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Not Our Fight Alone: An Analysis of the US Strategy Combating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

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CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE

**Not Our Fight Alone:
An Analysis of the US Strategy Combating the Islamic State of Iraq
and Syria**

SUBMITTED TO

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AND

DEAN NICHOLAS WARNER

BY

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ABSTRACT:

The recent policies of former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, combined with the collapse of the Syrian state in 2011, created conditions that led to the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or “ISIS.” As of November 2014, ISIS controls large areas of western and northern Iraq and northern and eastern Syria, an area roughly the size of Belgium. The rise of ISIS in the past three years has caught the attention of every major nation, especially the United States, and world leaders are justified in fearing a strong ISIS in the Middle East.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an analysis of the US strategy in combating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. The effectiveness of the United States strategy is closely linked with numerous factors, including the history of sectarian violence in Iraq. These factors will be explored throughout the paper. This analysis sheds light on the strengths and weaknesses of the US strategy and provides various ways the US can further its goals in the region.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The United States has been militarily engaged in Iraq for more than a decade. After the attacks carried out by al-Qaeda on September 11, 2001, the United States sought to eliminate the threat posed by militant Islamic organizations throughout the world. In 2003, US forces invaded Iraq based on intelligence reports suggesting that Saddam Hussein had developed weapons of mass destruction, or “WMD.” United States’ leaders, including President George W. Bush and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, believed that Hussein’s regime had ties with al-Qaeda and could provide the militant group with WMDs that could be used against the United States. The United States developed a “strategy” for dealing with this possible threat from Iraq, which consisted solely of a short-term plan to remove Saddam Hussein’s regime and prevent it from using WMD to threaten its neighbors and the United States’ interests in the region.¹ Astonishingly, this war plan omitted any form of a strategy designed to successfully occupy Iraq after the combat phase and establish a viable government. This lack of a strategy and the misguided actions of US civilian and military leaders would prove disastrous.

In the early years of the invasion, the decisions of American political leaders inadvertently incited sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims, and this sectarianism would fuel an insurgency against United States troops in Iraq. Radical jihadist groups would purposefully promote sectarian violence in order to achieve their objectives. During the past decade, sectarian violence has been the primary force undermining US foreign policy in Iraq. While US leaders made many decisions that

worsened sectarian violence, Americans have also pursued successful policies that worked to fight radical groups while easing sectarian tensions.

Unfortunately, in recent years Iraqi political leaders have pursued blatant sectarian agendas that have worsened tensions. The recent policies of then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, combined with the collapse of the Syrian state in 2011, created conditions that led to the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or “ISIS.” As of November 2014, ISIS controls large areas of western and northern Iraq and northern and eastern Syria, an area roughly the size of Belgium.² The rise of ISIS in the past three years has caught the attention of every major nation, especially the United States, and world leaders are justified in fearing a strong ISIS in the Middle East. Foreign fighters from around the world, including the United States, could be trained by ISIS and return to their countries to carry out terrorist attacks. The attacks by al-Qaeda on 9/11 demonstrate that only a small number of terrorists are capable of killing thousands of innocent civilians and damaging the world economy.

ISIS also threatens the stability of the region. The group has expressed its intention to invade and conquer neighboring countries such as Jordan, Turkey, Kuwait and Iran and expand the “Caliphate,”³ or its Islamic empire. The spread of ISIS throughout the region poses a direct security threat to US allies such as Israel and would further strengthen the group, making it more capable of carrying out attacks on the United States. Given these threats, it is imperative that the United States addresses the problem of ISIS in the region. On September 10, 2014, President Barack Obama outlined the US strategy to combat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. In sum, this strategy consists of a US air campaign targeting ISIS forces. These airstrikes will

support Iraqi forces conducting offensive operations against ISIS positions. The United States also has 3,000 troops stationed throughout Iraq tasked with training and supplying Iraqi Security Forces. Finally, US is working with the Iraqi government to support the formation of Sunni National Guard units that will fight ISIS.⁴

This essay will analyze this strategy in terms of its effectiveness in defeating ISIS and reducing sectarian tensions in Iraq. Radical jihadist groups will be able to find safe haven in Iraq as long as there are deep sectarian divisions. The United States must use its leverage to compel the Iraqi government to pursue policies that reduce tensions between Sunni and Shia factions throughout the country. In the first chapter, I will explain the various threats posed by ISIS and argue that it is imperative that the US works to diminish and ultimately destroy the group. In the next chapter, I will provide a history of sectarian violence between Sunni and Shia Muslims and its role in undermining US policy in Iraq. I will also examine the various approaches the United States has taken to fight radical Islamists while easing sectarian tensions. In the concluding chapter, I will analyze current US strategy for combating ISIS. This section will include policy recommendations aimed to degrade ISIS, reduce sectarianism, and facilitate reconciliation. I will only focus on actions the United States should take to drive ISIS out of Iraq, recognizing that for ISIS to be destroyed, they must be driven out of Syria as well. However, the United States and the Iraqi government must first drive ISIS out of Iraq and regain control over its lost territory.

II. THE THREAT FROM ISIS

In assessing the threat of ISIS to US security interests in the Middle East, it is imperative to understand the organization's ideology and how it has driven their recent actions in Iraq and Syria.

Brief History of Salafism

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria is a militant Sunni Salafi group, and Salafists are considered to be ultraconservative Sunnis. After the death of the Prophet Mohammed in 632 A.D, Muslims disagreed about who should be his successor. Sunni Muslims believe that the Muslim community can select the successor of Mohammed. The Shia believe that Mohammed chose his son-in-law, Ali, to be his successor and that therefore the successor must be a direct relative of the Prophet. This rift has divided the Muslim world across the Middle East for over a thousand years. While the vast majority of the world's Muslims are Sunni, in Iraq Sunni Muslims are a minority, making up around 20 percent of the population. Shias are concentrated in Iran, southern Iraq and southern Lebanon, and have a significant presence in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf States.⁵

The traditional form of Salafism is an ultraconservative religious reform movement within Sunni Islam. The majority of Sunni Muslims around the world, approximately 90 percent of the Muslim population, view Salifism as too dated, literalist, and detached from mainstream modern Islam. Salafi followers represent around 3 percent of the world's Muslims. Salafism is an ideology that posits that Islam has strayed from its origins and become polluted by modernity.⁶ Salafists want Muslims to adhere directly to Islam's original texts and teachings, thereby returning to

the moral practices of the Prophet. However, until recently, Salafists held practical political positions and did not attempt to revolt against existing political authorities. In the mid-1990's, some Salafists began to embrace "jihad," or holy war in the name of Islam, believing that violence and terrorism were both justified and crucial to achieve their religious and political objectives. Since the "Arab Spring" of 2010-2011, various Jihadi groups have politicized and polarized the Salafi movement.⁷

ISIS and Salafi Jihad

ISIS embodies this newly polarized and jihadist Salafism. Unlike traditional Salafists, ISIS acts on radical political goals as well as extreme religious views. The goal of ISIS is to recreate the Caliphate that existed following the death of the Prophet Mohammed in 632 A.D. A "caliphate" was the political-religious state comprising the Muslim community and the lands and people under its dominion. The "caliph," or successor, who sometimes holds spiritual authority, rules the caliphate.⁸ The leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared himself "caliph" in early 2014 after the taking of the Iraqi city of Mosul. Baghdadi aims to expand his "caliphate," which currently extends roughly from northwestern Syria to Fallujah in central Iraq, to include all territory from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf.⁹ In an audiotaped message, al-Baghdadi also announced that ISIS intends to conquer countries in the West.¹⁰

ISIS and American Security Interests

ISIS threatens United States' interests in the Middle East for several key reasons. The US and most of the world depend on Middle Eastern oil and gas, and disruptions in the flow of oil from the region could destabilize the global economy. ISIS clearly threatens this supply of oil. In August 2014, ISIS forces advanced on the Iraqi

city of Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish regional government and the administrative center of its oil industry. Global energy companies worth trillions of dollars have invested in Kurdistan, which accounts for about a quarter of Iraq's oil industry.¹¹ If ISIS militants were to seize control of Erbil, they would significantly disrupt Iraqi oil production and threaten global access to oil.

