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# An Assessment of the Counter-ISIL Campaign

## One Year after Mosul

Linda Robinson

RAND Office of External Affairs

CT-435

June 2015

Testimony presented before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities on June 24, 2015

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The RAND Corporation

*An Assessment of the Counter-ISIL Campaign  
One Year after Mosul<sup>2</sup>*

Before the Committee on Armed Services  
Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities  
House of Representatives

June 24, 2015

Chairman Wilson, Ranking Member Langevin, and members of the subcommittee: Thank you for the opportunity to testify again before this important subcommittee of the HASC. I returned on May 31 from a ten-day trip to Iraq and Jordan, which is my second research trip to the region this year. I visited many of the U.S., coalition and Iraqi commands and operations centers, and met with civilian and military leaders, officials, and troops at various echelons.

I will summarize my observations on the counter-ISIL military line of operations. Second, I will offer a few observations about the overall synchronization of the campaign and the political line of effort. I will finish with my assessment of the options for U.S. policy and the questions this committee is asking after one year of this campaign, namely:

1. Does the United States have the right strategy? Can ISIL be defeated and destroyed through a partnered approach? Are alternative strategies more promising?
2. Are the ways and means being applied under the current strategy adequate?

**Assessment of ISIL**

There is now, among U.S. and coalition officers, a very keen appreciation for the capabilities of the Islamic State, also known as ISIL or ISIS. The group has proven to be resilient, agile, and adaptive. Despite losses that approximate half of their estimated fighting force since the U.S. airstrikes began in August 2014, ISIL fighters have dug into Mosul, captured Ramadi, are still

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<sup>1</sup> The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of RAND or any of the sponsors of its research. This product is part of the RAND Corporation testimony series. RAND testimonies record testimony presented by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

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fighting at Baiji, and are expected to re-attack areas such as Tikrit and Diyala.<sup>3</sup> They have been able to resupply both fighters and materiel through internal lines running into Syria and externally through Turkey. They are tactically proficient; small squads can stop a company or more with a variety of weapons, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and evolving tactics. They have replaced leaders, moved between maneuver and guerrilla warfare as circumstances dictate, and launched new or diversionary attacks to maintain momentum. They trumpet their successes globally, which brings them recruits and affiliates. While ISIL just faced a setback on the Turkish border that could prove important (i.e., the capture of Tel Abyad), it has maintained and expanded its territory in Syria.

### **Assessment of Counter-ISIL Forces**

The anti-ISIL forces on the ground are characterized by 1) limited capability, 2) varying intentions, and 3) an overall lack of coordination. A detailed analysis of each group follows.

- First, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are not at present an effective force able to serve as the main fighting element. According to the U.S. Embassy's Office of Security Cooperation, on paper, Iraq has an army of 14 divisions, one armored, three mechanized, and ten infantry. The United States does not have a detailed grasp of how many forces are actually present for duty, but estimates run about 50 percent less than on paper. Some 40,000–70,000 of those unfilled positions are called "ghost soldiers," for whom salaries are paid; these funds either go into officers' pockets or are used to pay for legitimate unfunded needs. As Secretary Carter noted in this committee's full hearing last week, units showed up for the U.S. and coalition training far from fully manned: The units were 40–70 percent below the brigade's 2,750 manning profile, and many officers did not show either. While there are good officers, and some poor officers have been fired, many substandard officers remain on the job, and some serve in critical positions.
  - In addition to questions about manning, the United States does not know exactly what equipment, weapons, and ammunition our Iraqi partners have, because we

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<sup>3</sup> In an interview with French radio after a coalition meeting in Paris, Deputy Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said that more than 10,000 ISIL fighters had been killed ("U.S. says 10,000 Islamic State Militants Killed in Nine-Month Campaign," Reuters, June 3, 2015). At an Air Force Association breakfast, General Hawk Carlisle, the commander of the Air Combat Command, stated that 13,000 ISIL fighters have been killed (Sarah Caspari, "Air Force: ISIS Selfie Led to Its Headquarters Destruction," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 5, 2015). Director of National Intelligence James Clapper testified on February 26, 2015, to Congress that U.S. intelligence estimated ISIL fighters at 20,000 to 32,000 ("Hearing to Receive Testimony on Worldwide Threats," Stenographic Transcript Before the Committee on Armed Services, Washington, D.C., February 26, 2015, available at: <http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/15-18%20-%2022-26-15.pdf>).

