



**Statement before the  
House Committee on Foreign Affairs,  
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa**

***“CREATING A STRATEGY FOR IRAQ,  
SYRIA, AND THE WAR AGAINST ISIL: A  
NEED FOR CHANGE, INTEGRITY, AND  
TRANSPARENCY”***

A Testimony by:

**Anthony H. Cordesman**

Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy,  
Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

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A meaningful strategy is not a set of concepts. It is a detailed plan, with a clear net assessment of the situation, an examination of the available options and their relative cost benefits and risks, an explanation of why given options are chosen, a plan of action that sets clear milestones and calls for specific resources, meaningful metrics and measures of effectiveness, and a review cycle that ensure the strategy and plan to implement remain valid or are changed to reflect emerging realities.

A meaningful strategy is not a public relations exercise. It must be honest in its analysis and in its objectives. In the case of ISIL and other Islamic extremist groups, Iraq, and Syria, a meaningful strategy must provide a meaningful and in-depth explanation of the course of the fighting, a realistic assessment of the problems the United States faces and in the uncertainties in its plans for reacting. It must be honest about the risks the U.S. faces and the fact it might take years for even the best option to succeed.

### **The Need for Transparency, Integrity, and Content**

History has also shown that such a strategy – and reporting on its progress -- must be as transparent as possible. Whenever such transparency is lacking, politics and spin come to dominate. The default setting in government reporting is to avoid independent review and criticism, and claim success. From Vietnam to the present, the resulting history of far too many U.S. military efforts has become a history of failed strategies defended by exaggerated claims of success.

This is now all too true of what have become “failed state wars” in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. These are wars that we are not winning, and where our current efforts seem too weak, and too uncoordinated with our allies and partners, to be effective. They show that the United States cannot shape an effective military effort without providing the level of transparency, integrity, and content that allows informed debate over what it is doing, that shows it has chosen effective options and has a workable strategy, that justifies the risk to those it sends into the theater of conflict, and proves its efforts deserve the support of the American people and the Congress.

The Obama administration has talked about transparency since the beginning of its first term, but the reality so far has been to steadily cut the content and objectivity of its reporting when things go wrong. It has tended to confuse establishing a policy with implementing one and actually shaping the realities on the ground. Public reporting has spun events, and downplayed risk and problems to the point of lying by omission, and failed to report on the full nature and effectiveness of U.S. actions. Far too much of what has been said in recent years has made the “Vietnam follies” look like models of integrity and depth.

We need regular, honest, and comprehensive reporting on the course of our wars. We also, however, need Congressional legislative requirements that force that reporting to occur, and hearings and Congressional reviews that do more than focus on five minute media visibility exercises for committee members. We need Congressional action that goes beyond vague calls for “strategy,” or even vaguer partisan attacks that are designed to target the coming election or promote a particular Republican presidential candidacy.

The risks of failure and making inadequate efforts in all of our current military interventions – Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen – are now all too great. There need to be “whole of government” reports that fully assess both what is happening in each war – and the adequacy of our current efforts and future plans. These reports need to have real content and a full range of metrics on at least a quarterly level. They need to be subject to outside expert review and meaningful congressional hearings.

They need to have the kind of objective in-house review and criticism that can only come from groups like the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) and Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR). The in-house efforts of the new Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations called “Operation Inherent Resolve” – and the Inspector Generals of State, DOD, and USAID – have already proved to be an ineffective disgrace.

### **The Need for a Broader Strategy, Focus on Iraqi Unity, and Tying Action in Iraq to Action in Syria**

Iraq and Syria have become case studies in the need for more effective strategies, transparency, and independent review. The United States has reached a point in the war against ISIL – and the struggle to bring some kind of stability to Iraq and Syria – where it needs to focus on the full range of challenges it faces. It needs to understand that it is not fighting one enemy in ISIL or simply Islamic extremism, but dealing with a two-failed states that are deeply divided, have long had inadequate governance, face massive problems with corruption and mismanaged economies, and which face acute demographic pressures that would cause major employment and economic development problems even if they were at peace.

