



A Plan to Secure the Peace in Iraq

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Introduction

Over the past two years in Iraq and continuing today, our brave young men and women are combatting ISIS by re-fighting many of the same battles we won years ago. Retaking Ramadi, Fallujah, and Mosul are just a few examples. We must ask, as Americans, “How will this time be different?”

ISIS is a national security threat to the United States and our allies. The group has brutally killed Americans abroad, planned and inspired attacks here at home, and carried out overseas attacks on our allies. ISIS came to power in a political vacuum in Syria, from which the group expanded into a political vacuum in Iraq. The group didn’t just “defeat” the Iraqi Army; the Iraqi Army put their weapons down and went home because they had lost faith in their own government. Thus, **the fundamental problem in Iraq and Syria is political**, not military.

Although it’s devolved to the point where our military involvement is necessary, the only long-term solution that can allow our troops to return home for good must be political in nature. Yet despite this, we don’t have a clear political strategy or a plan to implement it.

Many will rightly say that executing a successful political strategy is hard, and the U.S. has a history of influencing foreign governments that is uneven at best, downright tragic at worst. But today in Iraq, the alternative is worse, which is what we are doing now: sending thousands of American troops back, less than five years after we left, to clean up the mess.

Despite the unfortunate circumstances of our troops’ return to Iraq, they are doing well and will defeat ISIS militarily in the short term. Here I outline a four-part political plan that should guide our military strategy going forward and ensure its lasting success:

- 1. Define our Desired Political End State**
- 2. Enable Political Reforms**
- 3. Condition Further Military Support on Political Progress**
- 4. Provide Authorization and Funding for Iraq’s Future**

Ultimately, our goal is to help create the environment for an Iraq that is sovereign, independent, representative of its people, allied with our interests, and able to maintain its own security against both foreign and domestic enemies. This plan will help get us there.

1.) Define Our Desired Political Endstate

In the absence of a clear political strategy for Iraq, there is renewed debate around core issues like whether the country should be divided, either in three or two, whether the makeup of Parliament should be changed, and what role militias should play in the security forces. This debate must end, at least for the time being, and we must set out a clear picture—hopefully in concert with Iraqi leaders—of what Iraq will look like going forward. If this is no different than what we envisioned during the surge, that is fine, but we must make it clear that this is the vision America will support—and everybody should know that, most of all our own troops.

Recommendations:

- **Legitimate, empowered governance.** Once ISIS is defeated militarily and all territory is regained, stability must be maintained by legitimate government authorities—Iraqi Security Forces and Iraqi civil authorities—not by militias. Many recently recaptured areas, even in Sunni regions of the country, are now controlled by Shia militias. While convenient now for their effectiveness in the counter-ISIS fight and the immediate security they provide in its aftermath, they will be disastrous for long-term stability. Iraqi militias are sectarian and generally lawless, and they will create the same Sunni embitterment that enabled ISIS to take over in the first place. Popular support for eliminating ISIS is not enough; we must foster renewed faith in the Iraqi government. The ethnic makeup of Iraqi government and security officials must be generally reflective of the areas they control, with an Army and national government that are truly multi-ethnic.
- **Functional Federalism.** The goal of ‘functional federalism’ is to allow for greater regional autonomy, preserving key functions of the national government while decentralizing political authorities to the provinces. Budget authority over regional and local public services and the authority for provincial political appointments should reside more locally rather than within the majority-controlled Baghdad central government. Doing so will help reduce sectarian strife and empower local and regional politics. This plan was enumerated in the Iraqi constitution but never fully realized.
- **Unitary Sovereign State.** Despite the turmoil of the last decade, and the haphazard way by which Iraq’s borders were defined early in the last century, the idea of an Iraqi state remains and is important to stability in the region, particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia but for Syria and Jordan as well. While accommodating a greater voice for the provinces, Baghdad should remain the central repository for oil revenues because it is the only way to distribute them with reasonable equity and ensure certain regions are not completely disenfranchised. There is tremendous sectarian overlap in many areas of Iraq, and even more before the 2003 war; no obvious geographic boundaries among the religious sects exist. Moreover, formal partitions [rarely work](#) in practice as envisioned. Ultimately, it’s better to have Iraqis arguing over division of revenues in Parliament than fighting over national borders in the sand.
- **Relationship with Iran.** Iran is an enemy of the United States, and most Iraqis will tell you it is an enemy of Iraq as well, despite how well Iran has leveraged influence in the Iraqi government over the past decade. The U.S. should be clear that we will not permit Iraq to become an Iranian client state.