do not have regular access to their depots and they lack good accountability systems. I will say more about the U.S. and coalition equipping effort below, but the basic picture is this: The depots are full of ammunition and small arms, but heavy weapons and armored vehicles are scarce. Prime Minister Abadi recently noted that 2,300 high mobility military vehicles (HMMVs) were taken by ISIL after troops fled Mosul last year, and some of those are now used as powerful bombs.<sup>4</sup> The United States has just announced that 35 mine-resistant ambush protected vehicles with mine-rollers are ready for delivery to Iraq, but the U.S. command urged that they be reserved for use in Mosul.

- More than 40 percent of the ISF is assigned to the Baghdad operations command, in a reflection of both the government's priority of defending the capital and its assessment that ISIL can indeed threaten it. A third rationale was mentioned, which is the desire for balance so that Ministry of Interior forces are not the only guns in the city. Finally, the Baghdad Operations Command has recently been assigned responsibility for retaking parts of eastern Anbar from ISIL. Another significant portion of the ISF is devoted to Diyala and the Shia provinces to the south.
- Second, the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) is Iraq's special operations element. I note that the Secretary of Defense amended his remark about the ISF lacking a will to fight, and I'd like to underscore this amendment by noting the following: Since December 2013, the CTS has been deployed in every major battle. It has suffered 2,636 casualties as of last month, which reduced its fighting force to somewhere between 6,000 to 7,000 troops from its authorized level of 11,000.<sup>5</sup> I talked to the CTS commander, General Kenani, about this operational tempo; he said it was too high, but he has no choice but to comply when the Prime Minister orders troops deployed. The problem is that CTS has been inadequately supported by other forces. He also noted that putting a small number of forces out in fixed positions is not the way this force was intended to be used. The CTS forces were pinned down in Baiji's oil refinery for months without relief and watched more than two dozen of their wounded comrades die. They are still fighting there. This experience probably influenced their decision to withdraw from Ramadi. While CTS was used for sectarian ends under Prime Minister Maliki, it seems to have maintained a nonsectarian recruiting policy and ethos. In my meeting with him, Kenani, a Shia,

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander Smith, "Iraq PM Says Forces Lost 2,300 HMMVs Last Year to ISIS," nbcnews.com, June 1, 2015, available at: <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/iraqi-prime-minister-haider-al-abadi-says-his-forces-lost-n367596>.

<sup>5</sup> Counter-Terrorism Service records.

introduced me to his Sunni deputy, as well as a Christian staff member. He said that the belief that “We are all Iraqis first” was a central criterion for membership in the unit.

- CTS is under great stress. A number of U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) advisers believe that CTS could crumble under the strain, if the way in which its forces are employed and supported does not change. There are frictions between CTS and the Ministry of Defense, partly because these are separate organizations. Parliament has not provided CTS its own separate budget, so its funding has been precarious. CTS’s current urgent needs are armored HMMVs—it is short by 1,400, according to its formal equipping table, but can repair a number of those damaged and recovered, if it can acquire the spare parts. The unit also lacks machine guns (.50 caliber, M240s, M249s) and the spare parts to repair damaged ones. The Iraq Train and Equip Fund (ITEF) package includes HMMVs, but they are not yet available because of limited production capacity. The United States expects delivery of 115 HMMVs later this summer. Machine guns are available in Kuwait, but as with the HMMVs, the United States and Iraq will have to decide whether to prioritize delivery to CTS or ISF brigades.
  
- A final point on CTS: In order to rebuild the force, the U.S. and coalition SOF advisers have revised the training program to add more classes of shorter duration. By next January, according to the plan, the ranks of the three Iraqi special operations brigades should be back to 11,000 on duty and 2,000 in the selection and training pipeline. This assumes a continuing level of attrition. The newer force will be trained as light infantry and will be less experienced. While the CTS does have a few forward observers, and is training more, the new ones will obviously be less experienced.
  