Iraq began to fall apart with the 2010 election and the struggles that kept Nouri al-Maliki in power. Maliki increasingly used the Iraqi security forces to maintain and expand his power base, and to support his Shi’ite faction at the expense of national unity. He appointed leaders on the basis of loyalty rather than competence and tolerated steadily higher levels of corruption. He sidelined the Sunni Sons of Iraq, and increasingly used the security forces to suppress peaceful opposition. These problems were compounded by cuts in the role of U.S. forces and training efforts before newly formed Iraqi forces were ready to operate on their own, efforts to impose U.S. systems that Iraqis had not successfully absorbed, and other problems in the train and assist effort.

By late 2013, the level of casualties in civil fighting had returned to the 2008 level, and the level of tension between Sunni and Shi’ite and Arab and Kurd had reached the crisis point. World Bank and Transparency International reporting show that Iraq’s governance had deteriorated to the point of becoming one of the most corrupt governments in the world, and Maliki’s use of the military and police had reached the point where protest turned into hostile Sunni opposition in the area around Fallujah and Ramadi.

ISIL entered Iraq at a time of sectarian and ethnic crisis and low-level civil war, and did nothing meaningful to heal Iraq once ISIL expanded into Anbar, and took Ninewa and Mosul. Maliki’s resignation in August 2014 did bring a far more unifying figure -- Haidar al-Abadi -- to power, but has left a legacy of sectarian and ethnic tension at every level

that has proven extraordinarily difficult to heal, and security forces that will take years to rebuild – if some way can be found to bring a new degree of unity to Sunni and Shi'ite and Arab and Kurd. It also has opened Iraq to steadily growing Iranian influence, made Iranian backed Shi'ite militias as powerful as the Iraqi armed forces, and created major new problems in terms of the growth of separate Kurdish forces, and Kurdish seizures of disputed areas and oil fields.

Syria is one of the most brutal civil wars in modern history. Sectarian conflict between a ruling Alawite minority and a Sunni majority, repression and failed development under Assad, major demographic pressure, and a weak economic base have exploded into a conflict where well over 7 million Syrians are displaced persons in Iraq and nearly 4 million are refugees in a country where the CIA estimate the population is under 19 million.

What began as moderate call for reform in 2011, and then moderate rebels that seemed to be on the edge of gaining power in 2012, is now a national civil war. The rebels are now almost all Islamist factions fighting a vicious and repressive government force backed by Iran and Hezbollah. ISIL is only one extremist neo-Salafi rebel groups. The Al Nusra Front is arguably equally or more powerful, and the last moderate factions the U.S. gave military backing were defeated in late 2014 and early 2015. There is no real Syrian economy and no pool of oil wealth to match Iraq. Syria has become a failed state by every critical dimension, and its recovery will probably take a decade when – and if – some level of stability and security is established.

These challenges are highlighted in maps and charts that measure the scale of the problems shaping the wars in Iraq and Syria in the graphs, maps, and trends summarized in the report on *“Failed State Wars” in Iraq and Syria: The Strategic Challenges* provided with this testimony. These data highlight the fact that a U.S. strategy that focuses on ISIL alone is doomed to failure. The U.S. is not simply fighting ISIL. It is dealing with a range of extremist movements as well as a much broader ideological struggle for the future of Islam.

Degrading ISIL will not be enough if the Al Nusra Front or other extremist movements come to dominate much or all of Syria on a lasting basis, or if Iraq effectively splits into a hostile and unstable Sunni Arab minority region, a Shiite dominated east, and a Kurdish dominated Northwest. No diplomatic bargain can cover up the reality of the repression and cruelty of the Assad regime in Syria, and driving ISIL out of western Iraq will not bring peace or stability if Iraq's Sunnis do not benefit from some form of recovery and reasonable degree of power sharing and the nation's oil wealth. Any outcome that does not offer equity to Iraq's Kurds will not only leave the nation divided, but also create a broader Kurdish problem in Syria, Turkey, and Iran.

The U.S. may be able to implement a strategy that focuses on Iraq, but this is questionable at best. At a minimum, no kind of lasting “victory” in the form of some reasonable degree of stability and security can occur in Iraq – or any of our other wars in failed – without effective national unity. The U.S. is not just fighting ISIL, the al Nusra Front, or Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula or a broader range of extremist and terrorist movements.