2.) Enable Political Reforms

Reforms must come from Iraqis to be seen as legitimate, but there is much we can do to encourage and influence their outcome. We did that successfully during the surge, and Iran does it in Iraq today. The good news is that we actually have a Prime Minister in PM Abadi who is allied with our interests and is setting a good course for Iraq. His problem is not having the political power or expertise he needs to follow through. We should support him in carrying out his reforms while many other actors, including Iran, are actively working to undermine him.

Recommendations:

- **Counter Iranian influence among Shia politicians.** Iran curries favor and influence with Shia politicians every day, through everything from threats to cash payments. We must work actively to counter this influence through our own clandestine resources, through State Department support for development efforts and regional projects, and by building political coalitions. Most Iraqis see the Iranian influence as historically malicious, but Iran's investments in Iraq's infrastructure and security have won some recent support.
- **Strengthen Sunni Influence in Parliament.** A fundamental cause of sectarian strife in Iraq today is that Sunnis are underrepresented. PM Maliki was effective in his malicious attempts to disenfranchise Sunni politicians, expunge Sunni leadership from the security forces, and use his militias to kill or falsely prosecute prominent Sunni leaders. Sunni politicians are disorganized and need to learn how to form coalitions. Many experts believe that much can be gained from simple political mentorship; it paid great dividends during the surge. The U.S. should also provide development aid targeted to Sunni areas.
- **Press PM Abadi to fulfill promises to Sunnis.** PM Abadi must follow through on still-unfulfilled promises to replace corrupt sectarian ministers, root out corruption throughout the government, and restore public services to areas long lacking attention. Pardons or, at a minimum, stays of execution should be issued to key Sunni political figures who have been convicted in spurious and politically-motivated judicial proceedings at the end of PM Maliki's time in office. Arbitrary, politically-motivated detention of Sunni leaders must cease.
- **Press Parliament to fulfill promises to Sunnis.** Additionally, the U.S. must press Iraqi leaders in Parliament to repeal de-Ba'athification legislation that prevents many Sunnis from fair access to government jobs and positions of power. Over a decade after this flawed policy sowed the seeds for Sunni discontent following the U.S. invasion, it still results in the systemic disenfranchisement of Sunnis.
- **Expedite the long-stalled cross-sectarian National Guard.** Top commanders have repeatedly stressed a National Guard force must be created that recognizes, finances, and professionalizes the growing army of anti-ISIS tribal fighters. Sunni leaders have described this as a key step not only to retaking Sunni territories from ISIS but to achieving national reconciliation. Care must be taken, however, to integrate these groups into a truly national and professional organization lest Iraq develop a Sunni militia problem as bad as the Shia one.
- **Facilitate reconciliation with the Kurds.** Assist with reconciliation and more equitable revenue sharing between the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and Baghdad. Again, we've done this in the past, and today we need to do it again. This will ensure one third of the country no longer operates on its own and feels embittered by Baghdad's policies and economic leverage.

- **Counter the Iranian propaganda effort.** Today Iran controls, by some estimates, 95% of Iraqi TV stations. Achieving political progress under this influence, when the Iraqi people are shielded from the truth, is incredibly difficult. Shortly after the invasion, we had success mentoring the Iraqi media and ensuring its independence, and doing so requires relatively limited resources. We must revive and re-fund these efforts.

3.) Condition Further Military Support on Political Progress

Significant progress has been made against ISIS thus far, but more needs to be done militarily to ensure the group's defeat. Iraq is dependent on our support, but that dependence wanes with every military victory, and so does our leverage. It has been a mistake to provide so much military support to date without demanding any political reforms in return, and we must reverse this policy immediately.