- Third, the Kurdish security forces (KSF) include the pesh merga and the interior ministry Zerevani. They are capable forces that have pushed back ISIL, in the process expanding territory held by the Kurdistan Regional Government by 30 percent, and they are an important part of the effort. However, they have, I would argue, largely achieved their objectives of defending predominantly Kurdish areas and moved into defensive mode. ISIL will certainly continue to test their defensive line, which stretches 1,200 kilometers. But the KSF are likely to play only a supporting role in any offensive to liberate Mosul, and they have not yet committed explicitly to a number of specific requests for supporting roles in that operation. Moreover, they are not likely to deploy to Anbar or other purely Arab areas. The point of this analysis is not to diminish the valor and commitment of the

most capable ally the United States has in this fight, but rather to note that the Kurds are not the silver bullet that some would wish them to be.

- The KSF has received at least 50 million rounds of ammunition, thousands of small arms, and more than 8,500 anti-tank weapons donated by coalition countries directly to the KSF. The Kurds seek heavy weaponry, and the United States will have to decide how to address the many requests. Some U.S. officials think that the Kurds are relatively well supplied at this time, especially compared with other elements seeking support.
  - U.S. forces are supporting the KSF through a combined operations center and advisory support at multiple echelons. This includes advisory support to the brigade level.
- Fourth, the program to raise Sunni tribal forces to fight ISIL is still nascent. This is a complicated picture: 11,000 have been officially “enrolled” by the Iraqi government. However, only 2,300 have been trained, equipped, and advised by U.S. forces, and not all have passed the two U.S. vetting processes.<sup>6</sup> Even if all 11,000 were armed tomorrow, they do not represent a silver bullet. They will not be heavily armed, equipped with armored vehicles, or trained for combined arms maneuver. They will primarily serve as local defense forces, though they can have greater effect if coordinated with other forces. The arming of Sunnis will be tremendously important as a political signal of inclusivity. The Mosul Fighting Forces (MFF) are another group recruited from former policemen. Some of those I talked to in the north said that both the MFF and Sunni recruits are barely hanging on, without salaries, arms, ammunition, or other support from either the Iraqi or the Kurdish governments.
  - The only place where the desired synergy between ISF and Sunni tribes has been achieved to date is in western Anbar, where the Iraqi 7th Army, the al-Jazeera and al-Badia Command (JBOC) command, and elements of four tribes mentored by coalition SOF are all working together.

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<sup>6</sup> One vetting process ascertains that no member is credibly alleged to have committed human rights abuses as required by the Leahy Amendment, and the other ascertains that the inductee has no ties to Iran or to al-Qaeda or its successors in Iraq.



- Fifth, the Iraqi Shia armed groups are by all accounts motivated, organized, capable, and equipped. They number some 80,000–100,000.<sup>7</sup> They are composed of three elements: 1) the volunteers who responded to Ayatollah Sistani’s call to defend the country, 2) a collection of newer Shia militias, and 3) the long-standing Shia groups—the Badr Organization, the Sadrist Promised Day Brigade, the Kataib Hezbollah, and the Asaib Ahl Al-Haq.<sup>8</sup>
  - After leading Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani issued a call for Iraqis to defend their country last summer, many of these militias were reinvigorated, and Shia volunteers in particular responded to Sistani’s call. The Iraqi government formed a Popular Mobilization Committee to organize these Popular Mobilization Forces. This has been the nominal vehicle for corralling the disparate paramilitary forces, both Shia and Sunni. Prime Minister Abadi is formally the commander in chief of the Popular Mobilization Forces, and the chain of command goes from him to his national security adviser, to Mohandis, and then to whatever field chain they designate. The current request by the United States is that that chain report to the ISF chain of command if those forces wish to receive air support in ISF-led operations.
  - The Badr, Kataib Hezbollah, and Asaib Ahl Al-Haq have been in the forefront of Popular Mobilization Forces activity in Diyala, Salahuddin, the Baghdad belts, and now in Anbar. Furthermore, Kataib Hezbollah commander Abu Mahdi Al-Mohandis is the deputy chief of the government’s overall coordinating body, the Popular Mobilization Committee. He and Badr leader and member of Parliament Hadi Al-Amiri recently visited the Baghdad command center. They and Asaib Ahl Al-Haq leader Qais Khazali regularly appear on the battlefield. CTS commander Gen. Kenani told me that there is a representative from the Popular Mobilization Committee in the Combined Joint Operations Center.

