



## Counterinsurgency Requires More than Guns Refocusing on the Political Strategy to Defeat Islamic State in Iraq

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### SUMMARY

- Political counterinsurgency was initially the centerpiece of U.S. efforts against IS, but the political war has been increasingly overshadowed by U.S. military engagement.
- Although Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has reached out to Iraq's Sunni community and has begun to address corruption in the military and judiciary, much more needs to be done.
- It is widely agreed that a Sunni "National Guard" force must be established to retake and hold territory from IS, but political quagmire in the Iraqi parliament is holding this up.
- The U.S. should heavily engage in brokering agreements to help the "National Guard" and other concessions to Sunnis through the Iraqi political process.
- The U.S. could aid this process by addressing the neglect of Shi'a Iraq and arranging a substantial budget transfer to support investment in Southern Iraq.

The Obama administration reacted with maturity and restraint to the fall of the major Iraqi city of Mosul to Islamic State (IS) in June 2014. Despite intense pressure to respond with the immediate use of military force, the administration took time to analyze the political realities in Iraq that had made such a catastrophe possible. They concluded that the governance of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had become so toxic that supporting his counterinsurgency efforts would risk strengthening support for IS and undermining the coalition against it. American envoys instead engaged in intense diplomatic efforts to bring about a new Iraqi government led by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. Working with Iraq's politicians to bring this relatively conciliatory leader to the fore was a huge achievement, but since then progress on the political side of the war against IS has stalled. American strategy now appears to be dominated by the military side of the engagement, through conducting airstrikes and training, supplying, and

supporting the Iraqi Security Forces. Although these elements are extremely important, the United States needs to rebalance this military effort with a renewed focus on the crucial political work that must take place in order for IS to be thoroughly defeated in Iraq.

### WHY THE POLITICAL WAR MUST BE FOUGHT

The resurgence of radical Islamist militancy in Iraq followed a period of collapsing Sunni confidence in the Iraqi political system. As Sunnis felt excluded, alienated, and even victimized by the Iraqi government, IS became able to operate increasingly openly in Sunni communities. Some Sunni leaders thought they could manipulate the IS presence to extract political concessions from the government, but they overestimated their ability to control IS and were quickly pushed aside. Although a small number of the Sunni population supported IS, most

remained passive while IS fighters became more of a presence in their midst. Many Iraqi Sunnis were not willing to risk facing a brutal death at the hands of IS militants in order to preserve an Iraqi political system that they felt was not interested in protecting them. Needless to say, early Sunni passivity in the face of a growing IS presence was a colossal mistake, and Sunnis have paid a hefty price for it. The vast majority of the 1.75 million Iraqis who have been displaced are Sunni, and many of them face an uncertain future as they are seen as somewhat complicit in the approximately 35,000 civilian casualties that took place in Iraq in 2014.

Iraq needs to bring Iraqi Sunnis back into the political fold by acknowledging and addressing their grievances and by establishing a political reality that Sunnis have a genuine stake in. Although the idea of granting concessions to Iraq's Sunni community after they seemingly allowed IS to take hold in the country may be morally repugnant to many Iraqis, it is also the only way of securing a future for Iraq without radical Islamist militancy. Even if IS can be cleared from the territories they currently hold in Iraq, control over these areas can only be maintained if their original Sunni inhabitants become sufficiently invested in the Iraqi political settlement that they will defend these territories against renewed attack. The alternatives, such as refusing to allow Sunnis re-entry into their towns and villages or exerting fierce military control over them, are actually likely to make Iraq *more* vulnerable to violent extremism over time. It is important to remember that IS is not merely an army that can be defeated; it is also an ideology that must be discredited and undermined otherwise it can continually self-renew by radicalizing local populations and drawing them into the fight.

President Obama recognized the importance of the political dimension of this conflict early in the anti-IS effort. In a press conference on August 28, 2014, he stated that “part of the goal here is to make sure that Sunnis, both in Syria and in Iraq, feel as if they’ve got an investment in a government that actually functions. A government that can protect them. A government that makes sure that their families are safe from the barbaric acts that we’ve seen in ISIL. And right now, those structures are not in place.”

To that end, the administration dispatched retired Marine Corps General John Allen and long-time Iraq diplomat Brett McGurk as special presidential envoys tasked in part with persuading Iraqi politicians to make the political moves necessary to undermine IS in Iraq.

### EARLY POLITICAL PROGRESS WAS MADE

The administration's early focus on political change did lead to some wins, most notably the fall of the Maliki government and the coming to power of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi together with a new governing cabinet. Sunni and Kurdish communities in Iraq had feared that the Maliki government would never be removed from power, and in his final days Maliki appeared to be gathering forces to mount a military coup. But by working intensively with Iraq's political and religious elite, particularly with the Shi'a clergy in Najaf, and aided by pressure from Iranian operatives, the United States was able to achieve a major political victory by persuading Maliki to allow a transfer of power.