ISIS is already in control of numerous oil fields throughout Iraq and Syria, which experts estimate may produce 25,000 to 40,000 barrels a day, worth a minimum of \$1.2 million in the underground market.¹² If the United States must protect the flow of oil from the Middle East to ensure the stability of the global economy, it must take both military and diplomatic efforts to diminish the presence of ISIS as well as to protect major oil fields in the region.

The United States also has a direct security interest in dismantling terrorist networks in the Middle East that threaten American lives. Al-Baghdadi, in an audio statement addressing ISIS in January 2014, warned the United States that soon they would be targeted.¹³ As of November 2014, ISIS had released the brutal beheadings of three American journalists. While intelligence experts claim that ISIS does not pose an immediate threat to the American homeland,¹⁴ there are numerous reasons to believe the group will pose such a threat to in the long term.

ISIS "foreign fighters," non-Arabs from the United States and other Western nations, could return to their home countries after becoming more radicalized while training and fighting in Iraq and Syria. These individuals could then attack Western civilians, including Americans. The Central Intelligence Agency estimates that ISIS has around 15,000 foreign fighters and a relatively small number of these fighters come

from France, Germany, Britain, and the United States. Experts estimate over one hundred American-born citizens have joined ISIS.¹⁵ Although these numbers are relatively low, the 9/11 attacks demonstrate the potential of only a small number of terrorists to kill thousands of innocent civilians, damage the economy, and traumatize the US and the world. If ISIS gains strength in Iraq and Syria by consolidating its control over new territory, more foreign fighters will be attracted to its ranks. ISIS has developed a significant presence on social media platforms, which it uses to recruit fighters in Iraq, Syria, and throughout the world. The group has used videos to widely publicize its recent military victories throughout Iraq, attracting more foreign fighters to its ranks.¹⁶ The US must use military and diplomatic efforts to dismantle ISIS in order to ensure the safety of American citizens abroad and at home.

The growing strength of ISIS also seriously threatens to spread its violent ideology throughout the Middle East. As mentioned earlier, an estimated three percent of the Muslim population adheres to Salafism. A much smaller percentage of this group supports the radical political goals of ISIS. However, ISIS will draw more of these Salafi Muslims as it becomes stronger and publicizes victories. Some Salafists believe they have a religious obligation to support ISIS after al-Baghdadi's announcement on June 29th declaring himself a "Caliph" over the newly established Islamic Caliphate. Even if a small percentage of Salafi Muslims pledged allegiance to Baghdadi, ISIS would gain the support of tens of thousands of Muslims in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, and every other Sunni Muslim country.¹⁷

US security is threatened by the spread of violent Salafism throughout the world, as it could energize and empower other radical jihadist groups that can threaten

the American homeland. In November 2014, an Egyptian militant group, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, pledged allegiance to ISIS and al-Baghdadi.¹⁸ In the future, it is possible these groups may carry out attacks in the name of the Islamic State, which may include targeting Americans throughout the world.

ISIS also threatens the stability of the Middle East. ISIS has directly expressed its desire to dissolve all political boundaries and conquer its neighboring states in order to expand the Caliphate. The spread of ISIS throughout the Middle East would threaten United States allies, including Israel, and could lead to catastrophic and destabilizing conflicts in the region. Given these immediate and long-term threats, it is imperative that the United States takes action to diminish ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and its strategy must be analyzed in the context of sectarian violence and US involvement for the past decade in Iraq.

III. US FOREIGN POLICY AND THE SUNNI-SHIA CONFLICT IN IRAQ

The Iraqi population consists of a variety of religious sects. The overwhelming majority of the population is Muslim, and of these 32 million people, around 60% are Shia Muslim and 35% are Sunni Muslim.¹⁹ The Sunni-Shia divide in Islam occurred immediately after the death of the Prophet Mohammed in 632 A.D. Sunni Muslims accepted the appointment of Abu Bakr, a close friend of the prophet, to be the leader of the Muslim Empire. Shia Muslims, on the other hand, believed the selection of Abu Bakr as a successor to Mohammed was a *coup d'etat*. They believed that the successor of Mohammed must be from his immediate family and that it should have been Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Mohammed. Sunni and Shia Muslims have been warring with each other since the death of Mohammed. In AD 656, the first Muslim civil war broke out in Iraq between the Partisans of Ali, the Shia, and the Party of Uthman.²⁰

Although the conflict concerns theological differences, the Sunni-Shia conflict has largely been about political power and regional interests. While the vast majority of Muslim believers respect fellow Muslims regardless of their particular sect, areas of political instability and extremism foster sectarian hatred and violence. While Iraq has been plagued by sectarian violence for centuries, I will begin with the more recent history of the Sunni-Shia conflict under the rule of Saddam Hussein. Hussein rose to power in Iraq in July 1979. A decade earlier, in 1968, Colonel Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr successfully overthrew the government and established the Baath party as the dominant political actor in the country. Saddam Hussein, Colonel al-Bakr's cousin, played a leading role in the suppression of Bakr's political enemies,²¹ often through torture or executions.

Through a series of political maneuvers, Hussein managed to marginalize al-Bakr and forced him to resign in July 1979. Initially, Hussein's Ba'ath party consisted of members of his extended family. He was a Sunni Muslim, born and raised in the Albu Nasr tribe in the Sunni triangle,²² and so Iraq became a Shia-majority country ruled by a Sunni leader. Until the US invasion in 2003, Hussein and the Ba'ath party ensured that the majority of the Shia population were marginalized and excluded from the government. Throughout his rule, Hussein targeted Shia religious leaders and indiscriminately killed Shia followers. Shia resentment would eventually lead to a rebellion after the 1991 Gulf War, but Hussein's military brutally cracked down on these Shia rebels, killing tens of thousands of people.²³

In March 2003, the United States invaded Iraq based on intelligence reports suggesting that Hussein had developed weapons of mass destruction. United States' leaders including President Bush and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld believed that Hussein's regime had ties with al-Qaeda and could provide the militant group with WMDs that could then be used against the United States. The United States' strategy to deal with this Iraqi threat consisted solely of a short-term plan to remove Saddam Hussein's regime.²⁴ Astonishingly, the United States strategy did not take into account the sectarian violence and resentment that had plagued Iraq for thousands of years, and its actions would only worsen these sectarian tensions.