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<sup>7</sup> For one source using the 100,000-troop estimate, see Kenneth Katzman, “Iraq: Politics, Security, and U.S. Policy,” Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, May 26, 2015, available at: <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS21968.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> The Badr and Sadr elements are established political parties with paramilitary forces. The Badr Corps formed in the 1980s with Iranian support to fight Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq war. In 2011, Badr split from the Islamic Supreme Revolutionary Council of Iraq in order to become a separate politico-military organization. Members of the Badr Corps, as it was also known, were included in the first Iraqi units formed after the U.S. invasion, the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps, which later became the Iraqi Army. During the U.S. invasion in 2003, Moqtada al-Sadr founded another politico-military organization whose militias were largely demobilized after 2010 or converted into social service organizations until the upsurge of ISIL violence in 2014. Badr is part of the dominant State of Law coalition, while the Sadrists won 32 seats in the April 2014 elections. Kataib Hizbollah was trained by Iran’s Quds Force, as was Asaib Ahl al-Haq, a splinter group of the Sadr’s original militia, the Mahdi Army. Both of these groups were implicated in attacks on American troops. A short history of these groups can be found in Katzman, 2015.

- One of the most surprising things I heard on this trip from a number of U.S. and coalition officers was the view that the United States must bow to reality and be more proactive in coordinating with these forces on the battlefield. Doing so, they argued, will produce more gains in the anti-ISIL fight. A more active U.S. role vis a vis the Shia militias could also entail efforts to mitigate the two widely acknowledged risks of their currently large and growing role. The first risk is that these forces may well commit atrocities or sectarian cleansing, as occurred in Diyala province, and thus spur even more recruits to ISIL.<sup>9</sup> The second risk is that the militias' battlefield successes will further strengthen their political and military clout, which could well lead eventually to the Lebanonization of Iraq (i.e., the long-term entrenchment of militia power). The two larger groups, Badr and perhaps the Sadrists, are already established political forces, and they might be prepared to see the long-term benefits of an effort to bring their militias firmly under government control and eventually integrate them into ISF or National Guard structures.
  
- Sixth, to briefly sketch the status of forces in Syria, ISIL and the Al Nusra Front (ANF), which is an Al-Qaeda affiliate, hold the most territory. At this time, Assad's removal would likely favor those two forces. However, the Syrian Kurdish Yekineyen Parastina Gel (YPG) or People's Protection Units and Free Syria Army recently allied in a collaboration called Burkan al-Furat (Euphrates Volcano). They are making significant gains on the Turkish border, notably the capture of Tel Abyad, and with it the closure of ISIL's main external line of communication. The Turkish government has been opposed to supporting the YPG.
  - The U.S. train and equip effort to build the New Syria Force (NSF) is extremely nascent, with no forces fielded and fewer than 200 currently in training. The original plan was to raise a force of 15,000 over three years, but one officer who worked on this program from its inception characterized the effort as "absolutely too little, too late." Another officer characterized the value of the NSF in more political terms, as a force that could serve as a boots-on-the-ground supporter of a post-Assad regime reached through a negotiated departure of Assad. However, the military facts on the ground suggest that ISIL and ANF, the latter of which has increasingly attracted support of more moderate opposition fighters

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<sup>9</sup> Human Rights Watch documented Shia militias' abuses in Amerli, Diyala, after anti-ISIL operations there in 2014. See "After Liberation Came Destruction: Iraqi Militias and the Aftermath of Amerli," Human Rights Watch, March 18, 2015.

like the Islamic Front and even secular groups, may play a more significant role in determining Syria's future. Syria's prolonged fragmentation or an outright victory by radical Islamists would appear to be the two most likely scenarios at this point.

