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Defeating the Islamic State in Iraq

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The RAND Corporation

Defeating the Islamic State in Iraq²

**Before the Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate**

September 17, 2014

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Corker, and distinguished committee members, thank you for allowing me to testify before you today on this critical topic.

This afternoon I will first discuss how the self-described Islamic State, or IS, was able to sweep through northwestern Iraq with such rapidity, and then I will outline options the U.S. and its coalition allies might take in order to attempt to free northern and western Iraq from IS dominance. The thrust of my proposition here is that the success or failure of any coalition effort to defeat IS—and ultimately to stabilize Iraq—hinges not on tactical considerations or tribal engagement efforts, but on the more critical issue of Sunni Iraqi reconciliation. I believe the new anti-IS coalition can succeed if it predicates all of its actions in Iraq on national reconciliation between Sunni and Shia' Iraqis. If political reconciliation is not the core aspect of an anti-IS strategy then coalition efforts are likely to fail in the long run.

Islamic State Sweeps In To Northern Iraq

There are many tactical, or perhaps localized reasons why IS and its temporary nationalist insurgent allies were able to achieve so much success in June and July. These include a patient yet aggressive infiltration of IS assets into northern Iraq through the spring, major gaps in Iraqi Security Force (ISF) capabilities in Nineweh Province, and also a series of IS victories in Syria and western Iraq that generated operational momentum. The Iraqi Army units in the Mosul area had alienated local Iraqis and lost nearly all vestiges of popular support. These units may have also been stripped of some of their equipment and personnel to shore up units fighting in Anbar Province. Morale in the northern Iraqi Army forces was low, leadership was weak, and IS

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capitalized brilliantly on their own operational surprise. Other Iraqi Army units that might have responded to the IS invasion of Mosul were tied down in the west or were simply incapable of the kind of rapid planning and movement required for operational-level quick reaction. IS succeeded in part because of Iraqi Army weakness, but also in great part due to their own military competence and élan.

All of these military factors were important to the IS sweep into northern Iraq. However, they do not fully explain why IS has been so successful in dominating millions of Sunni with only a few thousand fighters. The mostly Sunni Iraqi provinces of Anbar, Salah al-Din, and Nineweh are known for rejecting outside influence and repelling invaders. But while most Sunni Iraqis reject IS methods and philosophy, only a few have turned against IS and tried to push them out of the Sunni provinces. The ongoing Sunni revolt against the Government of Iraq (GoI) has given IS a perfect opportunity to latch on to the Sunni host in a part parasitic, part symbiotic relationship. IS serves the purposes of the Sunni polity by fighting against the government, and the Sunni provide IS with at least a temporary accommodation.

Underlying Sunni Issues Present Opportunities to Extremists and to the Coalition

A similar phenomenon took place between 2003 and 2006, the period after the U.S.-led coalition invasion of Iraq. Millions of Sunni Iraqis suffered the growth and ultimately the dominance of AQI while quietly and fearfully rejecting the Al Qaida methods and philosophy. They underwent years of murder and intimidation, beheadings, robbery, and rape because at least in part they viewed AQI as the lesser of three evils: the extremist group did not present as great an existential threat as either a Shia'-led government or the foreign coalition. During this period many nationalist, or Ba'athist fighters reached temporary deals with AQI and even supported some of its military activities. AQI's power culminated in early 2006 after the destruction of the Golden Mosque in Sana'a; they exploited the fear of Shia' oppression and took on the role of "defenders of the faithful" to fight for the Sunni.

Yet in late 2006 the Sunni Iraqis turned against AQI. Despite their best efforts to play on Sunni fears and sectarian animosities, AQI had worn out its welcome. Most Sunni Iraqi did not want to be part of an AQI caliphate and were only willing to accept AQI presence as long as the balance of fear kept them in check. The Awakening movement was the outward expression of the Sunni's turn against AQI. They accepted the promises of support and protection made by both the coalition and the government of Prime Minister Al-Maliki. Many members of AQI turned against the group itself, other insurgents rose up to fight AQI emirs, and in very short order AQI was defeated. While coalition and Iraqi Army military power helped turn the tide, the key to success in

2006 and 2007 was the shift in popular Sunni sentiment against extremism and against outsider domination.