It is engaged in conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen where no favorable outcome is possible without success in what has become armed nation building. The usual counter insurgency (COIN) mantra of “win, hold, and build” will be meaningless unless the Iraqi central government succeeds in reaching out to Iraq’s Arab Sunnis, and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) can be better integrated into some form of federalism.

The United States needs a civil-military and whole of government strategy for Iraq. If the U.S. does not link its strategy in Iraq to progress in helping Iraq go from failed state to something approaching a real nation, U.S. strategy will be too limited to succeed. Iraq will remain trapped into trying to contain the struggles and violence of its parts. No matter how degraded ISIL may become, Iraq will still be driven towards Sunni Islamic extremism and/or dependence on military support from outside Arab Sunni states in the West, Shi’ite dependence on Iran in the east, and a constant “Kurdish problem” in the north that spills over into Syria, Turkey, and Iran.

At the same time, the United States cannot support an Iraq strategy that secures Iraq, recovers Mosul and the west, and offers some lasting form of stability, and leave eastern Syria under the control of hostile extremist movements. Simply degrading ISIL is not a strategy if some mix of hostile Sunni forces has a de facto sanctuary just across the border.

The United States needs a civil-military and whole of government strategy for Syria, and not just for Iraq. It cannot simply wait, hope for some acceptable form of “burn out” and/or negotiation, and treat undefined and unstructured efforts at containment as the less attractive alternative. There may be no good alternatives, but the United States needs to determine this openly and at least show it is pursuing the least bad alternative, is doing its best to work with its allies, and fully understands the consequences of failing to link Iraq and Syria.

It should be clear from the outset, however, that the U.S. must not repeat the devastating mistakes it made in Afghanistan and earlier in Iraq. The U.S. must make it clear at every point that it will support Iraqi and Syrian efforts with limited amounts of aid, but will not try to transform either country either in terms of trying to make their security forces over in American models, or transform their economies and governance. The flow of military and civil aid money and personnel must remain limited, the U.S. should focus on World Bank and broader international efforts at development, and it must only help to the extent that Iraq and Syria clearly show that they can help themselves.

Nations must shape their own destinies in their own way and largely with their own resources. Nation building – armed or not – can be aided from the outside. It cannot be shaped or accomplished from the outside.

### **Iran: The Enemy of Our Enemy is Not Our Friend**

A U.S. strategy must also deal with Iran, and be realistic about Iran’s efforts to expand its influence in the region, the role of its al Quds force, and its support of the Hezbollah and other Shi’ite factions like the Houthi. In some abstract world where nations made decisions on the basis of rational bargaining, Iran’s leadership would see that its best

security lay in a strong, independent, and united Iraq. It would see the advantages in an Iraqi democratic government that inevitably reflected the power of Iraq's Shi'ite majority but also provided the security that only equity and unity can provide, and that acted as a bridge between Iran and better relations with the Arab Sunni nations in the region.

Some Iranian officials almost certainly see this need. The fact is, however, that the Supreme Leader, Iran's hardliners, key elements in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the leadership of its Al Quds force do not. At best, they are still pursuing a policy of competing with the United States for military influence over the Iraqi military and police, Shi'ite militias, and even influence over Iraq's Kurds.

At worst – and “at worst” now seems more likely than “at best” – Iran's leaders are seeking an Iraq where Iran has dominant influence at the end of a war that the United States may have helped to win, but lacked the political visibility and presence on the ground to get the credit for. They seem willing to accept the risk of a divided Iraq where the more populated and oil rich areas near Iran are dependent on Iran, even if this means an alienated Sunni population in Iraq and even more stress between Iran and its Arab neighbors.

The United States cannot have a strategy in Iraq that does not address these issues more openly, or ignore Iran's role in Syria. It cannot continue to let Iran control many of the “facts on the ground” by preventing the U.S. advise and assist mission from moving forward and helping Iraqi combat units, from keeping that advise and assist mission and the U.S. air campaign too small to be effective, and by failing to openly support some broader forms of political reform and unity.