Following its "successful" invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Hussein's regime, the United States, the United Kingdom and their allies established an interim entity led by Americans to run the country until a new provisional Iraqi government could be established. They established the "Coalition Provisional Authority" as a transitional

government.²⁵ On May 16, 2003, Paul Bremer, as the Chief Executive of the CPA, issued a directive calling for the “de-Ba’athification” of the Iraqi government.²⁶

The Iraqi Ba’ath Party was a hierarchical organization with six tiers. The top three levels of the Ba’ath Party consisted of Saddam Hussein, his immediate family, his advisors and key regime officials. Had Bremer’s “de-Ba’athification” directive only removed these top three tiers, a very small number of Iraqis would have objected. However, Bremer decided that de-Ba’athification would include the fourth tier, which effectively disenfranchised tens of thousands of ordinary Iraqis who had joined the party in order to obtain better jobs.²⁷ These Iraqis included doctors, engineers, university professors and civil servants. In just one order, the entirety of Iraq’s Sunni elite class was disenfranchised and humiliated. Sunni tribes began to worry that the United States intended to marginalize the Sunni population in Iraq, which led many Sunnis to join the growing insurgency opposed to the US occupation.²⁸

Bremer made another decision that further fueled the rise of an insurgency. On May 23, 2003 he disbanded all Iraqi government departments that had a role in security or intelligence.²⁹ The Americans felt it necessary to disband the departments developed by Hussein and the Ba’ath party for purposes of regime control since many were responsible for horrible acts of violence against the Iraqi people.³⁰ However, Bremer’s directive also disbanded the entire Iraqi Army, a force of hundreds of thousands of mostly Sunni soldiers and officers.³¹ Many of these soldiers and officers would eventually form the core of the Sunni insurgency.

Despite US directives removing the Ba’ath party and disbanding the Iraqi military, many Sunni leaders still believed that the United States would incorporate

them in the government. This optimism stemmed from the fact that Sunnis had more government experience than any of the other groups in Iraq.³² Sunnis also believed that it was not in the interest of the US to establish a government dominated by Shia and Kurdish groups, since most of these groups were connected to Iran. Sunni tribal leaders in the provinces of Anbar, Ninevah and Salah al-Din urged former Baathist members and ousted members of the former Iraqi military to wait for the United States' next move before committing to joining the insurgency.³³

Meanwhile, the insurgency had begun to develop. After the US invasion, ultraconservative Sunni jihadists from throughout the Middle East began to cross into Iraq. The most powerful of these groups were al-Qaeda and Tawheed wa'al Jihad, founded by Jordanian native Abu Musab Zarqawi.³⁴ Tawheed wa'al Jihad would become a precursor to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. While in Iraq, Zarqawi planned and conducted numerous suicide bombings against Shia militias and civilians as well as US coalition forces. This jihadist group had two main objectives: to wage a sectarian war against Shias in Iraq and work to end the US occupation through constant attacks on coalition forces.³⁵

The United States' official backing of the Iraqi Interim Governing Council, the Iraqi government established by the Americans in July 2003, convinced many moderate Sunnis to join the insurgency. The majority of the Council was made up of Shia politicians with highly sectarian views, and the Sunni political elite was largely excluded from the body.³⁶ Also, US forces failed to reach out to Sunni tribes for nearly a year after the occupation, and the Coalition Provisional Authority did not engage with tribal leaders until May 2004.³⁷ These developments convinced Ba'athist officials, the

Sunni majority, and many tribal leaders that the United States intended to marginalize the Sunni populace. This led many moderate Sunnis, including former military Ba'athist officials, to tolerate and in some cases cooperate with radical jihadist groups such as Tawheed wa'al Jihad.³⁸

The formation of the interim government led the majority of Sunnis to distrust the United States and suspect that it intended to marginalize the Sunnis in Iraq and empower the Shia throughout the region. This perception of the Sunnis, along with incidents of US abusing Iraqis, fed the insurgency. On November 26, 2003, four soldiers put an Iraqi general, Abed Hamed Mowhoush, into a sleeping bag, sat on him, and rolled him around the floor.³⁹ At an outpost near Fallujah, soldiers would "blow off steam" by beating prisoners until they passed out or collapsed.⁴⁰

Al-Qaeda and other radical jihadist groups gained support from many Sunni tribes. Tawheed wa'al Jihad provided Sunni communities with guidance and protection, and Zarqawi assured Sunnis that they were performing their religious duty by fighting coalition forces. These jihadist groups also used propaganda to win the allegiance of Sunnis, claiming that the Americans were working with the Shia and Iran to expel Sunnis from Iraq.⁴¹ Zarqawi capitalized on Sunni resentment from their removal from the government and the formation of a Shia-dominated government. By 2004, Zarqawi and his group became notorious for conducting dozens of deadly suicide bombings of Shia mosques, schools, cafes, and markets throughout Iraq. In October 2004, Osama Bin-laden officially endorsed Zarqawi and Zarqawi renamed his group "al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)"⁴² However, it is important to point out that al-Qaeda in Iraq was not actually a precursor or partner with al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda in Iraq and the global al-Qaeda

responsible for the 9/11 attacks had different ideologies and employed different tactics. In 2005, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri would criticize Zarqawi's tactics, claiming that Zarqawi's attacks against Shias distracted jihadists from their most important enemy, the United States.⁴³

Al-Qaeda in Iraq succeeded in igniting a sectarian civil war in 2004 that would wage for two years. In March 2004, suicide bombers and mortars targeted the Shia holy city of Karbala, killing 181 people and wounding several hundred.⁴⁴ From that point, AQI increased their number of attacks against Shia civilians. In response, Shia militias and the Iraqi Security Forces would kill hundreds of Sunnis, claiming they were responsible for the bombings.⁴⁵ On February 22, 2006, Al-Qaeda in Iraq bombed the Shiite Askiriya shrine, leading to an explosion of sectarian violence. Shia militia members formed "death squads" and assassinated hundreds of Sunnis. The assassinations conducted by Shia groups accounted for more than four times as many deaths in March as bombings and other mass-casualty attacks, according to military data.⁴⁶ After the installation of the new government led by Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Ja'afari in early 2005, the Shia-dominated Iraqi military frequently and brutally retaliated against the Sunni populace. Zarqawi's strategy was simple yet effective: incite the Iraqi government to retaliate against the Sunni populace, so that Sunnis had no choice but to support al-Qaeda in Iraq.