Unfortunately, Prime Minister Al-Maliki abused the trust of the Sunni and undertook an active campaign to disenfranchise them. Between 2006 and 2013, the Sunni again lost faith in what they saw as an Iranian-influenced government. They again grudgingly allowed a foreign-led Sunni extremist group to enter and dominate their provinces, partly out of fear of IS and greatly out of fear of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). In late 2014 we now have a situation that closely resembles late 2004: Sunni Iraqis are disenfranchised from their government, they fear Iranian influence, and they do not yet trust the coalition. But underlying all of this is a desire to turn out the extremists. For now the members of IS float on the surface of the Sunni Iraqi polity; but they will never be integral nor will the Sunni Iraqis accept the IS caliphate. Tolerance of IS in Iraq is temporary. The ways in which they might be ejected, however, matter a great deal.

A Military Centric Anti-IS Effort Faces Formidable Challenges

In his 10 September speech, President Obama described a primarily military-focused effort designed to eject IS from Iraq and ultimately destroy them across the globe. This counterterrorism approach, which weaves together coalition airstrikes, Iraqi Army operations, and Sunni militia support, will certainly reduce IS influence and power in Iraq. Within months we can expect that IS armor, large artillery pieces, technical gun trucks, and overt fixed military positions will be reduced or eliminated inside of Iraq; they will no longer have the ability to conduct large-scale offensives of the kind we saw in Mosul and Tikrit. It does not necessarily follow, however, that IS will be weakened to the point of defeat. While many pundits and analysts have focused on IS technical and financial assets, their fighting power derives primarily from their overall morale and their aggressive, motivated small infantry units. Some of these can be destroyed from the air, but most can and probably will position themselves close to the civilian population in an effort to survive and increase chances of civilian casualties from airstrikes. As a result, airstrikes are insufficient to defeat or destroy IS.

The coalition plan also calls for increased support to the Iraqi Army, which will then help to drive IS out of Iraq. Equipment and trainers are already being prepared and deployed, and intelligence and air control support have already played critical roles in places like the Mosul Dam. All of these technical efforts will help Army units get back on their feet, and they will stiffen the resolve of some units that may be faltering. Consistent, overt U.S. military support can strengthen an allied partner in ways that cannot be measured and should not be underestimated. However, there are several reasons why the Iraqi Army will be challenged to achieve immediate or even

long-term success against IS. I propose three of what I think are the most important reasons for doubt.

First, the recent tactical victories in northern Iraq came only with the help of combined Kurdish and Shia' militia support. Iraqi Army units fought alongside Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) units, Pesh Merga units, and some sectarian Shia' fighters. It is possible but unlikely that Kurdish forces will directly support Iraqi Army advances into the mostly Sunni city of Mosul. It is even less likely they will support offensive thrusts further west into the almost wholly Sunni province of Anbar. They are most interested in protecting the Kurdish north. Similarly, Shia' fighters are most interested in protecting their sectarian cantonments in Diyala and other mixed provinces. While some Shia' militia may accompany Iraqi Army units west, their presence will only serve to reinforce the increasingly widespread—if perhaps exaggerated—belief amongst Sunni that the Iraqi Army is a Shia'-dominated, Iranian-directed force bent on eliminating Sunni Arabs. There are limits to Iraqi collaboration.

Second, the offensive capability of the Iraqi Army is questionable at best. They may well be able to mount a successful campaign into Mosul and Anbar, but it is more likely that they will move slowly, haltingly, and that they will have insufficient force to overcome hardened urban objectives. They remain, as some experts have noted, logistically challenged; this problem will require years of remediation. Iraqi special operations forces that have carried out the most aggressive and successful actions against Sunni insurgents are exhausted from nearly a year of constant combat, and they are too few in number to generate the kind of combat power necessary to seize a large urban area like Mosul, Fallujah, or Ramadi.

