

Acting Now Can Reverse an ISIS-Iran Power Grab in Iraq

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Two former U.S. ambassadors explain why a more aggressive campaign against ISIS is necessary to preserving a unified, pro-American Iraq.

In our view, based on much experience in Iraq, the country is not lost, but is at a critical impasse. Much of what the United States set out to accomplish has survived, but two antithetical forces that are both hostile to us -- ISIS and Iran -- seek to control Iraq and destabilize the region. The United States can help its Iraqi friends and help stability, beginning with a more effective, rapid campaign against ISIS and enhanced assistance to the Baghdad and Erbil governments. But if it does not, the implications for regional order are frightening.

We worked together at the American embassy in Baghdad from 2004 to 2005 when Iraq was sliding into internal strife and horrendous fighting. Each of us volunteered for extended additional tours of duty in Iraq, adding to our perspectives of developments there. We were up close to the fighting, and the huge efforts American military and civilian personnel made to help Iraqis hold their country together. Given the predictions of some analysts that Iraq is a failed or failing state, we just visited Iraq to see the situation firsthand.

Americans paid a high price in Iraq, and thus have high standards for what the Iraqi state should look like. Iraq has not reached many of those standards, but our disappointment that Shiite and Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Christians, Turkmen, and many other ethnic and religious groups do not all work together easily does not mean that Iraq is or will be a failed state. In fact, after the vicious fighting in Baghdad less than a decade ago, the capital now is relatively

calm and physically looks far better. The Iraqi parliament rambunctiously debates big issues and chooses the prime minister and his cabinet, peacefully and in broad accordance with the constitution. How many other states in the region can say this? Sunni Arabs we met from the three main Sunni Arab provinces all urged that empowered local governments be established within a united Iraqi state. This is a far cry from their demands ten years ago that Iraq, like its Arab neighbors, have an overpowering central government, and the new Sunni Arab thinking is far closer in vision to the 2005 constitution that Iraqi Shiites and Kurds largely wrote. Relations between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil are difficult. However, Erbil has not declared independence, Iraqi Kurds enjoy wide autonomy within the Iraqi state, and Iraqi Kurdish politics themselves are evolving. Baghdad and Erbil continue to negotiate quietly over how oil export revenue streams are to be handled. The tone between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdish region's officials is vastly better and more pragmatic than it was a decade ago. It helps that both governments understand they face a common enemy in ISIS. Thus, success in building a federal Iraqi state is not assured, but it is entirely possible.

But this is an especially challenging moment. Baghdad and Erbil face linked political and financial crises, the latter more dangerous for the Kurds, the former more so for Baghdad. These political and financial crises are partially generated and certainly exacerbated by ISIS. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi faces great challenges from Iranian-backed political and militia hardliners who reject reforms and take a dim view of national reconciliation. Iraqis of all stripes believe Iran is, like in Syria, on a maximalist path for power in Iraq, exploiting the lack of success against ISIS. Now it may be possibly reinforced with Russia, given the intelligence coordination agreement (although the Iraqi government says it will not coordinate operations with Moscow). If Shiite-dominated Baghdad and the south fall entirely under Tehran's sway, reconciliation among the country's three major groups would end, pushing a more sectarian "Shiite state" even closer to the Iranians. This is the recipe that the ISIS leader is banking on, as a nasty, sectarian Shiite state would ensure plenty of recruits for the ISIS "caliph" to replace his battle losses.

It is critical that Iraq not go down this path. If so, Iraqis and the region will blame the United States for not defeating ISIS and then letting a partner fall. An Iraq joined with Iran and Syria would create the "Shiite Crescent" King Abdullah of Jordan has warned against. Furthermore, Iraq's southern oil reserves of 140 billion barrels along with Iran's similar reserves surpass Saudi Arabia's 268 billion barrels. A power shift of this dimension in the middle of the region to the advantage of Iran (and, less so, ISIS) could push the region, some of America's closest allies and partners, and ultimately the United States itself into a broader Sunni-Shiite regional conflict. This long-term Sunni-Shiite war would benefit both Russia and extremists who also hate the West, especially the United States.

Preserving a unified, pro-American Iraq is a vital U.S. interest. Central to preserving this interest is a more aggressive campaign against ISIS. The U.S. "degrade-destroy" strategy assumes that time is on our side ("three to five years"; sometimes we hear "a decade"). It is not. Failure to act in Syria has produced ISIS, then the refugee flow that endangers EU political stability, and now Russia's dangerous reintroduction into the region. Further unpleasant surprises are one of the few reliable predictions we can make if the United States does not get ahead of the events curve. How to make the U.S. military campaign against ISIS more aggressive and faster moving is a military issue beyond us, but given the great U.S. military strength, one can assume the constraints in doing so are primarily political and thus a fair subject of public debate. Vladimir Putin, wielding a weaker military tool, did not let political and logistical concerns restrain his move into the region. The brilliant U.S. Special Forces rescue operation of October 22 suggests what more we could do. Public support is there, according to the just-released 2015 Chicago Council Survey. Apart from military action, the United States should focus on a few critical goals -- helping Baghdad and the Sunni Arabs come to a mutually agreed deal, relieving some of the crushing financial burden on the Kurds -- most feasibly by helping with costs associated with refugees and internally displaced persons and getting needed weapons to Erbil, and not ignoring internal governance problems but rather spurring Baghdad and Erbil to address them in order to bolster longer-term stability.

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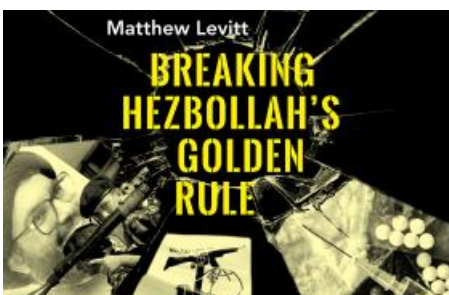
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