From 2004 to 2006, AQI drastically increased its presence in Sunni areas of Iraq and by 2005 controlled many areas throughout the "Sunni Triangle." The Sunni Triangle, the area between Baghdad in the south, Mosul in the north, and Rutba in the east, where most of Iraq's Sunni population resides, consists of hundreds of small and

medium-sized tribes as well as a dozen large tribal federations.⁴⁷ However, after the early post-invasion years, Sunni tribes and the general populace began to feel disillusioned with and threatened by al-Qaeda in Iraq. Zarqawi viewed himself as “caliph,” or a spiritual leader, and AQI began to impose its harsh interpretation of Sharia Islamic law on Sunni communities. Al-Qaeda in Iraq members would force families to provide food and shelter and make families marry their daughters to suicide bombers. They would force divorces for wives they desired and prohibited drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes. AQI extremists would brutally murder anyone they perceived as deserving or disobeying orders. Sunni tribes began to view al-Qaeda in Iraq as a significant threat.⁴⁸

Once Sunni tribes viewed al-Qaeda in Iraq as an enemy, they began to fight AQI militants in an attempt to regain control of their territory. In Anbar Province, tribal leaders recruited police officers and led operations against al-Qaeda in Iraq.⁴⁹ Sheik Abdul Sattar Abu Risha led what became known as the “Anbar Awakening.” American forces facilitated recruitment for the police force, and local tribesmen coordinated with Americans in securing areas and restarting the economy. The Iraqi government officially supported the Anbar initiative, as the Interior and Defense Ministries funded and equipped Iraqi Security Force (ISF) recruits from Anbar Province. The Anbar Awakening was largely effective at eliminating AQI extremists from the province.⁵⁰

Inspired by the success of this initiative, the United States started the “Sons of Iraq” program. In February 2007, US General David Petraeus, the commander of American forces, started the Sons of Iraq Program in the cities of Diyala and Baghdad.⁵¹ The program aimed to replicate the success of the Anbar Awakening in

eliminating al-Qaeda and restoring security. As part of the program, the United States paid Sunni tribesman to fight AQI. Unlike Anbar, the provinces in which the “Sons of Iraq” program operated were ethnically heterogeneous. In Baghdad, Salah al-Din, Diyala, and Ninevah, the Iraqi police were Shia-dominated and often committed sectarian violence against Sunnis.⁵² Sunnis in these ethnically mixed areas viewed the presence of Americans as a buffer against such sectarian attacks. Unlike in Anbar, Sons of Iraq members were not interested in improving their relations with the Iraqi government. Rather, Sunni fighters who joined the Sons of Iraqi Program wanted to get a regular paycheck, ammunition and weapons, and fight AQI to secure their home areas.⁵³

The Sons of Iraq program, combined with deployment of an additional 20,000 American troops in 2007, was effective in drastically diminishing the presence of al-Qaeda throughout Iraq. By the end of 2007, AQI forces throughout Iraq had been decimated by over 70 percent, from 12,000 to 3,500. By 2009, Al-Qaeda in Iraq was effectively defeated as an army.⁵⁴ The remaining members of the group consisted of al-Qaeda militants, some Sunni tribesmen, and former members of Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist military.⁵⁵ It appeared as if the al-Qaeda that had terrorized Sunni provinces, killed American soldiers and Iraqi security forces and carried out suicide bombings against Shia civilians for the past eight years had finally been defeated.

In the spring of 2011, a civil war broke out across the border in Syria. An armed rebellion developed after President Bashar al-Assad violently cracked down on nationwide peaceful protests. The surviving remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq took advantage of the resulting breakdown of the Syrian state. In the summer of 2011, the

new leader of AQI, Abu al-Baghdadi, sent fighters into Syria to join the opposition in fighting al-Assad.⁵⁶ In Syria, AQI was able to regain strength, recruit members, and spread its message. Within twelve months, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, now calling themselves the “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant”, was the most powerful rebel group in the country fighting Assad’s regime.⁵⁷

In Iraq, Prime Minister al-Maliki’s decisions had continued to alienate and anger the Sunni populace. During the Anbar Awakening, Maliki promised that Sunni fighters involved would be incorporated into the Iraqi state security structures. On September 4, 2008, al-Maliki issued an executive order officially naming the Awakening fighters “Sons of Iraq” and called for the integration of its members into Iraqi state structures by the end of 2009.⁵⁸ In reality, Maliki and the Iraqi government never intended to incorporate the Sons of Iraq into the Iraqi security apparatus. As the United States increasingly drew down its forces, Maliki proceeded to dismantle the Sunni militias formed during the Awakening.⁵⁹

In late 2011, Maliki began to accuse and persecute Sunni members in the government. The Prime Minister ordered the immediate arrest of Vice President Tarek Hashimi, the most senior Sunni politician in the Shia-led government, after hearing of a supposed terror plot planned by Hashimi’s bodyguards. Hashimi fled and his bodyguards were tortured until they presented false confessions about planning to attack Shia civilians.⁶⁰ In 2012, Maliki arrested thousands of Sunni, claiming they were attempting or planning to subvert the government. Simultaneously, Shia militias were roaming through Sunni areas, killing anyone they deemed suspect.⁶¹ Bodies of Sunni civilians could be seen strewn everywhere on a daily basis. In response to Maliki’s

sectarian agenda, thousands throughout the Sunni Triangle began to demonstrate and demand political inclusion. In late 2012, hundreds of thousands of Sunnis assembled in Fallujah and Ramadi.⁶² At the same time, thousands of Shias gathered in counter demonstrations and expressed their approval of Maliki's policies in Basra, Naja, Babel, and Baghdad.⁶³

After establishing a dominating presence in Syria, ISIS moved back into Iraq. This reflected its grand ambition to establish an Islamic caliphate, or Muslim empire. ISIS members began espousing their radical message at peaceful Sunni protests against Prime Minister Maliki. In April 2013, a peaceful Sunni protest in Hawisha was attacked by the Iraqi Army, leaving hundreds of innocents killed. This event led hundreds of formerly moderate Sunnis to join the ranks of ISIS.⁶⁴ The brutality of Maliki, the Iraqi Army, and Shia militias convinced the Sunni population that they needed to be prepared to defend themselves and fight for their rights.

Unfortunately, the only group in the country willing to fight for these Sunnis was ISIS, which began to grow in numbers and steadily take over more territory in Iraq. In July 2013, ISIS conducted an attack on Abu Ghraib prison and released 500 prisoners. This formidable attack involved a sophisticated coordination of ground forces and artillery,⁶⁵ and emboldened ISIS forces to seize control of the key cities of Fallujah and Ramadi. The battle for Ramadi only lasted a few days, and it was clear that ISIS was far stronger and determined than the Iraqi Security Forces. With this realization, ISIS launched an offensive on the northern city of Mosul in June. The local Sunni population of Mosul viewed the Iraqi Security Forces stationed to defend against ISIS as a Shia militia. Without support from the local population, most Iraqi Security Forces

troops fled without a fight. This shocked the US, since the ISF force consisted of around 10,000 soldiers and the ISIS force had only around 800 militants.⁶⁶

ISIS quickly conquered more territory heading south along the Tigris River, capturing Qayyarah, al-Shirqat, Hawijah, and Tikrit. During this expansion, ISIS committed numerous atrocities, including the massacre of thousands of Iraqi Security Forces. ISIS has brutally executed thousands of Shia Muslims and Iraqi Security Forces throughout its advance in Iraq.⁶⁷ In deciding its next moves, the United States must take into account the past ten years of sectarian violence and radical jihad in Iraq. The following section will look at the United States strategy in combating ISIS in Iraq.

