allies — namely, Maliki and militias with ties to Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps. A prudent but perhaps unpopular idea is to engage the Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and influence him to tip the balance in favor of Abadi's government and against Iran and its allies. Sadr, despite wielding a form of anti-Iranian Shia Arab nationalism and adopting a more moderate tone in recent years, is a longtime foe of the United States. But as they say: if you want to make peace, you don't talk to your friends.

Additionally, there needs to be a stronger push for inclusive political compromise in Kurdistan. The Kurdish people want independence, and their region has been the most stable part of Iraq, but these facts are overshadowed by the political deadlock since the region's parliament was suspended more than two years ago. Peaceful and temporary disengagement of the Kurdish region from the rest of Iraq may be the only feasible path to stability. Two years of dysfunction has severely weakened trust between the major Kurdish parties, and opened the door for outside interference. The United States should step back in and prevent Iran and Turkey from further polarizing Kurdish politics and playing the parties against one another. The first objective should be to reconvene the Kurdish parliament.

That being said, fostering Sunni Arab unity is critical and the Saudi and Turkish governments are the best-positioned actors to use their influence to encourage Sunnis to adopt a unified, peaceful political agenda post-ISIS. The United States should impress upon Ankara and Riyadh - and other Sunni capitals - that their interests are better served when Sunni Arab hardliners in Iraq abandon the rejectionist attitude for the post-Saddam political order, a stance which put their community in near-constant conflict with the state since 2003. Iraq's Sunni Arabs can be more effective at balancing Iran's influence and Shia dominance when they are integrated in Iraq's political and military structures than when they are surviving on the margins. After getting Riyadh and Ankara on board, Washington should lay the groundwork for inclusive talks between Sunni groups, perhaps under the umbrella of the United Nations, to formulate joint objectives for their communities.

Fourth, special attention should be paid to the next local elections in Iraq, currently slated for September 2017. These will be crucial to identifying legitimate representatives of various communities. This is exceptionally important because the legitimacy of previously elected representatives has been tarnished as Sunni communities continue to be the victims of massive displacement and unspeakable brutality under ISIS. The emergence of a new class of representatives is vital to both local and national level reconciliation pacts. The United States and other stakeholders should direct their energy at undertaking the necessary preparations to ensure that elections can be

held fairly in retaken towns. This is critical to ensuring that local, and later general, elections can reliably reflect the will of the various communities.

Fifth, there needs to be an effort to break the deadlock on armed forces reform. Ethno-sectarian imbalance in Iraq's security forces is a problem that has haunted the country ever since the regime change in 2003. The fall of Mosul and rise of ISIS is often attributed to Maliki's policy of assigning predominantly Shia security forces commanded by inept loyalists to predominantly Sunni regions. Previous proposals to give Sunni Arabs greater representation in security forces, either as their own National Guard force in their provinces or as a fair share in the national army via conscription, have failed to advance through Iraq's political gridlock. The prime minister, as commander-in-chief, backed by article 9 of the Constitution, could instruct that recruitment in the army and other federal-level security forces must follow specified quotas for each province based on the population. It would seem a fair option for a military quota to mirror seat allocation for the provinces in the Council of Representatives. A realistic multi-year implementation timeline with annual targets could in five or ten years give Iraq an army that truly reflects the country's demographics. This mechanism does not need to include the Kurdistan region, which has its own armed forces.

Finally, the United States should remain engaged militarily and avoid letting post-ISIS fatigue lead to another episode of disengagement like that which followed the surge. An expansion of the U.S. military presence should not be ruled out if the anti-ISIS campaign required it, but the focus should be on using existing assets to achieve a few specific goals. For example, there must be a commitment to extended and effective surveillance and reconnaissance support, because as ISIS loses control of urban centers it will resort to creating sleeper cells and desert camps from which to launch raids. The U.S. military can be of enormous long-term help to the Iraqis, who lack the military capacity to monitor large swaths of territory. There should also be support for strengthening the formal chain of command of armed forces, and on replenishing the special forces units that were hit hardest by combat against ISIS while also gradually raising the standards of regular army units.
These steps do not represent instant, easy, or complete solutions to Iraq's problems. They are, however, practical remedies that the United States can pursue at relatively low costs. The successful implementation of these objectives has the potential to positively change the underlying conditions of an increasingly intractable sociopolitical struggle, and prevent the rebirth of violent extremism under a new title after ISIS. ❖

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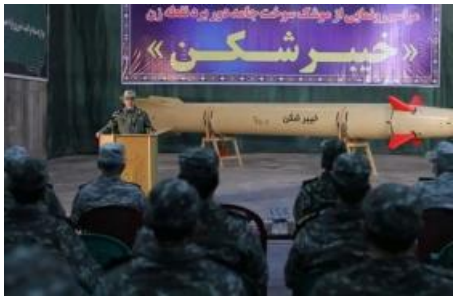

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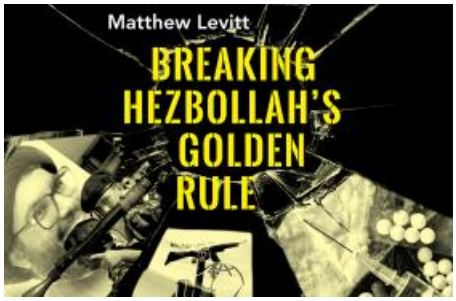

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