Although both Iraqi and American commanders are understandably anxious to conquer Mosul, the last remaining ISIS stronghold in Iraq, there are several reasons for slowing our advance. Conditioning further support on progress on the above goals is important to long-term stability, and neither we nor the Iraqis seem to have a plan for post-conflict Mosul at this point anyway. Even more specific to American interests, there are two key goals the U.S. must achieve before Mosul falls.

Recommendations:

- **Sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to legitimize continued U.S. presence.** Most experts seem to agree that it was a mistake not to successfully negotiate a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that allows for the enduring presence of some U.S. forces, if for nothing more than to protect and empower our diplomats. Experts disagree on how much leverage the Bush and Obama Administrations had to do so in the face of stiff Iraqi political resistance (despite behind-the-scenes political support). The privileges and immunities discussion that precipitated the agreement's downfall remains a third rail in Iraqi politics, but the exchange of diplomatic notes that allowed a limited presence of U.S. troops to fight ISIS should be formalized and extended. This is not an argument for legitimizing anything like the massive presence of conventional U.S. forces post-invasion, but it is in both Iraq's interests and our own to legitimize the limited military and more robust diplomatic presence we will require to ensure stability going forward. We have the opportunity to take this fractious debate off the table now with an enduring agreement.
- **Condition future arms sales on political progress.** Beyond the current fight against ISIS, Iraq relies on American arms and equipment for its security. We must use this leverage more effectively and demand more in return for the provision of our material and support. Iraq should meet measurable benchmarks to secure shipments.

4.) Provide Authorization and Funding for Iraq's Future

Congress should press the Administration to enact these recommended changes to its Iraq strategy, but Congress must also fund and support them. Doing so is a wise investment in Iraq's future and in eventually reducing what we currently budget in dollars and lives to maintain Iraq's stability. Congress needs confidence in a strategy, and Congress must resource its execution. One of the side benefits of moving from a military-led strategy to a longer-term, diplomatic-led strategy is that the latter will be less costly to American taxpayers.

Recommendations:

- **Renew stalled and abandoned State Department programs.** As military forces were drawn down in 2011 and a robust State Department presence was promised, ambitious plans including programs to continue training of Iraqi security forces, police, and maintain coordinated intelligence gathering outposts [were scrapped](#). In total, nearly \$1.6B was cut from security and political assistance programs due to a combination of budgetary concerns, fears of security for U.S. personnel, and PM Maliki's intransigence. U.S. military leaders strongly criticized the cuts, and have tied them to the slow deterioration of Iraqi governance and security forces prior the 2014 incursion by ISIS. These programs, or modified successors, must be renewed.
- **Increase numbers of diplomatic personnel.** In 2010, the State Department had nearly 20,000 total personnel in Baghdad. By January 2013, the number had decreased to 11,500, and by January 2014, it was down to 5,500. Since then, State Department personnel have totaled less than 2,000, with the number of actual diplomats far lower as many of these are security and support contractors. In order to tackle the critical political reforms outlined above, we must increase the number of State Department diplomatic personnel in Iraq, and we should consider reopening additional consulates in key provinces. Of course, numbers alone are not enough—the effort must be well-resourced with quality leaders, and this will take a concerted recruitment effort by the State Department.
- **Broaden diplomatic and intelligence authorities.** In order to counter the activities of Iran's intelligence and paramilitary operations, the NSC must give the CIA and State Department appropriate discretion and bureaucratic authority. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and hardline militias affiliated with Iranian intelligence want a weak Iraq that is dependent on Iranian support, and they are working hard to achieve it. We have to empower our intelligence professionals to counteract them.
- **Secretary of State Focus on Iraq.** To signal the seriousness of the U.S. commitment to this strategy, the Secretary of State should schedule a sustained presence in Baghdad over the course of 2-3 weeks, much like his presence and personal diplomacy in Afghanistan brokered the political compromise that underlies today's Afghan unity government.

In the long run, all of this is more important than our military campaign against ISIS because it's the only way to ensure our military efforts will ultimately be successful.