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The Rise of ISIL: Iraq and Beyond (Part I)

by [James Jeffrey](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[James Jeffrey](#)

Ambassador Jeffrey is a former U.S. special representative for Syria engagement and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey and Iraq; from 2013-2018 he was the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. He currently chairs the Wilson Center's Middle East Program.



Articles & Testimony

A former ambassador to Iraq discusses the ideal plan for U.S. action on the Iraq crisis -- and how to proceed if that plan proves unachievable due to rapidly deteriorating conditions on the ground.

The following are Ambassador Jeffrey's prepared remarks submitted to the House Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, and the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa. [Read Michael Eisenstadt's testimony](#) at the same joint hearing, or [watch video of the entire event](#).

The turn of events in Iraq over the past month, leading to the establishment of the Islamic State (IS) by the al-Qaeda in Iraq offshoot group Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), is a stunning blow to U.S. policy and objectives in the Middle East. The creation of an extremist quasi-state analogous to Afghanistan under the Taliban carries the risk of further escalation, including a regional Sunni-Shiite conflagration and a dramatic loss of U.S. influence in the region. Simultaneously, in part as trigger, in part as reaction to this development, we are facing a militant Iran on the march, allied with Syria's Assad, Hezbollah, and some in Iraq. The U.S. government must counter both the IS threat and the overall deterioration of stability throughout the region. This is an emergency, not an everyday crisis, and the caution that characterizes U.S. actions often is inappropriate. The costs of doing nothing significant now are greater than the risks of most actions short of committing ground troops.

The significance of this situation can be seen by juxtaposing it with President Obama's description of America's vital interests in the Middle East in his September 2013 UN General Assembly Speech: responding to external aggression against our allies and partners, ensuring the free flow of energy from the region, dismantling terrorist networks that threaten our people, and not tolerating the development or use of weapons of mass destruction. The rise of the IS,

with control over up to six million people and massive military equipment and funding, in close proximity to some of the largest oil fields in the world, and bordering our NATO ally Turkey and security partners Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, threatens three of the president's four vital interests. If the situation deteriorates further, it will likely threaten the fourth, development of weapons of mass destruction, as Iran is even less likely to forego such weapons in the face of a possible regional conflict arising from the IS threat.

The president's course of action outlined in his Iraq speech of June 19 is sensible: protect our Baghdad embassy, strengthen our intelligence and military presence in and around Iraq, increase assistance to the Iraqi military, and press the Iraqi political system to support a new, inclusive government that can reach out to estranged Sunni Arabs and Kurds and maintain the country's unity; only then with our help can it begin to retake areas held by the IS. Consider this Plan A. While this remains the best option, and actions to achieve it are discussed below, it is not clear if we still have time to achieve it. Iraq is functionally split into three states -- the IS, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and rump Iraq governed out of Baghdad, which is almost entirely cut off from the KRG by the IS and marauding Sunni insurgents. Mass murders of Sunni and Shiite prisoners and civilians by Shiite militias and ISIL, respectively, exacerbate the divisions further. The administration thus must focus on a Plan B in case Iraq's current divisions grow even deeper.

PLAN A

To achieve the president's objective of a unified, inclusive Iraq to which we can provide significant new military assistance including airstrikes, the following needs to occur in the days ahead:

- The Iraqi parliament, charged with forming a new government after the March elections, must decide on a prime minister other than Nouri al-Maliki. There is absolutely no chance of Iraq remaining united, or of the Iraqi security forces performing effectively, or of an inclusive government appealing to Kurds and Sunni Arabs, with him still at the helm. The ink in written commitments by Iraqi leaders to reach out to other communities over the past eleven years would fill several bathtubs; what is needed is not new promises, but concrete action. The most convincing such action would be for Maliki to step down; failing that, for the Shiite parties to coalesce behind essentially any alternative candidate to force him out. Maliki is rightly associated with the worst forms of sectarianism, and only his departure would convince now highly skeptical Kurds and Sunni Arabs that a Shiite Arab-dominated political system will take their concerns into account. Removing Maliki is a job for the Iraqis, not the United States, and Washington has to be careful not to advocate his departure openly, as that will only strengthen him. But we must make clear that serious U.S. military engagement, now desperately needed, will come only with a different leadership.
- The Kurds must be brought back into the Iraqi camp. Their dispute with Maliki and, on a larger level, Baghdad has grown more serious since Mosul fell due to serious errors by both Erbil and Baghdad. Finding a replacement for Maliki is necessary but not sufficient to win the Kurds back. This will require further compromises on Kurdish oil exports and building on a December 2013 agreement not carried out, and Baghdad needs to restart payment of the Kurds' 17 percent share of southern oil exports. In turn the Kurds, as they have acknowledged, will have to share their oil proceeds 17-83 percent between themselves and Baghdad, and exercise restraint on the status of the Kirkuk field now in their military power. The United States, once the above measures are taken, should pressure both the KRG and its not-so-silent patron, Turkey, that the Kurds must participate fully in the central government and cease threatening an independence referendum. What's in this for the Kurds? Full independence is a chimera given not only Iranian but Turkish sensitivities; for the next few years at least, a 17% share of all of Iraq's oil exports will earn Erbil more money than exporting from the north, even with Kirkuk, and tranquility between Erbil and Baghdad will allow both to focus on the greater threat -- IS.
- The new Iraqi leadership should make clear that it will institute similar oil earnings distribution policies in the Sunni provinces, along the lines seen to some degree with the KRG and oil-producing provinces. While politicians' promises

to distribute wealth equitably and promote economic development are fine, they have been heard many times with little result, especially in Sunni areas. Only such a dramatic, concrete commitment will win credibility in the Sunni areas.