And third, the Iraqi Army is not structured, trained, or inclined to conduct the kind of thoughtful counterinsurgency campaign that appears necessary in the Sunni provinces. Instead they are likely to conduct the kind of *counterguerrilla* campaign they executed in Anbar in the first half of 2014. Counterinsurgency campaigns are designed to win support of the population by building government legitimacy and applying force in careful measure. Counterguerrilla campaigns are designed to kill guerrillas, or in this case IS. In early 2014 Iraqi Army units conducted Vietnam War era "sweep and clear" missions across Anbar Province with very little success. When they moved against the insurgent stronghold in Fallujah they used excessive force and still failed to retake the city. Surely they will be more successful at killing IS fighters with coalition air support and intelligence, but they will probably be no more successful at winning popular support than they were earlier this year.

There are also aspects of IS that will affect the likelihood of military success. I stated previously that they are militarily competent and resilient. They may collapse in the face of airstrikes and ground offensives, but it seems more likely that they will adapt their tactics and dig in to dense urban areas. They will also probably accelerate their use of terror attacks against both military and civilian targets in order to weaken political support for the coalition and to degrade Iraqi Army morale.

But while IS has many strengths it also has weaknesses. As pressure mounts against the group, and as young and unbalanced IS fighters are forced to manage hundreds of thousands of Sunni civilians, the likelihood that IS will alienate the Sunni Iraqis increases. And while IS may have a robust force of tens of thousands of fighters across Iraq and Syria, some IS fighters were either forcibly conscripted or have stronger loyalties to Iraqi nationalist insurgent groups like the Jaysh al-Rijal al-Tariqeh al-Naqshibandieh, or JRTN. These conscripts and nationalist fighters can be peeled away from IS with the right pressure and incentives. This will make the job of the Iraqi Army somewhat easier.

What About the Tribes? Considering a Second Awakening Movement

There are challenges to an Iraqi Army offensive, even if it is supported by coalition airstrikes and intelligence. But there are three proposed legs to the anti-IS military plan: airstrikes, Iraqi Army operations, and Sunni popular support. Ostensibly the Iraqi government and the coalition will try to rally Sunni support to turn against IS and, at the very least, defend their local areas to create space for the Iraqi Army to maneuver. Some hope to see a reprise of the 2006-2008 Awakening Movement. A mass Sunni uprising against IS would probably shift the balance of power in favor of the government and might rapidly push IS back across the international border to Syria. Indeed, this uprising, or revolt against IS is central to the possible solution I am laying before you this afternoon. However, it is important to eliminate misconceptions about the first Awakening movement before trying to encourage a second.

Conditions in 2006 and early 2007 were perfect for an Awakening. AQI had alienated the population, the U.S. had demonstrated its commitment to the Iraqis by announcing a surge of troops, and the Iraqi government pledged millions of dollars in reconstruction support to Sunni areas stricken by years of heavy combat. Finely tuned special operations targeting raids kept the insurgents on their heels while U.S. infantry and armored forces created safe zones for civilians and for burgeoning yet vulnerable Sons of Iraq militias. Prime Minister Al-Maliki offered reconciliation to the Sunni and seemed to prove his non-sectarian bona fides by moving against

Shia' militias. And probably millions of dollars changed hands through local reconstruction deals and direct payments to fund and motivate Sunni militia leadership.