### **Assessment of U.S. Military Effort**

The lack of capability and capacity of the ISF means that any ground effort will have to depend on the totality of forces available in the short term. Therefore, effective coordination and advisory support to those elements at the operational level is the most urgent need. Coordinating with Shia militias is controversial, but it should be noted that previous U.S. military commands (the Multinational Forces-Iraq and the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan) both created engagement cells that talked to adversaries. Engagement may provide avenues to mitigate the negative effects. Finally, additional measures may improve the efficacy of the air campaign, though ground forces and not air will be decisive in this largely urban hybrid campaign. The following section offers observations and recommendations regarding the three main elements of the U.S. military line of effort.

- *Advise and assist.* The Iraqi effort is critically lacking coordinated planning and execution of operations. This caused the fall of Ramadi. This month, the administration announced a decision to send 450 U.S. military personnel to the Taqqadum base in Anbar. Sending advisers to the area commands has been under discussion for months, as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff indicated in his testimony last week. It was the right step but belated, and it should be expanded to other area commands.
  - The most critical need is for advisory assistance at the area commands to coordinate operations among all the stovepiped organizations (army, CTS, police, and militias) to coordinate and improve combined arms operations, support, and sustainment; increase visibility of all forces; and exercise restraint on abuses. The critical area commands are Anbar, Salah al-Din, and Ninewa. The Baghdad Operations Command is operating much as these commands should, with a capable commander who is also actively recruiting to fill his force. Placing Joint Terminal Air Controllers (JTACs) at these area commands and at trusted brigade commands' forward command posts can help coordinate fires and speed accurate targeting. In addition, U.S. SOF have identified an available satellite radio in Kuwait in U.S. army stocks. These satellite radios and Thurayyas

can provide a speedier and more-accurate targeting solution without putting combat advisers into tactical units.

- Somewhat to my surprise, most officers did **not** argue for tactical combat advisers or JTACs below the brigade level. The commanders do want the discretion to move advisers as the brigade commander moves. Moving advisers to the battalion level and below dramatically increases the footprint required to support them (including air support, medevac, quick reaction forces, and logistic support), as well as the risk to U.S. forces. It also increases the dependency of the forces, a lesson that U.S. SOF and others have learned in recent years.
  - Finally, the Combined Joint Operations Center was seen by several officers as too narrowly focused as a strike cell. Given the lack of coordination among the varied armed forces, the center could be usefully transformed into a general headquarters that plans and coordinates all the stovepiped organizations on the battlefield.
- *Train and equip (T&E)*. A long-term commitment to building a professional security force is needed for Iraq to avoid the prospect of Lebanonization. The current T&E program's scale is limited and should be expanded: The eight brigades represent only a fraction of the force. This will take time as units are deployed in operations, and recruitment is constrained by Iraq's budget deficit. The scope is also limited: Institutional changes need to be an equal focus of the current effort to correct the structural problems, including recruiting with nonsectarian standards, consolidating units, ending the ghost soldiers, and instituting leadership standards and accountability systems. (The Iraqi army did not train since 2010, and what the United States did help build was destroyed in the interim.)
    - The U.S. security assistance process operates on a two-year cycle that is not sufficiently agile for wartime needs. Also, it does not supply training ammunition and other training needs. A tailored security force assistance package is needed. Finally, commanders say they need small amounts of flexible funds for emergent needs.
  - *Air campaign*. The air campaign is being conducted according to three basic principles: avoid civilian casualties; obtain Iraqi approval; and do not put U.S. combat forces in frontline positions, which would significantly increase the risk of U.S. casualties. A more aggressive air campaign that involved greater numbers of civilian casualties would risk

increasing the alienation of the largely Sunni population in these areas and a wider backlash from public opinion. However, a review of the process appears warranted to determine whether greater effects may be achieved. By some accounts, Iraqi units in contact may wait up to an hour for air support, but I have not verified those statements.