IV: US STRATEGY AGAINST ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND SYRIA

On September 10, 2014, President Obama stated the objective of the United States: to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIS through a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy. The strategy to achieve this objective has three major parts:

- The United States is conducting air strikes on ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria. These airstrikes have stopped the advance of ISIS fighters in many areas by forcing them to conceal themselves. These airstrikes have also damaged or destroyed oil refineries, weapons depots, and communication centers in Syria. According to General Ray Odierno, the US Army Chief of Staff and a former top commander in Iraq, the goal is that these airstrikes will give the Iraqi military time to increase its size and capabilities.⁶⁸ After this has been accomplished, US airstrikes will provide support for Iraqi forces conducting offensive missions against the Islamic State.
- The United States has deployed hundreds of service members to Iraq to support Iraqi Security Forces and Kurdish forces with training, intelligence, and equipment.
- The United States plans to support Iraq's efforts to establish "National Guard" units to help Sunni communities secure their own freedom from ISIS control.⁶⁹

V: THE AIR CAMPAIGN SUPPORTING IRAQI FORCES/TRAINING IRAQI TROOPS

American airstrikes began in early August after ISIS announced its plan to massacre the Yazidis, a Christian minority in northern Iraq, and advanced on Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish Autonomous Region. President Obama ordered airstrikes to prevent the massacre of Yazidis on Mount Sinjar as well as to protect American diplomats, civilians, and military personnel stationed in Erbil.⁷⁰ The US military worked closely with Kurdish and Iraqi forces in this campaign, and from early August through November 19, the US Air Force has conducted a total of 1,006 airstrikes, 561 against targets in Iraq and 445 in Syria. The US flew 843 of the missions and its coalition allies flew 163. The airstrikes have hit more than 2,300 ISIS targets, including 700 ISIS-occupied buildings, 380 fighting positions, 260 vehicles and 180 “black market oil-related targets.”⁷¹ Aided by US airstrikes, Kurdish forces recaptured the towns of Mahmour and Gweyr from ISIS control.⁷² In mid-August, US airstrikes helped Kurdish and Iraqi forces retake control of the Mosul Dam from ISIS militants.⁷³ In early September, with the help of US airstrikes, the Iraqi army recaptured the Haditha dam from ISIS fighters.⁷⁴ In October, 10,000 ISIS troops headed from Mosul towards Baghdad. On October 12, ISIS came within 15 miles of the Baghdad airport and the US deployed Apache attack helicopters and successfully fended off the attack.⁷⁵

The US has conducted strikes throughout ISIS-controlled territory in Iraq, hitting Fallujah, Ramadi, Haditha, al-Qaim and other ISIS-controlled areas.⁷⁶ In November 2014, President Obama sent an additional 1,500 US troops to help train Iraqi army soldiers and militia fighters to fight ISIS on the ground. A total of 3,000

American troops will work at four training centers, helping recruit soldiers for the Iraqi Army by providing training, supplies and help with strategy and logistics. The US military plans to improve these Iraqi forces until they are capable to go on offensive operations and the United States will provide close air support for these operations.⁷⁷ The United States is also providing weapons and supplies to militia forces in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Central Intelligence Agency is providing light arms and ammunition to the Kurdish Peshmerga militia.⁷⁸ The United States has about 40 Special Operations advisers in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish regional government, stationed at a “joint operations center” established to coordinate intelligence and targeting against ISIS forces.⁷⁹

An Analysis of the Air Campaign and Training Iraqi Forces

The Iraqi Security Forces

After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the United States spent seven years training and supplying the new “Iraqi Security Forces” leading up to the withdrawal of US troops in 2011. In early 2009, the ISF was comprised of over 500,000 members. The three divisions of the ISF were the Iraqi Army, the Iraqi Police, and the National Police. The Iraqi Army was under the command of the Ministry of Defense and the National Police force was under the command of the Ministry of the Interior. The Iraqi Police was recruited and deployed within local communities.⁸⁰

In the seven years after the overthrow of Hussein, the ISF steadily became a more effective, professional force capable of fighting the remainder of the insurgency. However, by the time of the US withdrawal in 2011, the ISF was deeply divided on sectarian lines. The Army and Police were fragmented, with some soldiers loyal to Shia

militias and others loyal to Sunni tribes. The ISF also under-represented the Sunni Arab population.⁸¹ Although the ISF had a number of problems, the US believed that the ISF could succeed against an internal threat of mid- to low-level insurgency.⁸²

After the US withdrawal, the condition of the ISF quickly deteriorated largely due to the actions of Prime Minister al-Maliki, who harbored a deep distrust of the Sunni population throughout his term. His close relatives had been targeted and tortured by Hussein's security forces. Driven by a seemingly constant paranoia, al-Maliki removed many Sunni members of the ISF and replaced them with Shia leaders of his choosing. He reneged on his promise to incorporate many Sunni members of the "Sons of Iraq" into the ISF.⁸³ Al-Maliki also relied heavily on sectarian Shia militias, often to persecute innocent Sunni. He created his own personal security departments that were uncoordinated with the Defense or Interior Ministries and unsupervised by the Iraqi Parliament.⁸⁴

To have any chance to stop the advance of ISIS, the United States must address the problems that have plagued the Iraqi Security Forces. The US needs to limit sectarian divisions within the ISF and ensure that it represents both Sunnis and Shias, by first incorporating more Sunnis into the ISF. The areas under control of the Iraqi government, including Baghdad and southern Iraq, have a significant number of Sunnis. In Baghdad, about 35 percent of the population is Sunni.⁸⁵ The US must make it clear to the Iraqi government that they must allow the Sunnis into the ISF, and that air support and troops on the ground for training will only be provided if this criterion is met.

The incorporation of Sunnis into the Iraqi Security Forces is essential if it is to be effective in conducting offensive operations against ISIS-controlled territories with

large Sunni populations. For these operations to be successful, it is crucial that Iraqi forces have the support of a significant portion of the Sunni population. A major reason why the ISF was unable to defend Mosul from ISIS forces in June 2014 was because the ISF force did not have the support of the population as most of the majority Sunni population in the city viewed the ISF as a glorified Shia militia.⁸⁶ This perception was reinforced by the misguided efforts of the ISF stationed at Mosul. Iraqi National Police frequently detained local citizens and set up intrusive checkpoints in order to prevent militants from maneuvering about the city.⁸⁷ These actions further alienated the population.

The incorporation of Sunnis into the ISF will also increase the probability that the force will be willing to fight ISIS and secure areas formerly under ISIS control. The majority of the cities under ISIS control consist of predominately Sunnis. An ISF consisting of a significant amount of Sunnis will be more willing to fight ISIS in Sunni-dominated territories. Sunnis should be incorporated into the Iraqi Police Service that is responsible for enforcing the rule of law and providing local security. This force will be essential in working with the Iraqi population in securing areas after they are captured from ISIS.

The United States must also ensure that the new Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi recognizes the legitimacy of the Minister of the Defense and the Minister of the Interior. In October 2014, Iraqi lawmakers approved the appointment of Khaled Al-Obeidi as Iraqi Defense Minister and Mohamed Al-Ghabban as Interior Minister.⁸⁸ The recognition of a proper chain of command will limit sectarian divisions in the ISF as well as allow for independent decision-making and innovation.