What did not happen is just as important as what did happen. While Sattar Abu Risha did lead the Awakening council and was a charismatic figure, he was not a unifying figure for all Sunni nor did he generate the Awakening. At no point did U.S. interlocutors find "the right person" to talk with, thereby energizing a Sunni revolt against AQI. Instead, Abu Risha was a convenient public face for a broad grass roots shift in popular sentiment. And while the U.S. troop surge played an important moral and physical role in defeating AQI, the troop surge was not the critical component in the Awakening. While it would have been far more difficult, and would have taken longer, it is possible that the Awakening might have succeeded against AQI even with less U.S. or coalition support. Iraqi Sunni are competent and sometimes aggressive fighters. They nearly ejected the coalition from Iraq, and perhaps ultimately they could have ejected AQI from Sunni-dominated areas.

Conditions today are different in several critical ways. IS has alienated many Sunni, but it still has some support in various Sunni areas. There are some strong local Sunni leaders and even potential national leaders, but the Sunni political class is badly fragmented. Even tribal leaders have very limited influential power over their own tribal members, and many tribes are if anything more divided than they were in 2006. There are no U.S. ground troops to create "oil spots" of stability for fledgling militia forces, and ostensibly none of the supremely capable U.S. special operations direct action forces will help pick apart IS leadership in the dense urban or maze-like rural swathes of Anbar. Most importantly, though, is the absence of proof—so far—that the new Prime Minister of Iraq, Haider Al-Abadi, is serious about reconciliation.

Finding "the right person" to talk to amongst Iraq's Sunnis and handing over bags of cash to stand up militias or encourage Sunni to join a new national guard may lead to real short-term tactical success in some Sunni areas of Iraq. There may be visible signs of Sunni resistance against IS as tribal leaders come to the fore and, cash in hand, pledge to work alongside the Iraqi Army. It is possible that over time, with coalition airpower, the Iraqi Army and Sunni militiamen may be able to push IS out of Iraq without national reconciliation of any kind.

Ultimately, though, this quick tactical approach is likely to perpetuate rather than reduce instability in Iraq. While the world focuses on IS, it is important to remember that IS floats above the Sunni population and does not represent enduring Sunni grievances or narratives. There is an ongoing Sunni revolt against the Iraqi government that, if not addressed, will continue even if IS is ejected.

In this event the second Awakening is likely to end in the same way as the first: with armed, angry Sunni fighters turning against the government in a recurring cycle of violence.

I propose there is a way to encourage the Sunni to turn against IS in a way that will be more tactically effective, more cost effective, and ultimately more enduring than inducing quick and temporary allegiances with cash and military aid. I also propose that this approach will obviate the weaknesses inherent in a primarily military or counterterror approach to the IS problem.

Reconciliation is the Best and Least Costly Option for Success

The Iraqi state that existed in early 2014 now exists only in the Iraqi Constitution. There is a de facto split of Iraq along ethno-sectarian lines: Sunni, Shia', and Kurd. It may or may not be possible to bring the Kurds fully back in to the Iraqi state. Chances for successful Sunni-Shia' reconciliation are probably quite low. However, my interactions with Sunni Iraqis since 2003, and my targeted research on Sunni Iraqi perceptions over the past year indicate that all strata of the Sunni Iraqi population wish to remain within the state.

They tend to view their revolt against the government as an anti-Iranian rather than an anti-Shia' movement. Most are nationalists who believe they should play a prominent role in the central state. Further, the natural resources in the Sunni provinces are inconsequential in comparison to Kurdish and Shia' resources, and Sunni do not believe decentralization will result in equitable sharing. While they want more local power, they do not want to be permanently marginalized and disenfranchised from the state. It is therefore possible to leverage Sunni nationalism to foster lasting reconciliation.

One approach to Sunni reconciliation would be through negotiation. This might require finding a charismatic Sunni leader who represents a large majority, or at least large plurality, of the Sunni population. His influence would have to be sufficient to encourage tens of thousands of Sunni to turn against IS. As of late-2014, though, this leader has not emerged and the Sunni do not seem disposed to follow a single political figure. Another approach would be dispersed engagement, with coalition and Iraqi leaders fanning out across Iraq to drum up local support. I argue this approach will lead to tactical success but strategic failure. Instead, I propose that only intensive, one-sided national reconciliation efforts aimed at the broad Sunni population will lead to lasting success.