- Several steps might be considered to increase the effects of the air campaign under the current procedures and rules of engagement. One obvious step is to increase the amount of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets and analysts dedicated to Iraq and Syria and to increase the deliberate targeting. Another step, as stated above, is to accelerate the targeting cycle by supplying radios to Iraqi units that accurately mark friendly locations and permit more reliable and secure communications. More indigenous forces can be trained to assist in target development. Placing advisers at area commands should also have a significant effect on the speed of the targeting process. The authority to order strikes when the proper assessments have been conducted could be distributed more widely. The effects of these steps could be assessed before considering further revisions to policy and procedure.

### **The Overall Conduct of the Strategy and Lines of Effort**

The U.S. effort has suffered from some confusion about who is in charge of synchronizing the multiple lines of effort in the strategy. (There is even confusion about the number of lines of effort: Just in the past month, officials have stated that there are nine, five, and six lines). In particular, the political and military efforts are not closely synchronized. A logical division of labor would be for the U.S. embassy to focus on political and institutional issues while the military focuses on the operational and tactical issues.

A major surge in the political line of effort is warranted. This should focus not just on Prime Minister Abadi but on the major political blocs represented in parliament. Under the majoritarian system in which the Shia majority has the winning votes, the priority should be to engage with the Shia parties and leaders, and secondarily to encourage the three separate Sunni blocs to come together on a vision for the proposed National Guard and over the longer term on a federalized system with greater decentralization.

In the near term, passage of legislation on the National Guard could be a huge boost for the counter-ISIL campaign—but only if it is a version that wins Sunni support. Coalition diplomats might be helpful in exploring whether there is a compromise on the National Guard legislation that

would allow the Guard commander to be nominated by the Provincial Governor and/or jointly appointed, rather than solely by Baghdad. It would be hard to overestimate the positive effect of legislation that gives Sunnis some control over securing their areas, as well as a possible path for incorporation of militia members into regular entities of the government.

The U.S. government cannot impose its will, and its voice is not necessarily the most influential one in Baghdad at this point. It may be that the diplomatic community in Baghdad can form a contact group to support the search for political compromises. The cleavages are deep and may not be bridged, or at least for some time. By the same token, the United States will have to accept what the Iraqi government determines to be its operational priorities in terms of Baghdad, Anbar, Bayji, and Mosul. Shaping operations for Mosul can accelerate as the ISF capacity increases.

An urgent priority should be facilitating the return of residents to Tikrit and helping rebuild their city under their elected officials' governance. Otherwise, Tikrit threatens to become a very negative symbol for Sunnis. I met with several displaced residents, who told me that only in recent days, 1,000 families have been allowed back. Even 300 tribesmen from Al Alam who fought for the liberation of Tikrit have not been welcomed back. Hospitals, homes, and businesses were looted and destroyed, and services remain scarce. Between the new focus on Ramadi and the ongoing preoccupation with Mosul, Tikrit threatens to be lost in the shuffle.

The United States has a difficult time, it is often noted, gaining traction in the counter-ISIL information and messaging space. While this is primarily a job for the Iraqis and the wider Muslim community, the incoming two-star commander of our Combined Forces Land Component Command in Baghdad and the current brigade commander are rightly focused on ways to counter ISIL's media operations and promote effective communications policies by the area commands. It would seem that the most powerful counter-ISIL messages are those delivered by disaffected former fighters.

Finally, regarding the other lines of effort, the Gulf countries' relatively weak roles are noteworthy, although finally Saudi Arabia has opened its embassy in Baghdad. Given the Gulf states' concerns about Iraq's close ties with Iran, Iraqi overtures to Gulf states may be beneficial. The other glaring fact is the continued lax visa and border policies of Turkey. Turkey's priority has been to seek the ouster of Syrian president Bashar Assad rather than shut off the flow of foreign fighters, but the recent elections and pending change in government in Turkey may provide an opportunity to secure further measures to stem the flow of fighters and resources.