- The United States should begin very limited strikes against ISIL elements to support Kurdish *peshmerga*, Sunni Arab tribal fighters, and Iraqi central government security forces when the latter are defending the approaches to Baghdad or other majority Shiite population areas. Such strikes could shift the military momentum away from the IS and show all those fighting it that the United States, under the right conditions, not only will strike the IS, but strike it much harder. Given prior administration reluctance to use military force, such demonstrations now are necessary. Limited U.S. strikes could leverage our efforts for an inclusive central government. But we would have to be careful, as the president said, not to give the impression that we are taking sides with a sectarian government against the Sunnis. The strikes thus would have to be coordinated with friendly Iraqi Sunni Arabs and regional partners.
- Simultaneously, the United States should rapidly deploy the \$500 million it has committed to train and equip the Syrian opposition. The United States should begin strikes against the IS in Syria, and once significant U.S.-trained and equipped forces are in the field, strike Syrian government forces opposing them.
- Once these steps have been taken, the United States can plan with the Iraqi government, KRG, friendly Iraqi Sunni Arabs, and regional partners to retake those Iraqi areas now held by the IS. Such a counterinsurgency plan would include aggressive U.S. training, equipping, coordinating, intelligence, and airstrikes, along with action by Sunni Arabs willing, with our help, to take on the IS.

PLAN B

While the above plan offers the best way forward, it may soon be too late to implement it, as the divisions between the various Iraqi groups deepen, the KRG moves toward virtual independence, and Maliki entrenches himself in office. Were this to occur, the United States must deal with three separate entities, all posing significant problems for American interests: an IS that threatens us, as well as our allies and partners, and serves as a magnet for jihadist supporters worldwide; a KRG moving ever more toward a de jure breakup with Baghdad, raising the specter of a Near East-wide quest for a Kurdish nation-state and undermining existing borders; and a rump Iraq, dominated by Shiite religious parties heavily influenced by Iran and controlling what the International Energy Agency believes could well be exports of six million barrels of oil by 2020 -- almost two-thirds as large as Saudi Arabia's exports.

Under these circumstances, the United States should:

- Deter and if necessary defeat IS attacks on Jordan and other partners and allies. This is the sine qua non of any effective American role. To carry it out, the administration must concede that its policies have generated huge doubts about America's military reliability -- thus actions, not just words.
- Coordinate policies with Turkey, Jordan, Israel, and the Gulf states. That is easy to write but hard to implement. It would have to include more active U.S. support for the Syrian opposition, agreement with other states on whom to support within it, and caution with the KRG, neither endorsing an independent status anathema to Baghdad and Arab states, nor opposing KRG-Turkish cooperation on oil exports and security.
- Conduct strikes against the IS in both Iraq and Syria.
- Recalibrate U.S. policy toward Baghdad. To the extent it is willing to cooperate with us and avoid provoking the Kurds and the Sunni Arabs further, then limited U.S. military support under the FMS program should continue, as should direct U.S. military action against IS attacks against Shiite population centers. This policy will require constant review depending upon how influential Iran becomes in Baghdad, and how relations develop between Baghdad and its Kurdish and Sunni Arab citizens.

IRAN

The United States should maintain limited exchanges with Iran on Iraq, as at a superficial level (unity of the state, fight against the IS), there are common interests. But there are no common goals, and the administration must be cautious in giving any impression that there is one. Here the mess that the Middle East has become severely hampers U.S. freedom of action. Essentially, we see not one but two hegemonic Islamic radical forces intent on overthrowing the prevailing nation-state order in the region -- al-Qaeda and similar jihadist movements (especially the IS) and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Importantly, our allies in the common struggle for stability -- Turkey, Israel, and the Sunni Arab states -- see Iran as at least an equal threat to their survival as al-Qaeda, and we must respect that to gain their essential cooperation.

On the other hand, we should not be drawn into a regional "Sunni versus Shiite" conflict. Such a conflict would tear the region apart, and any U.S. involvement would have us violating our "we fight for liberal principles, not sectarian interests" policy, which we have been able to maintain in the region and elsewhere, such as the Balkans.

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

Much has been written blaming this or the previous administration, or this or that decision, for the crisis in Iraq and the region. But the situation is so serious now that any way out of it will require decisive, difficult U.S. action predicated on support from the American people. Thus, the less polemics about the past, the better. But there are certain lessons from our regional involvement since 2001 and earlier that we should heed:

- As we've experienced from al-Qaeda before 9/11 to Iraq since 2011, problems in the region absent decisive, heads-up engagement by the United States will keep getting worse to the point when, very late, and at great cost, the United States will be compelled to act at far greater risk than if acting earlier.
- Dramatic efforts to transform the underlying historical, political, social, ethnic-religious, and ideological fundamentals of the Middle East are bound to fail. We have to deal with a dysfunctional region as it is.
- Putting American ground troops into Middle Eastern conflicts, as seen from Beirut and Mogadishu to Kabul and Baghdad, is a recipe for disaster unless they have (as in 1991) a clear, achievable, limited, purely military mission.
- But using limited force, from the air or sea, or through our allies, special operations, or other surrogates, must remain a major element in our response to regional instability, crisis, and war. Such limited actions do not incur major costs, have limited escalation risks, and have repeatedly been tolerated or supported by the American people.
- Such measures are much in demand now. The administration's "not doing stupid stuff" admonishment is defined so broadly that any use of limited or indirect force is rejected as tantamount to another Iraq-level "adventure." This thinking has brought us to the brink of disaster.

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

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1111 19th Street NW - Suite 500
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