Earlier this month Prime Minister Al-Abadi enumerated a list of grievance resolution measures he intended to take in order to win Sunni support. These include general amnesty for innocent Sunni

caught up in the counterinsurgency campaign, a depoliticized justice system, amendments to anti-terror laws, reconstruction of damaged Sunni areas, the formation of a National Guard, and increased regional authorities. Sunni leaders have listed other grievances and want the immediate release of all female prisoners and Sunni politicians, restoration of full retirement pay for former regime officers, and other measures to reduce the impact of de-Ba'athification laws that have been used to target Sunni leadership. Some of these actions will require political ratification, but others will not.

President Obama and senior administration officials have correctly stressed that success against IS is dependent on Iraqi reconciliation and on positive Iraqi leadership. Prime Minister Al-Abadi has a window of opportunity now, in the early stages of the campaign, to make unequivocal moves towards genuine reconciliation. The coalition should encourage him to enact all grievance resolution measures within his authority in one fell swoop. This action, which should include prisoner releases and the real-time transfer of money for reconstruction and retirement pay, would demonstrate that he is taking a different path than his predecessor. At this point in the year-long Sunni revolt, only real and dramatic action on the above-named fronts will be sufficient to convince the Sunni that the more tangible things—cash payments, equipment—are part of a broader strategy to reunite the state.

Following this top-level Iraqi action, all coalition activities should be predicated on reconciliation. Every engagement should hinge on some kind of local or regional reconciliation measure, and every tactical military action should be planned to preserve and improve relationships between the Sunni and the state. This may mean taking some tactical risk, including strictly limiting damage to Sunni urban areas and curtailing aerial targeting. Advisors will find themselves in difficult positions as they attempt to rein in Iraqi Army air and artillery support. This approach will certainly preclude the use of Shia' and Kurdish militias in support of Iraqi Army combat actions in Sunni areas. Reconciliation first and foremost, in conjunction with coalition support, and Iraqi military and government efforts must be woven together into a holistic strategy with a definitive envisioned end-state.

There are many hurdles to successful reconciliation. Divisions in the Sunni polity will continue to undermine Sunni cohesion and may hinder efforts to develop militia support. Prime Minister Al-Abadi may not be willing or able to make the kind of dramatic measures necessary to gain Sunni trust. And IS and some of its allies will probably make every effort to foster discord between Sunni and Shia' in order to maintain Sunni support. They already conduct terror attacks that seem designed to deepen the divide between Sunni and Shia' Iraqis. However, there are also some positive underlying factors. While there are divisions between Sunni and Shia' Iraqis, there are

also strong inter and intra-tribal bonds between the two sectarian groups. Sunni leaders I have spoken with in the last year repeatedly emphasized their belief that Sunni and Shia' Iraqis are first and foremost Iraqis.

Conclusion

As I stated earlier, chances of genuine and lasting reconciliation in Iraq are admittedly low. However, reconciliation also offers the best and perhaps only chance to reconstitute the admittedly limited successes of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn. Absent reconciliation we can expect lasting instability in Iraq. We may physically defeat IS, but the ideas that cause young Iraqi men to support groups like IS and Al Qaida will live on. The group name will change—there were over 100 identified insurgent groups in Iraq during the 2003-2011 war—but the violence will continue to destabilize the region, give space for international terror groups, and deprive millions of Iraqis of even a modicum of normal life.

Stopping IS now is wise; current anti-IS actions should be applied aggressively to keep the group on its heels. In the case of IS, military force is necessary. Yet addressing root causes of any insurgency is also historically proven to be the best and most lasting way to defeat insurgent groups. Leveraging reconciliation—and using military force to support reconciliation rather than using reconciliation to support military force—seems to be the least costly and possibly the only way to defeat IS in Iraq and stabilize that country.