The U.S. may well have to openly confront Iran when its actions seek to expand Iranian influence and undermine or weaken Iraq's unity. One key area is the need to confront over the need to keep Iraq's Shi'ite militias tightly controlled, avoid revenge, and support Iraq's Sunnis. Another is its support of elements that rival or oppose Prime Minister Abadi's efforts to bring unity, support Sunni leaders and forces, and give Iraq real independence.

The U.S. also needs to carefully consider what kind of strategy could unite Syria into a functioning state or divided sections that would leave Syria independent and functional without some major faction or part dependent on Iran or as a source of constant sectarian tension within the region. A division of Syrian into a Sunni region and a largely Alawite section would risk creating a permanent source of religious tension and conflict, as well as place an Alawite controlled area on Syria's coast and next to Lebanon, creating another source of tension with Lebanon. A unified Syria cannot be a Sunni Syria without making the Alawites a threatened and hostile minority and dependent on Iran, as well as linking Iran and the Sunni Arab states to a continuing source of sectarian tension and hostility,

Just as it is impossible to have an ISIL strategy without an Iraq strategy -- or an Iraq strategy without a Syria strategy- it is impossible to have strategy for ISIL, Iraq, or Syria without an Iran strategy. This does not mean the U.S. should demonize Iran or fail to work with Iranians where there is a common interest. It does mean openly competing

with the “worst case” Iranians, and not sacrificing Iraq for the nuclear negotiations. It does mean that the U.S. does need to support Iraqi forces more actively and more quickly as long as they are tied to Iraqi efforts that can help bring unity to the country, and aggressively seek to close the gap between Sunni and Shi’ite and Arab and Kurd.

U.S. aid must remain conditional, but if the Abadi government continues its efforts to defeat ISIL, heal Iraq’s divisions, and most towards civil recovery, the U.S. must make it clear that Iraq does not need to be dependent on Iran.

### **The Need to Send Train and Assist Teams Forward**

At the same time, there are two areas where the U.S. needs to take immediate action if it is to have the opportunity to develop and implement a broader and more effective strategy. One is to make major changes in its train and assist mission. Another is to give more teeth to its air campaign.

The train and assist mission is particularly critical because the U.S. really does not have a ground option in Iraq. Even if the U.S. had the domestic support to send in major ground combat units, the end result would be a nightmare. U.S. forces would be caught in the middle between Shi’ite and Sunni and Arab and Kurd.

Major U.S. combat forces would require a massive support and basing presence, and every element of such a return of U.S. forces would be a major source of provocation not only to Iran but many of Iraq’s Shi’ites. Iraq’s Sunnis would divide, as well as have factions that sought to use U.S. forces to serve their own interests. The same would be true of the Kurds. The U.S. could not move west in Iraq – or help Iraqi forces secure Iraq’s borders with Syria, if this is even possible – without confronting ISIL and Islamist factions in Syria. The U.S. would effectively be repeated the mistakes of Xenophon, and laying the groundwork for writing a new version of the *Anabasis*.

At the same time, the U.S. cannot rely on Canada and covert Special Forces efforts to create an effective train and assist mission, and it cannot rely on the effort it now deploys. A recent State Department background brief has stated that the administration is reevaluating sending a larger and more effective train and assist movement forward to aid Iraqi forces. It also touches on the slow progress of the effort to train moderate Syrian rebel forces.<sup>i</sup> It does not, however, indicate that the White House is taking action.

The key challenge in making the train and assist mission effective does not lie in providing Iraq with more weapons or with forward air controllers – although both steps are necessary. The U.S. needs to act upon a key lesson from Vietnam – and from all past train and assist efforts. Generating or rebuilding forces in the rear is not enough, and is an almost certain recipe for failure. New or weak forces need forward deployed teams of advisors to help them actually fight.

Insurgents cannot be allowed to have a massive intelligence advantage on the ground, to learn the weakest links in the government forces and their defense, attack them, roll-up

the weaker units, expose the flanks and position of the better units, and then force them into what as best is partially organized retreat.

It is also important to remember that no one can create effective combat leaders and forces from the rear. New and weak units need to have a small, but experienced team of combat leaders embedded with them. New combat leaders and units need months of on-the-ground help in getting the essentials of combat operations right. Modern forward air control is critical, and the use of drones can make it effective far beyond the line of sight, but so are human intelligence, and the constant assessment of tactics, defensive positions, and patrol activity.