The new Abadi government struck a conciliatory tone and reached out to Sunni and Kurdish leaders, as well as to regional powers, to try to repair some of the relationships that had been damaged during the years of the Maliki government. In his remarks at December's counterterrorism conference in Brussels, Prime Minister Abadi acknowledged that “governmental reform, national reconciliation, and economic and social reconstruction” were a critical part of the anti-IS fight. The new prime minister has since taken some preliminary steps to address the fractured cross-sectarian relationships that have made Iraq so vulnerable to IS.

The Iraqi government has in particular made great strides in reconciling with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). The KRG had spent much of the last few years mired in a tense and conflictual relationship with the Maliki government in Baghdad. A failure to agree on the terms for KRG independent oil exports led Maliki to withhold federal government payments to the region, causing months of debilitating financial chaos for the KRG. The KRG had become so frustrated with the federal government that they were seriously discussing

the possibility of declaring independence and abandoning the Iraqi state. The Abadi government made it a priority to rebuild a relationship with the KRG. In December, it succeeded in striking a new deal that restores the transfer of 17 percent of the federal budget to the KRG (before the deduction of sovereign expenses) and awards one billion USD to the Peshmerga forces who were not previously paid or recognized as part of Iraq's security forces by the Iraqi government.

Disagreements remain over the slow transfer of humanitarian aid to the KRG and the status of Kurdish forces in disputed territory, especially in the vicinity of Kirkuk's major oilfields, but overall the Iraqi government and the KRG have a much more positive and productive relationship today and, as a result, are in a better position to collaborate effectively in the war against IS.

The Abadi government has also attempted to restore Sunni confidence in Baghdad by ending the indiscriminate shelling of Sunni areas, by addressing the rights of detainees, and by reshuffling senior officials in the Iraqi Security Forces. In September 2014, Prime Minister Abadi called on Iraqi Security Forces to halt a campaign of indiscriminate airstrikes that had been targeting areas taken by IS since June. In some cases, barrel bombs had been used, inflicting extreme damage on towns and killing dozens of civilians, and Sunni tribal and clerical leaders had been threatening not to support the Abadi government unless they were stopped. Abadi's willingness to declare an end to such indiscriminate tactics was a positive step, although much more needs to be done to differentiate civilians and combatants in the fight to retake territory from IS.

The treatment of detainees has long been a major source of grievance for Iraq's Sunni community, tens of thousands of whom protested throughout 2013 calling for, among other things, a prisoner amnesty. The system by which citizens are imprisoned is extremely chaotic and open to severe abuse, resulting in tens of thousands imprisoned without charge and often subjected to torture or degrading treatment. Sunnis believe that their community

was targeted disproportionately out of a desire by Iraq's Shi'a-dominated security forces to punish them for being the "source of terrorism" in Iraq, and as a result many Sunnis fear Iraq's Security Forces rather than look to them for protection. The Abadi government has issued a decree mandating that Iraqi Security Forces work with the Ministry of Justice to create a central register of all detainees that records the reason for their incarceration and their timeline to trial. This is an important move that seeks to prevent Iraqi detention facilities from being a black hole where detainees disappear without ever being brought to trial. This will be an enormous task and much remains to be seen in terms of implementation, but this is an important first step in terms of signaling to the Iraqi Sunni community that the government is taking their concerns seriously.

Prime Minister Abadi also sought to signal his departure from the Maliki approach by abolishing the Office of the Commander in Chief, dismissing dozens of senior officers from the Iraqi Security Forces, and announcing a crackdown on corruption in the military. The Office of the Commander in Chief had previously been used by Maliki to exercise direct power over the armed forces, thereby circumventing traditional chains of command and fatally weakening the efficacy of Iraq's armed services. Abadi's attempts to professionalize the Iraqi army—though he admits this could take years—are an extremely important signal to Iraqi Sunnis that he intends to build an army free of sectarian and political agendas. The task of building Sunni confidence in Iraq's security establishment is an enormous one, however, and has become more difficult as Shi'a militias outside of the control of Iraqi Security Forces have regrouped and are now playing a leading role in the fight against IS.

### POLITICAL REFORM CRUCIAL TO SUCCESS

Although the Abadi government has signaled in a number of different ways that it is keen to address the political roots of the resurgence of IS in Iraq, it has not been able to push these policies through Iraq's fractious political system.

Prime Minister Abadi has agreed with the United States that Iraq should create a National Guard which would seek to regularize and channel support to Sunni tribesmen who are joining the fight against IS. Bringing Sunnis on board in the fight against IS is absolutely crucial, as the U.S. learnt during the Sahwa in 2007, but many Iraqi Shi'a simply do not trust Sunnis to be armed and do not believe that they should be paid and supported when Shi'a militias are not being sufficiently armed and paid. This is a real quandary for the Iraqi government, which may be seen as "rewarding" the community from which IS has developed. However, it is not realistic for the Iraqi government to retake and hold Sunni territory from IS without Sunni support. The United States should work with allies in the Iraqi government to intensively lobby those who are opposed to the National Guard. There should be strong reassurances that the National Guard will not operate in Shi'a areas and that members will be heavily vetted. The National Guard structure would allow the United States and the Iraqi Government to be much more responsive to the needs of Sunni groups seeking to fight IS, and it could prevent tragedies such as the massacre of over 300 tribesmen from the Abu Nimr tribe at the hands of IS last October. The United States has been reluctant to circumvent the authority of the Iraqi government by engaging with Sunni tribes directly, but if it is to maintain this policy, it needs to much more aggressively pursue the creation of the National Guard through the Iraqi political system.