## Assessment of Options

To answer the overall question of this hearing—are we on the right path?—ISIL’s continuing strength indicates that adjustments in the current approach are necessary. The timeline is also likely to be more extended than previously estimated. There are three theoretical options: 1) improve the current strategy of working through partners, 2) launch more-aggressive unilateral measures, or 3) fall back to a containment strategy.

The best strategy is to defeat and destroy ISIL through a partnered approach, because if the Iraqis and Syrians can fight and win this war, they will own that victory. This is an excruciatingly difficult case, however, and it involves dealing with less-than-ideal partners, as outlined here. The strategy may be failing not because it cannot work, but because it is not being adequately resourced. In particular, the advisory effort has not been robustly resourced and implemented at the operational level. Four specific steps are recommended in the short term. First, the United States should send advisers to the area commands and the CTS brigade level to assist in coordination, planning, and execution of operations. Second, the Combined Joint Operations Center should also expand its focus on planning and coordination of forces at the national level, supported with adequate intelligence collection and analysis. Third, delivery of the needed vehicles, weapons, and spare parts should be accelerated. Fourth, the provision of satellite radios, which are available but not part of the programmed delivery, should be approved and prioritized for delivery to the Iraqi special operations units and other trusted units. To have maximum effect, this suite of measures should be implemented in conjunction immediately. Finally, in order to have lasting effect, these short-term measures should be coupled with a long-term commitment to building a professional Iraqi security force, competing with Iranian influence, and trying to help Iraqis forge political compromises that may be several years in the making.

The second option of adopting more unilateral measures is not viable unless the United States is prepared to enter into conflict with the government of Iraq. The government of Iraq is not likely to accept a U.S. combat role or other unilateral actions, and such options also include significantly increased risk to U.S. forces. For example, directly arming Kurds and Sunnis would not be welcomed by the central government. Unilateral bombing without Iraqi participation in the decision-making would also not likely be welcome. Putting JTACs with Iraqi battalions or even lower echelons amounts to inserting them into combat and would require deploying many more troops in addition to those advisers. This much larger footprint would include quick reaction forces, medical evacuation airlift, and close air support, along with the support personnel each of those elements requires. Another idea, isolated insertions of combat forces to retake key areas, would hazard a longer-term combat commitment if ISIL proved a significant match for U.S. troops.

Taking these steps unilaterally would likely create another source of opposition—including potential armed opposition from Iraq, Shia militias, or Iran.

The third alternative available is containment, which might include a combination of continued attrition from the air and perhaps by SOF, coupled with greater support to neighboring countries like Jordan to add a containment dimension. Should the partnered approach fail, the United States may have to fall back to this option. We should recognize that this approach would amount largely to “mowing the grass,” and, given porous borders and a fluid enemy that already has global reach, containment in practice may prove no more effective. However, this option should be studied and some elements of containment are probably warranted at this stage, particularly to insulate Jordan and Lebanon from the destabilizing political and economic effects of the massive refugee populations.

In summary, the United States faces a most difficult challenge in partnering with the government of Iraq. The U.S. and Iraqi governments are aligned in the desire to counter ISIL; however, the Iraqi government and the Shia majority at large have not yet come to a consensus about incorporation of Sunnis into the political and military institutions of the country. Sunni exclusion, from the U.S. perspective, is a major driver of the ISIL engine, yet Iraq’s Shiites remain prisoners of their past. They may eventually reach a federal solution that pacifies Iraq, though it is also possible that the country will dissolve. How Iraq arrives at decentralization or dissolution will matter greatly, as new conflicts of extended duration can open up in that process.

In the meantime, the United States may be guaranteeing the failure of the Abadi government, a well-intentioned if weak partner, by its relatively slow, fitful, and ambivalent support, particularly compared with the support offered by Iran. Some U.S. observers believe Iraq is already irrevocably in the Iranian orbit, but U.S. actions may make that a self-fulfilling prophecy. Highly conditioned support at this stage may serve primarily to weaken Abadi in the face of less palatable options. There is no guarantee that his government will survive or succeed, but it would be a shame if he failed for want of U.S. support in the face of the extremely resilient ISIL threat.