Forward deployed train and assist teams – usually Special Forces or Rangers – are necessary to spot good combat leaders and warn against weak, ineffective, or corrupt ones. They are needed to provide intelligence backwards that static or inexperienced Iraqi leaders and units cannot. They are needed to be a voice for active patrolling. At the same time, they needed to be a second voice when resupply, reinforcement, regrouping, and relief are truly needed. Someone has to bypass the barriers, rigidities, and sectarian/ethnic prejudices in the chain of command and send the right signals to the top. The Iraqis cannot do this yet.

Forward deployed train and assist teams are needed to encourage effective civil-military action in cases where the Iraqi unit has a different ethnic or sectarian bias or simply thinks in tactical terms rather than how to create a local capability to hold, recover, and build at both the military and civil levels.

These teams are needed now! They have been needed in Iraq and Afghanistan from the start. The same is true of a larger and more aggressive air campaign to support them and the overall efforts in both Iraq and Syria. There are times when support from the rear is enough. Several thousand years of military history is a warning that there are no times when leading from the rear is adequate in actual combat.

## **Raising the Level of Air Support**

The other area where the U.S. needs to immediately take more effective action lies in the use of air strikes. The State department background brief referred to earlier describes the defeat of the Iraqi forces in Ramadi as the partial result of what is in many ways a more effective ISIL bombing effort that the U.S. mounted. It notes that: <sup>ii</sup>

“Over the course of 96 hours in Ramadi, and what we’ve been able to collect looking at different things, about 30 suicide VBIDs in Ramadi and the environs of Ramadi. Ten of them, I’ve been told, had the explosive capacity of an Oklahoma City type attack.”

“...the attacks over the weekend in Ramadi were just quite devastating in terms of ISIL attacks. And you can go see them, and I have some pictures in my – there was an armored bulldozer which knocked over the T-wall perimeters, which then was the first explosion. They then had an armored dump truck, an armored Humvee, and you can see what they do. They weld these things so they’re totally impervious to a lot of weapons systems that the Iraqis have to try to take them out. It was one of – I have to say it was one of Abadi’s main demands when he was here. He needed a weapon system to defeat suicide VBIEDs. And we made the decision immediately while he was here to get 1,000 AT4 anti-tank systems to Iraqi Security Forces. And those are going to be



arriving fairly soon. And that's specifically, as I understand it – I'll defer to experts on this, but that's specifically a kind of close-in weapon system for a VBIED that is coming in your direction. The Peshmerga have been using them to good effect and we're getting 1,000 to the Iraqi Security Forces."

The air data in the document on "*Failed State Wars*" in *Iraq and Syria: The Strategic Challenges* show that the U.S. has flown some 14,210 strike sorties and 4,844 intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance sorties in Iraq and Syria between the start of the air campaign in August 2014 and April 30, 2015. It also flew 5,072 airlift and air drop sorties, and 9,237 refueling sorties. This is a total of 19,054 strike and ISR sorties directly relating to air strikes, and 33,363 sorties of all kinds.<sup>iii</sup>

Only 3,270 sorties, however, actually released a weapon. This is roughly 1 in 4 strike sorties, 1 in 6 strike and IS&R sorties, and 1 in 10 ten sorties of all kinds. Peak weapons releases have varied sharply by month, but reached a peak of 2,308 in January 2015 and then dropped back to 1,685 in April 2015.<sup>iv</sup> The unclassified data on the key targets is uncertain, but most (80% or more) seem to have been flown in close support of active ISIL operations in areas like Kobane, Bajji, and the Mosul Dam areas where there was little risk of killing civilians and relatively few seem to have been "strategic" in the sense they struck at ISIL directly.<sup>v</sup>

As an article by Eric Schmidt in the *New York Times* notes,<sup>vi</sup>

The air campaign has averaged a combined total of about 15 strikes a day in Iraq and Syria. In contrast, the NATO air war against Libya in 2011 carried out about 50 strikes a day in its first two months. The campaign in Afghanistan in 2001 averaged 85 daily airstrikes, and the Iraq war in 2003 about 800 a day. American officials say targeting is more precise than in the past, so fewer flights are needed. A major constraint on the air campaign's effectiveness, critics say, has been the White House's refusal to authorize American troops to act as spotters on the battlefield, designating targets for allied bombing attacks.