The Iraqi government should also grant Sunni provinces their constitutional right to local self-government, with the Sunni National Guard ultimately being responsible for security in these areas and with Sunni local police taking control of arrests and detention to the greatest extent possible. The discriminatory and highly politicized de-Ba'athification policy that is used to prevent mainly Sunnis from access to lucrative government jobs must also come to an end, and stays of execution should be granted to Sunni political figures who have been sentenced to death in highly irregular and unfair judicial

proceedings. By offering a vision for a fair political future of self-government for Sunnis within Iraq, the Abadi government will give Sunnis something to fight for and reassure them that there is a future for them in the country.

These will be difficult concessions to achieve in the Iraqi parliament, where Shi'a parties are answering to constituencies that want to punish, not reward, Iraq's Sunni population. At a time when Iraq's economy is struggling under the weight of low oil prices and the cost of an expansive counter-insurgency, Shi'a populations in the oil-rich South are sick of the lack of investment and growth in their towns and cities and scoff at the idea of paying a proportion of "their" oil wealth to an independent Sunni province. The United States should give the Iraqi government direct budget support to invest in infrastructure and social services in Southern Iraq. This will enable the Iraqi prime minister to win over the approval of political representatives from the South for measures to address Sunni grievances. There is currently a debate over the level of additional payments due to oil-producing regions in Iraq taking place in the Iraqi Parliament's discussions over the FY 2015 Iraqi budget. Falling oil prices have led Baghdad to reduce the oil payments from the \$5 per barrel forecasted to \$2 per barrel, prompting outcry from oil-producing cities such as Basra. The United States should support greater generosity to the oil-producing South out of recognition that alienating Iraq's majority Shi'a population, who happen to inhabit the most oil-rich parts of Iraq, will serve only to undermine support for the political strategy needed to defeat IS.

While stepping up assistance to Shi'a provinces, the Iraqi government must also take steps to regularize the behavior of the Shi'a militias that have come to play a leading role in the fight against IS. Although these militias, which have been branded Popular Mobilization Units, are indispensable given the crippling weakness of Iraq's Security Forces, it is critical that there is some government oversight of their activities and that there is accountability when they

commit criminal acts. There have been extensive accusations of Shi'a militias driving Sunnis from their homes, hunting down and killing Sunni men of a fighting age, and burning their homes, out of an assumption that all Sunnis are IS and that to allow them to resume their lives after IS is cleared from an area is to invite IS to return. But if Sunnis cannot trust those who are fighting IS to protect them, they face a choice of death or persecution at the hands of IS or death and persecution at the hands of Shi'a militias. Of course the Shi'a militias engaged in this war are extremely varied, and many have fought valiantly to protect and retake areas from IS and they enjoy a great deal of popular support among Iraqi Shi'as. This is even more reason to regularize and oversee their activities and to punish those who pursue a violent sectarian agenda.

#### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Remember that politics defeats insurgencies, not military force alone.** When the U.S. focuses on political goals with urgency and clarity of vision, it can achieve a great deal. It is critical that the U.S. prevents its military engagement in the war against IS from overshadowing the political strategy that must be implemented in order for IS to be fatally undermined in the country. The political war against IS must once again become the centerpiece of the U.S. strategy, and there should be a rebalancing of the distribution of attention and of resources accordingly.
2. **Engage in Iraqi politics to win concessions for Sunnis.** Envoys from the United States should help to broker agreements between Iraqi politicians so that the Iraqi government can make progress in its plans to grant major concessions to Iraq's Sunni community. It is critical that a National Guard be created that recognizes, funds, and protects the growing army of anti-IS Sunni fighters. Sunnis must also be offered a future in Iraq in which they will be locally autonomous, with their own police and section of the security forces, and with a fair proportion of Iraq's wealth channeled to them. De-Ba'athification legislation
3. **Enable the cash-strapped Iraqi government to invest in Shi'a Iraq.** After years of horrific violence directed against it, Iraq's Shi'a population is not going to allow its political representatives to make significant concessions to Iraq's Sunnis unless they are reassured that their needs are also a top priority for the government. At a time when oil prices are falling and the country is already headed into deficit, the temptation is for the country to usher in a period of fiscal conservatism. Failing to invest in the political counterinsurgency will simply lead to many more years of spending on expensive military engagements. The United States should give the Iraqi government direct budget support to invest in infrastructure and social services in Southern Iraq. In return, political representatives from the South should be expected to approve Iraqi government measures to address Sunni grievances. Resources for this endeavor could be sought from the \$2.1 billion Economic Support Fund included under the Overseas Contingency Operations title in FY15. Most of that \$2.1 billion is designated for Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria and Somalia, but the remaining \$475 million is undesignated and a portion of that could be allocated to spending on Southern Iraq. By investing comparatively little in pushing through progress in the political war against IS today, the United States has the opportunity to forestall a much more costly long-term military engagement with IS in the years to come.



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