The United States must also take action to limit corruption throughout the Iraqi Security Forces. In the past, leadership at the division level used their positions to extort soldiers of lower ranks, as many officers saw their units as businesses with revenues to be tapped rather than combat units. Many officers pocketed the money they were supposed to provide their soldiers, forcing some soldiers to purchase their own food and water from civilian markets and cook their own food.⁸⁹ Rampant corruption decreases morale and reduces soldiers' willingness to fight. The absence of American boots on the ground will make limiting this corruption difficult, but US troops advising and training security forces can put in place departments assigned with limiting corruption throughout the ISF. Through its training and educational efforts, the US should also emphasize the importance that the capabilities of the ISF are not compromised by corruption.

Shia Militias and the Iraqi Security Forces

The increasing role of Shia militias in Iraq is one of the most complicated factors in the US strategy to provide air support for Iraqi ground forces against ISIS. Shia militias have been a major force in Iraq since the US invasion in 2003. The overthrow of Hussein allowed many of these Shia militias to increase their involvement throughout the country, and during the insurgency some of these militia attacked US and government forces and inflicted significant casualties.⁹⁰ In April 2006, US officials stated that Shia militias “posed the greatest threat to Iraqi security and would be the most daunting and long-term challenge for the Iraqi government.”⁹¹

After the US withdrawal in 2011, Prime Minister al-Maliki relied on pro-government Shia militias to arrest and kill Sunnis suspected of subversion. After the ISF

retreated in the face of ISIS forces, Shia militias stepped up to fill the resulting power vacuum.⁹² As of November 2014, a number of Shia militias are leading the attack against ISIS forces. After the fall of Mosul in June 2014, Shias throughout Baghdad and the southern cities of Iraq took up arms in preparation for a fight. The Iraqi government is forced to rely more heavily on Shia militias with the growing threat of ISIS and the weak state of the Iraqi Security Force. Shia militias have demonstrated both the willingness and capability to fight the Islamic State.⁹³

The situation is further complicated by the fact that many of the strongest Shia militias are backed by Iran. For example, the Iranian-backed Badr Organization has taken a powerful role in protecting Baghdad. The new interior minister, Mohammed Ghabban, is a prominent Shiite politician associated with the Badr Organization. However, Hadi al-Amiri, head of the military wing of the Badr organization, will likely hold the most power in the Ministry of the Interior.⁹⁴ Al-Amiri has effectively made his Shiite militia indispensable to the Iraqi government. After the fall of Mosul, Amiri took his men to defend the north of Baghdad, in Diyala province.⁹⁵ Many Shia militias, some of them Iranian-backed, have successfully fought back ISIS advances. Shiite militias such as Saraya al-Salam and Asai'b ahl al-Haq have pushed back ISIS militants from the town of Jurf al-Sahkr, located between Baghdad and Karbala.⁹⁶ There have been some instances in which the United States provided air support for Shia militias conducting offensive operations against ISIS positions. United States officials claim that they have not coordinated directly with Shia militias. However, United States leaders are well aware that Shia militias have been fighting alongside the Iraqi Security Forces.

The United States needs to help the Iraqi government incorporate Shia militias into the Iraqi Security Forces. Ideally, the United States would not allow Shia militia fighters into the Iraqi Security Forces, because the ISF needs to be viewed by the Iraqi population as representing both Sunnis and Shias. Due to the history of Shia militia involvement in sectarian violence, their presence in the ISF could threaten their credibility among the population. However, Shia militia members are desperately needed to fight ISIS. Even with the help of the US, the ISF does not have the manpower and the capabilities to effectively conduct offensive operations against the well-armed, battle-hardened ISIS forces.

Shia militia fighters must be incorporated into the ISF so it has the strength to successfully fight ISIS. However, given their reputation for sectarian violence, it is imperative that Shia militia fighters are placed in units that include Sunnis. The local Sunni populations will be more willing to support these ethnically mixed units. Also, the incorporation of both Sunnis and Shias in the ISF will help ease sectarian tensions. In early November 2014, Sunni tribesmen joined forces with Shiite militias and Iraqi Security Forces in order to recapture the ISIS-controlled city of Hit in Anbar province. The process of working together to fight a common enemy may help facilitate reconciliation between the two groups. Another reason why Shia militia fighters should be incorporated into the ISF if possible is that it will increase the ability of the US and the Iraqi government to control these Shia militias. Currently, the ISF and the United States does not have the capability to fight Shia militias as they have done in the past. The US should help the Iraqis to incorporate these militias into the ISF in order to

increase their influence on these groups while harnessing their experience and capabilities.

A serious concern is that the Shia militias will continue to perpetrate horrible crimes against the Sunni population, preventing reconciliation and inciting more violence. Already, Shia militias have reportedly beaten, tortured, and killed Sunnis in retaliation for the mass murders by ISIS.⁹⁷ The United States cannot provide air support for a Shia force that commits genocide against Sunnis, and this must be made clear to the new government. This type of sectarian violence allows for the rise of radical jihadist groups.

Without American troops on the ground, preventing Shia forces from committing acts of violence will prove challenging. However, the United States can take actions to limit this possibility. First, the United States should try to recruit and organize ethnically mixed forces to conduct operations in Sunni-dominated areas. These forces will have ties to the population and will be less likely to demonize the Sunnis in the area. The United States should also threaten to cut off air support, supplies, and weapons if Shia forces indiscriminately kill Sunnis. It must be made clear to the new interior minister, Mohammed Ghabban, that it is in his strategic interest to ensure that Shia forces do not kill Sunni civilians. The killings of Sunnis will only fuel an insurgency against Shia forces and prolong the conflict.

“The Surge” and the Fight Against ISIS

In 2007, President Bush ordered the deployment of an additional 20,000 US troops into Iraq. These troops were tasked with degrading al-Qaeda in Iraq, protecting

the local population, and training Iraqi Security Forces for the impending US withdrawal. An examination of the “Surge” and the fight against AQI sheds light on the current US strategy to destroy ISIS by providing air support for indigenous Iraqi forces.

The United States was significantly more military involved in fighting al-Qaeda in Iraq than they are today in fighting ISIS. The fight against AQI involved the coordinated counter-insurgency efforts of 130,000 American troops, almost 90,000 Sunni tribesmen and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi security forces. The role of American military action in decimating AQI varied depending on the nature of the province. In areas that were ethnically and sectarian mixed such as Baghdad, Diyala, and Salah al-Din, U.S. military presence and operations played a crucial role in eliminating AQI and securing the area.⁹⁸ Ramadi, located in central Iraq, is the capital city of Anbar Province and has a population of around 400,000 people. By the summer of 2006, AQI had a major presence in Ramadi, as it and other insurgents prevented the government from functioning through constant attacks on government buildings and employees. The 1st Brigade of the US Army’s First Armored Division and other US units partnered with Iraqi security forces and conducted numerous successful counterinsurgency operations in Ramadi from June 2006 to February 2007.⁹⁹ US and Iraqi forces conducted targeted raids against high value targets, used air strikes to kill military commanders, and raided an al-Qaeda meeting and captured 48 suspects. After largely clearing Ramadi of AQI insurgents, the US Army, Iraqi security forces and Sunni tribesmen continued to conduct numerous neighborhood sweeps in north-central Ramadi to retain control of the area.¹⁰⁰ This essential pattern was replicated in areas under AQI’s control.