While Iraqi criticism of U.S. air efforts is uncertain and often seems designed to excuse Iraqi failures, the same article notes that reaction times are often slow and inadequate, and the number of strikes is not sufficient to halt even ISIL movements that are not shielded by civilians,<sup>vii</sup>

One army commander in Salahuddin Province, of which Tikrit is the capital, said he had passed along a long list of potential targets, including weapons caches, training centers and the homes of local Islamic State leaders. "The least important 5 percent of them were targeted," said the officer, who was not authorized to speak publicly and did not want to be identified as criticizing Iraq's ally. "We also asked the U.S. coalition to attack ISIS convoys while they were moving from one place to another, but they either neglected our requests or responded very late."

...American officials say they are not striking significant, and obvious, Islamic State targets out of fear that the attacks will accidentally kill civilians. Killing such innocents could hand the militants a major propaganda coup and alienate the local Sunni tribesmen, whose support is critical to ousting the militants, and Sunni Arab countries that are part of the fragile American-led coalition.

...many Iraqi commanders and some American officers say that exercising such prudence with airstrikes is a major reason the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or Daesh, has been able to seize vast territory in recent months in Iraq and Syria. That caution — coupled with President Obama's reluctance to commit significant American firepower to a war the White House declared over in 2011, when the last United States combat troops withdrew from Iraq — has led to persistent complaints from Iraqi officials that the United States has been too cautious in its air campaign.

Iraqi officials say the limited American airstrikes have allowed columns of Islamic State fighter's essentially free movement on the battlefield.

"The international alliance is not providing enough support compared with ISIS' capabilities on the ground in Anbar," said Maj. Muhammed al-Dulaimi, an Iraqi officer in Anbar Province, which contains Ramadi. "The U.S. airstrikes in Anbar didn't enable our security forces to resist and confront the ISIS attacks," he added. "We lost large territories in Anbar because of the inefficiency of the U.S.-led coalition airstrikes."

The AFCENT claims about the effectiveness of the strikes that did launch weapons are surprisingly vague. The *New York Times* refers to killing 12,500 fighters without any indication of what this means or its credibility – and the count seems very high for the number of ISIL forces engaged.<sup>viii</sup>

USCENTCOM does not provide a body count, and provides a strange metric of exactly 6,278 targets damaged or destroyed as of May 8, 2015, which includes 77 tanks, 288 HMMWVs, 427 staging areas, 1,779 buildings, 1,415 fighting positions, 152 oil infrastructure targets, and 2,140 other targets. These numbers have often been surprising static over time, and it is far from clear what value damaging a building, staging area, or fighting position really has, much less hitting 2,140 "other targets," which make up more than a third of the total.

Various background briefs do indicate that the U.S. tied such air support to Iraqi efforts to limit the role of Shi'ite militias, build up Sunni and Kurdish forces, separate military efforts from Iran's al Quds force, and create a more unified Iraq. This kind of conditionality should remain a key part of U.S. support of Iraq. At the same time, however, the rules of engagement seem to have set so many limits on the risk of killing or hurting civilians that they became nearly paralytic in striking at ISIL targets where they could imbed civilians and use them as human shields.

The end result is an air campaign that is strong on total sorties flown (and cost), and weak in terms of both overall combat power and strategic effect. It is not the kind of air campaign that can build Iraqi morale, deal with the collapse of weaker units, destroy key ISIL and al Nusra cadres, and cover the period in which Iraqi forces must be rebuilt or provide the kind of force necessary to support a more effective strategy in Syria. If the U.S. wants to limit Iranian influence, increase its influence in Iraq and Syria, buy time for Iraqi force development, and put real pressure on ISIL and Al Nusra, it is going to have to do more.

