

As the ISIS Tide Recedes

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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The beginning of the end of ISIS's dominance over the Sunni Arab region of Iraq is at hand, following the Iraqi security forces' clearance of ISIS from most of Fallujah, the first Iraqi city to fall to the terrorist group. Only one major Iraqi city remains in ISIS' hands: Mosul. While it will be a tough nut to crack, extensive pressure all along ISIS' frontier in Syria and Iraq could produce an easier-than-anticipated victory. Much will depend on whether the Obama Administration will increase its military forces in the anti-ISIS fight, take more risks, push the 'rules-of-engagement' envelope, and accelerate the full court press. Certainly after the Orlando attack, complacency about an ISIS "in retreat" is unwise.

Still, within a year, ISIS will likely be essentially cleared from Iraq. The question then will be, can Iraq learn from the errors that fueled ISIS' rise and, in particular, move towards a cross-sectarian, cross-religious concept of the nation? Much will depend on Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who has two more years in office before new parliamentary elections. But he cannot wait. Iraq's problems are immediate, requiring responses even before ISIS is eradicated.'

The stakes are huge. Iraq remains the center of the Middle East. It is the "land of two rivers" with considerable agricultural potential. Its oil reserves -- two thirds of Saudi Arabia's -- rival Iran's. As the most "balanced" ethnically and religiously of the region's non-homogenous states, it is either a model for a Middle Eastern future that acknowledges diversity or one of chaos, terror, and repression. Finally, as the "subject" of three separate American-led international coalitions since 1990, Iraq's fate is closely tied to the West's efforts to partner with key Middle East states to promote stability.

The United States and the international community can nudge Iraq in the right direction but only cautiously. The U.S. policy community is full of bold ideas and sweeping programs to reinvent Iraq. None will work.

Rather, U.S. policymakers must accept that the U.S. and the international community at best can only contribute at the margins. Even at the height of U.S. power in the country, accomplishments were limited: a democratic constitutional system that has withstood ISIS, oil price collapse, and uprisings by the Sadrist faction; an oil sector producing over four million barrels of oil a day; and limited modus operandi between the Kurds in the north and Baghdad.

But if the U.S. could not even at the height of its power promote major constitutional or societal transformation, Washington,

along with the rest of the international community, can avoid the worst and help the Iraqis navigate towards a "least bad" azimuth and avoid collapse.

The first priority is to move emergency assistance to the Sunni Arabs displaced by ISIS and the recapture of Ramadi and Fallujah. The U.S. and other international actors can generate assistance funds rapidly and effectively, but such "efficient deployment" requires intense sustained attention by policymakers and a willingness to take certain risks.

The second problem is the Abadi Government. Prime Minister Abadi's flaws are known and include his unwillingness to take advice, failure to build a coalition, and bad management style. On the margins, the U.S. already has helped him, and such help should be accelerated. Promoting political compromise will require the U.S. embassy and top Washington officials to "jawbone" Abadi and other political leaders to pull together. The U.S. should not deploy empty threats, such as cutting assistance and military operations, if Washington's will is not complied with. But the U.S. can emphasize that the "quality" of U.S. help, for example, the speed of execution and flexibility of the latest IMF multi-billion dollar assistance package, is dependent upon a stable Baghdad political scene and outreach to Sunni Arabs.

Looking forward, U.S. led international efforts with Iraq's Sunni Arabs can focus on three main components. First is continued opposition to Shia "Popular Mobilization" militias in Sunni areas, and building on Abadi's and Grand Ayatollah Sistani's warnings to the Shia militias. The U.S. was successful on this in the Ramadi fight, but could not prevent the militias involvement in the Fallujah battle, which led to the mistreatment of Sunni Arabs.

Second is creating Sunni Arab self-policing, with reconstituted local police forces and if possible, a National Guard similar to the Shia Popular Mobilization forces.

Third is the revitalization of local politics in the Sunni Arab areas recently under ISIS control. The Iraqi constitution offers considerable latitude to provincial authorities, but they need outside aid and counsel, and tolerance from the central government.

While none of these proposals will change underlying dynamics, they could tilt the scales towards both a decent political outcome and immunization against renewed Sunni Islamic extremism.

Furthermore, the U.S., Abadi, and other political leaders should together stress to the Iranians the need for a limited U.S. presence in Iraq and restraint by the Iranian-backed Shia militias. Teheran in return would benefit from a unified, stable, politically friendly Iraq.

Finally, the "cold" stalemate between the Kurdistan Regional Government and Baghdad should be maintained. U.S. leverage is high with the Kurds. Washington must discourage Kurdish independence and ensure the Kurds continue their positive role in the Iraqi government and parliament.

With such a feasible program, Prime Minister Abadi will likely remain in power, in a country slowly recovering from ISIS and the oil price collapse, until the next elections in 2018.

James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and former U.S. ambassador to Iraq. ❖

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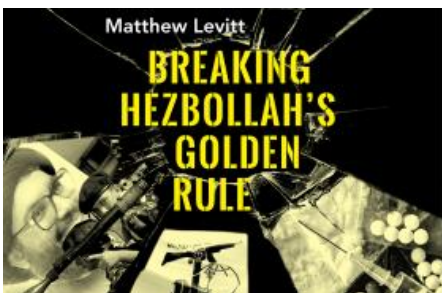
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