By contrast, ISIS today has significantly more fighters, weapons and money, and holds more territory, than AQI at the time of the US “Surge” in 2007. ISIS is estimated to have double the number of fighters under its command than did AQI. In 2005, it was estimated that AQI consisted of around 12,000 to 15,000 fighters, with an estimated 120 foreign fighters per month joining from neighboring countries.¹⁰¹ According to the Central Intelligence Agency, ISIS today has between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters in Iraq and Syria, and the number of “foreign” militants is estimated at 12,000, from 74 countries.¹⁰² During its sweep through areas of Iraq and Syria, ISIS stole hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of weapons and military equipment from Iraqi and Syrian military installations. These weapons include heavy weapons such as tanks and armored vehicles, as well as thousands of weapons supplied by the US government to Iraq and by Russia to Syria.¹⁰³

Without American boots on the ground, Iraqi ground forces will have to defeat ISIS militants and conduct counterinsurgency operations to secure captured areas. This will be very difficult, as the “surge” of 20,000 US troops was critical in reversing the trend of violence and degrading AQI. Former US Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker wrote, “Iraqis certainly deserve credit for this transformation; but it would not have happened without the intensive, sustained, US engagement, particularly by those in the military who carried the surge forward.”¹⁰⁴ This task is made more difficult by the fact that ISIS controls much more territory than did AQI in 2005. During the time of the US surge in 2007, AQI’s support was limited to the Sunni minority of Western Iraq.¹⁰⁵ This consisted of only 20% of the Iraqi population in only four of the eighteen provinces. Since January 2014, ISIS has rapidly increased its control of territory throughout Iraq.

As of November 7, 2014, ISIS controls huge parts of northern Iraq, including the cities of Sinjar, Mosul, and Baiji. ISIS also controls Fallujah and the surrounding area, as well as the western province of Rutba.¹⁰⁶ Considering these factors, it will be a challenge for Iraqi Security Forces to successfully conduct offensive operations against ISIS with only US air support.

However, there are some reasons for optimism. The United States is advising and training Iraqi Security Forces so that they become capable of employing US strategies that were successful from 2007 to 2010. The surge of US troops in 2007 was accompanied by a strategy shift called “clear and hold.” After United States and Iraq forces would clear an area of AQI insurgents, they would remain in the area and keep it clear of insurgents while building connections with the local population.¹⁰⁷ Iraqi Security forces, if they consist of both Sunnis and Shias, will likely have an easier time winning the support of the local population than did the Americans. This is especially the case in ethnically mixed areas, such as Salah al-Din, Diyala, and Baghdad. However, the ability of the ISF to win the support of the population and fight remaining ISIS fighters will hinge on whether they refrain from targeting the Sunni populace.

The goals and nature of ISIS also work in favor of the US and the Iraqi government. ISIS’s strength comes from its effective military force and its ability to spread its ideology among disaffected Sunnis. However, the ideology and political goals of ISIS also make it vulnerable. Unlike AQI, ISIS seeks to build a new nation as the basis for its “Caliphate.” In areas under its control, ISIS operates a security force that regularly detains and kills people suspected of subverting their cause. In Mosul, ISIS members enforce taxes on a variety of commercial activities and force students to pay

additional monthly taxes.¹⁰⁸ ISIS may have difficulty maintaining harsh control over the local population while fighting a formidable force of Iraqi forces and American air strikes. This will make it difficult for ISIS to fund its operations.

ISIS's advanced military force, which now includes captured tanks and Humvees, will be less able to engage with Iraqi forces in open combat due to the threat of American airstrikes. ISIS fighters will be forced to engage Iraqi Forces from close range. The precision of American airstrikes will allow the US to hit ISIS targets even in cities. As ISIS has expanded, it requires more lines of communication. These exterior and interior lines of communication are vulnerable to attack by Iraqi and US forces. ISIS has also relied on projecting images of its military victories to gain support, an effective strategy during its rise since 2012. However, if ISIS suffers military defeats in the future it will hurt their claims of dominance and their ability to recruit. US and Iraqi forces must work together to exploit ISIS's vulnerabilities.

VI: NATIONAL GUARD UNITS

The United States and the Iraqi government plan for the Iraqi National Guard to be a provincially organized auxiliary force. Local Sunni tribal militias would be incorporated into the larger Iraqi Security Forces, and serve as local reserves under the control of provincial governors. Some experts estimate that the total strength of the National Guard could be between 120,000 and 200,000 members.¹⁰⁹ As of November 2014, the Iraqi government has met with leaders from the Dulaym, Shammar, Anaiza, Jubour, Hamdan, and Aqaidat tribes to discuss the plan for a National Guard Force.¹¹⁰ The plan has been met with some support. Numerous groups from ISIS-controlled areas have agreed to join the National Guard, including 5,000 Sunni tribesmen from Kirkuk. On October 13, 2014, the Anbar Council announced the formation of the first Anbar National Guard Brigade made up of 2,000 volunteers.¹¹¹ On October 22 2014, Prime Minister Abadi approved the formation of the Ahmad Sadak Al-Dulaym Brigade, named after a former police chief killed by an ISIS attack on October 12. The United States has been in contact with more than 20 tribal leaders in Anbar. A representative of General John Allen, the US official leading the anti-ISIS campaign, met with Ahmed Abu Risha, a longtime U.S. ally in Anbar Province, Hamid Shokah, a leader of the Albu Dhiyab tribe, and Rafe' Abdul –Karim Al-Fahdawi.¹¹²

National Guard Units: Analysis

The US and Iraqi government sponsored plan to create Sunni National Guard Units is essential in the overall strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Even with over a hundred thousand forces on the ground, the

United States was not able to effectively fight al-Qaeda in Iraq until Sunni tribesmen became involved in the Anbar Awakening and the US-funded Sons of Iraq program. It is imperative that the United States works with the Iraqi government to win the support of Sunni tribes in the fight against ISIS.

In the past three months, the United States and Iraqi government have made progress in reaching out and building connections with Sunni tribes. However, the majority of Sunni tribes have not demonstrated a desire to work with the United States or Iraqi government to fight ISIS militants. This is due to a number of reasons.

First, ISIS and its predecessor organizations conducted a systematic killing of former Awakening members and tribal leaders beginning in 2009. Since 2009, at least 1,345 Awakening members have been killed by ISIS militants. In Jurf al-Sakhar, south of Baghdad, 46 Awakening members were killed between 2009 and 2013.¹¹³ ISIS's brutal killing and intimidation campaign has eliminated the Sunnis most capable to lead a resistance against the jihadist group.

These systematic killings have also made it difficult for the United States and Iraqi government to find and connect with Sunni leaders. However, the United States has extensive relationship and intelligence within Sunni communities due to its involvement in the Anbar Awakening and Sons of Iraq Program. The United States should identify which US officers and non-commissioned officers had ties with certain tribal leaders and reinvigorate these relationships.¹¹⁴

A second reason why the majority of Sunni tribes have not fought against ISIS is because they lack manpower, supplies, and weapons. In late October 2014, the town of Al-Zwaiha was forced to surrender to ISIS fighters. Jalal al-Gaood, one of the tribal

leaders the US has been in contact with, recalled how the attacking ISIS force had around 200 fighters and about 30 armored trucks.¹¹⁵ The tribal fighters were running low on ammunition and food and were forced to escape while the rest of the tribe surrendered. Tribal elders from Al-Zwaiha reached out unsuccessfully for help from the United States and the Iraqi government.¹¹⁶ Poorly equipped Sunni tribes are incapable of defending against well-trained and equipped ISIS forces.