The U.S. also needs to rethink the steady rise in limits to its rules of engagement, and restrictions on the use of airpower, and limits in its strategic communications in describing what it does. The U.S. cannot afford to make avoiding all civilian casualties a strategic objective. It ends in making human shields a constant in every form of irregular and potentially conventional war as well. It also ignores the grim realities of war.

There is nothing humanitarian about saving a small number of civilian lives and opening whole towns and cities up to prolonged occupation by threats like ISIL. There is nothing humanitarian about prolonging wars, producing far higher net casualties, and adding to the massive totals of displaced persons and refugees. The horrors of war are not shaped by a single target or moment in time, but by the cumulative impact of a conflict. There

also is nothing cowardly about using force at a distance to strike at forces that butcher minorities, civilians with different religious beliefs, and prisoners of war.

### **Creating a Conditions-based U.S. “Train and Assist” and Air Effort**

Calling for an adequate train and assist effort and air campaign, and the creation of an effective linkage between the U.S. strategy for fighting ISIL and a U.S. strategy for Iraq and Syria does not mean the U.S. should offer a blank check or open-ended support for Iraq or expanding the U.S. role in Syria beyond the point where there is strong allied support and a high probability of success.

There is no point in reinforcing failure. There is no point in repeating the mistake in Vietnam of trying to replace host country forces with U.S. forces, even if they win every tactical battle but cannot achieve lasting strategic and civil-military success. U.S. efforts should be conditions based. They should be clearly linked to Iraqi efforts a building unity, including Sunnis in the security forces, and reducing the divisions between government and Pesh Merga forces

Here, the same State Department background brief referenced earlier describes what could be an effective Iraq *response if the necessary resources are provided and the U.S. enforces the necessary conditions for support:*<sup>ix</sup>

“...Iraqi political response has been encouraging. Prime Minister Abadi, who is an engineer by training, he immediately wants to get to the root of what exactly happened, what went wrong, what do they need to defend against these suicide VBIDs, what do they need to correct some of the deficiencies in the security forces, and whatever happened on – particularly on Sunday. And he’s been looking at it in terms of really fixing it at the root of what exactly happened.”

“...they released a seven-point program yesterday which we very much support. It’s focused on mobilizing tribal fighters in Anbar, with a streamlined delivery mechanism for weapons – that’s something we’ve been working on for some time, but that’s something that is starting to move. And we’re going to use this – this particular challenge to really accelerate it.”

“...Recruiting into the Iraqi Army and specifically in their program they released yesterday, they talk about the 7th Iraqi Army Division. That’s the really depleted Anbar-based division that we’re working with all the way out at Al Asad Air Base in western Anbar province. They talked about recalling the Iraqi police from Anbar. There’s about 24,000 police in Anbar who left their posts some time ago; they’ve issued amnesty for those police and asked to recall them. And anyway, we think this is a pretty good – a good program in terms of thinking about how to claw back what was lost in Anbar.”

“The Iraqi parliament today completed a second reading of the national guard law, which is also very important. And why this is important is because the model of the new government of how to stabilize Iraq is a much more decentralized model, much more autonomy in the provinces. And Abadi actually in the wake of this crisis called together all the governors and talked about decentralization, the importance of the governors taking responsibility in their areas as powers are devolved to their areas, and the national guard is a provincial-based security force.

The tribal mobilization, which is kind of the bridge to the national guard, is designed to collect the – what will be the foundation of a national guard. So the Iraqis have already allocated resources, and there’s a list of weapons that are approved for about 8,000 of the tribal fighters in Anbar, which will be ultimately the national guard. But that will take some time to get in place. But they’re moving forward with that.”

“... In the Iraqi plan that they put – they released yesterday, there’s also – they mentioned the stabilization funding mechanism, and they’ve approved the stabilization fund with the United Nations, which is pretty important, because what we found as we’ve been going forward here is that the Iraqis – the government remains pretty cash poor. It can’t access capital markets. It can’t do things to flood resources into areas that are cleared, and that’s remained a real problem. So this new funding mechanism that they’ve established with the UN is designed specifically to get at that problem, for kind of quick-hit projects as soon as areas are cleared, which is necessary. And also the humanitarian response, which is just massive, and making sure that the UN programs – because the UN teams in Iraq are doing an incredible, heroic job – are funded, and that’s something that the coalition will be helping out with as well.”

More broadly, however, the U.S. should openly assess the risks inherent in both increasing its efforts in relatively limited ways, and in shaping the broader strategy necessary for any form of lasting success. The U.S. should not use military force without publically stating the reasons it feels it can succeed in spite of the uncertainties and risks involved. It must go beyond spin and slogans, and justify and explain. It must also set clear conditions for continuing such efforts once they begin, and never pursue limited wars with limited objectives when the risks exceed the cost-benefits.

The United States needs to fully assess the level of effort, aid, and support the Iraqi government will need to make this work. It needs to develop a clear strategy for Syria and justify and explain it, rather than issue empty statements about training token levels of rebel forces. The Administration must present a clear plan, clear milestones for action, clear criteria for ongoing support, and regular open-source reporting and measures of effectiveness. It must revise a strategy and plans when things go wrong, and even end U.S. support if the chances of success drop below a critical level.

Providing forward train and assist teams, more airpower, and an adequate U.S. military and civil effort, will also mean more U.S. casualties and costs. However, as noted earlier, the “butcher’s bill” in war is determined by the total cost over time, not the losses and costs at any given moment. Not providing the right kind of train and assist mission can mean defeat -- or extending the fighting for years. It can expose other Americans to attack over a far longer period of time, produce higher net casualties, and result in far higher net costs in dollars than decisive action. It can also empower a wide range of violent extremists and other conflicts.

The Administration and the Congress must go beyond the meaningless budgeting in the OCO budget, and empty, specious reporting in a recent Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations report on “Operation Inherent Resolve.”<sup>x</sup> It is time both the Administration and the Congress open showed they had assessed the risk and cost-benefits of what is being done, and took meaningful responsibility for their actions.

And yes, sustaining an adequate effort may mean the Obama Administration will have to leave office encumbered by ongoing wars. It may well mean the Congress must face the 2016 election having supported a demanding, expensive, and uncertain military. However, it is time the President’s White House team learned that losing wars by default and inaction is scarcely a better historical record. It is also time that the Congress learned that calling for a strategy means insisting on actually getting one, using the power of the purse to make it effective, and taking responsibility on a bipartisan basis.

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<sup>i</sup> Special Briefing, Office of the Spokesperson, Senior State Department Official, Background Briefing on Iraq, Washington, DC, May 20, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/05/242665.html>.

<sup>ii</sup> Special Briefing, Office of the Spokesperson, Senior State Department Official, Background Briefing on Iraq, Washington, DC, May 20, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/05/242665.html>.

<sup>iii</sup> AFCENT, [http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814\\_iraq/Airpower\\_30\\_April\\_2015.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814_iraq/Airpower_30_April_2015.pdf).

<sup>iv</sup> AFCENT, [http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814\\_iraq/Airpower\\_30\\_April\\_2015.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814_iraq/Airpower_30_April_2015.pdf).

<sup>v</sup> BBC; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034>, May 20, 2015

<sup>vi</sup> Eric Schmitt, U.S. Caution in Strikes Gives ISIS an Edge, Many Iraqis Say," *New York Times*, May 26, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/27/world/middleeast/with-isis-in-crosshairs-us-holds-back-to-protect-civilians.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share>.

<sup>vii</sup> Eric Schmitt, U.S. Caution in Strikes Gives ISIS an Edge, Many Iraqis Say," *New York Times*, May 26, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/27/world/middleeast/with-isis-in-crosshairs-us-holds-back-to-protect-civilians.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share>.

<sup>viii</sup> Eric Schmitt, U.S. Caution in Strikes Gives ISIS an Edge, Many Iraqis Say," *New York Times*, May 26, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/27/world/middleeast/with-isis-in-crosshairs-us-holds-back-to-protect-civilians.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share>.

<sup>ix</sup> Special Briefing, Office of the Spokesperson, Senior State Department Official, Background Briefing on Iraq, Washington, DC, May 20, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/05/242665.html>.

<sup>x</sup> Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations, *Operation Inherent Resolve*, April 2015, [https://oig.state.gov/system/files/oir\\_042915.pdf](https://oig.state.gov/system/files/oir_042915.pdf).