The United States must provide weapons, supplies, and funding to Sunni tribes through the Iraqi government. The Iraqi government should provide Sunni tribes with US provided funds, weapons, and supplies. In November 2014, the Pentagon asked Congress to approve a \$1.62 billion package of weapons, ammunition, body armor, trucks and medical kits for the Iraqi Army, Kurdish forces, and Sunni tribes.¹¹⁷ This is a crucial beginning step, however only \$24 million of this package will be given to Sunni tribes. When the United States funded the Sons of Iraq Program from 2007-2010, the US paid Sunni fighters monthly salaries and provided fighters bonuses for capturing or killing al-Qaeda militants. In areas where the security situation was relatively good, Coalition funding for Sons of Iraq fighters primarily served to provide them with much needed jobs.¹¹⁸ According to a local sheikh, the United States paid Sunni fighters in certain areas to give these men a job and a way to provide money for their families. This served to keep these same Sunni fighters from joining the insurgency while protecting the American and civilian population in the area. By January 2009, the United States government had invested more than \$400 million in the Awakening program.¹¹⁹ The United States must be willing to invest at least a hundred millions dollars in order to fund Sunni National Guard Units.

By providing money, supplies, and weapons to the Iraqi government for Sunni tribesmen, the US can also help dissuade Sunni fighters from joining the ranks of ISIS. The Islamic State makes an estimated \$1 million to \$2 million dollars a *day* just from the oil fields and refineries under its control in Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, the Islamic State controls oil fields that produce an estimated 25,000 to 45,000 barrels of oil a day. ISIS also collects taxes and extorts local populations under its control.

With these millions of dollars in revenue, the Islamic State has been able to pay its fighters a relatively high salary. ISIS is reported to be paying its members the equivalent of around \$400 a month.¹²⁰ This has attracted hundreds of local Sunni tribesmen especially in the Sunni tribal areas where employment is difficult to find. Sunni tribesmen will be less willing to join ISIS if they are given an alternative way to make money and support their families.

A major obstacle to the success of the National Guard Strategy is that it must involve deals between Sunni tribes and the Iraqi government.¹²¹ This is problematic because the sectarian policies of Maliki eroded the trust between Sunni tribes and the Iraqi government. Also, the Iraqi government is still dominated by Shia political parties and led by a Shia prime minister. In order to win the support of Sunnis, the Iraqi government must take significant action to increase Sunni representation within the government. Iraqi lawmakers appointed Khalid al-Obeidi, a Sunni member of parliament, to be the defense minister. This was a crucial step towards the process of Sunni integration.¹²² Through this appointment, Abadi has demonstrated his seriousness about Sunni inclusion. However, these promises must be followed by more efforts by Abadi and the Iraqi government to meet Sunni demands. The Iraqi government should

make it clear that Sunni tribes will have the option for more autonomy. The al-Maliki government illegally cut off numerous initiatives aimed at transforming some Sunni provinces to regions.¹²³ By reinvigorating these options, the Iraqi government can gain the support of Sunni tribes.

Another potential problem with the Sunni National Guard Strategy is that it limits how much leverage the Iraqi and US government have over Sunni tribes. During the Awakening movement, the US exploited intertribal conflicts in order to incite individual tribes to turn against al-Qaeda.¹²⁴ The United States was a broker, rewarding tribes that served US interests while cutting off support and fighting those that worked with al-Qaeda. The National Guard strategy requires that the Iraqi government offer a broad accommodation to Sunni tribes as a whole.¹²⁵ Since any tribe could theoretically join the National Guard force at once, the Iraqi government and the US would lose its leverage over individual militia units.¹²⁶ It is true that the Sunni National Guard strategy will make it difficult for the US and Iraqi government to exploit intertribal conflicts. However, by offering a broad accommodation to Sunnis, the Iraqi government is increasing the likelihood that Sunni tribes will turn against ISIS. This is because ISIS has established such a dominating presence in Sunni areas. Sunni tribes understand that successfully fighting ISIS will require cooperation amongst numerous Sunni tribal factions. The fight against ISIS can unite formerly adversarial tribes. A single Sunni tribe will be more likely to turn against ISIS if it is confident a broader Sunni force will also join the fight.

The biggest obstacle preventing the Iraqi government from fully supporting Sunni National Guard Units is the fear that these Sunni forces could pose a threat to the

government. Experts estimate that the National Guard could potentially grow to 120,000 to 200,000 men.¹²⁷ This force would be significantly larger than the Awakening force and could pose a threat to the Iraqi Security Forces and the regular police and army. Although the Iraqi Security Force at the start of 2014 numbered 730,000, its numbers have decreased due to combat losses and desertions.¹²⁸ The ISF's notorious poor leadership and corruption increase the credibility of the potential threat of Sunni National Guard Units.

Given the rise of ISIS in 2014, the Iraqi government is understandably hesitant to provide weapons, supplies, and salaries to a large Sunni force that could potentially threaten the Iraqi Security Force and the government. However, the Iraqi government recognizes that defeating ISIS requires the cooperation of a substantial Sunni fighting force. Thus, the Iraqi government is forced to pick between two bad options. Given the immediate threat posed by ISIS, the Iraqi government will likely be forced to accept the formation of Sunni fighting units. Also, the potential threat posed by these Sunni units is lessened as the ISF gains strength. President Obama's decision to double the number of US troops, from 1,500 to 3,000, assigned with training and supplying the Iraqi Security Forces lessens the potential threat of Sunni forces. This fear of the Sunni National Guard may also serve as a powerful incentive for the Iraqi government to take meaningful steps to include Sunnis in the political process. Sunni inclusion in the government will reduce the likelihood of Sunni National Guards fighting the government down the road.

VII: CONCLUSION

ISIS poses an immediate threat to the stability of Iraq and the entire Middle East. If left alone, it is likely that ISIS will pose a serious threat to the United States homeland and European nations. Given these threats, the United States must take action to fight ISIS in the Middle East. The US strategy, although far from perfect, recognizes that the best way to fight ISIS is to allow the Iraqi government and Iraqi forces to take the lead. As much as United States' leaders want to believe they can control events in Iraq, the reality is that the Iraqi people will decide the future of Iraq. Ultimately, it is up to the Iraqi people to decide their fate. As ISF operations and American air strikes increase, ISIS will likely begin to lose some territory. After this occurs, the fate of Iraq rests largely on Prime Minister Abadi and the Iraqi government. Iraq can only achieve peace if the Iraqi government incorporates the Sunni population. Abadi will have to take a risk and trust the Sunni population for the civil war to come to an end. Meanwhile, the United States must be willing to accept a stronger Iranian presence in Iraq. Defeating ISIS will involve numerous Shia militias, many of which are backed by Iran. Given the numerous threats posed by ISIS, it is in the security interest of the US to allow for this stronger Iranian presence if it means the degradation and ultimate defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

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