

WRITTEN TESTIMONY

Prepared and delivered by Amb (ret) Robert S. Ford

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Mr. Chairman, Senator Corker, members of the Committee,

It is an honor to be invited to speak with you today about what we should do in the face of a growing threat from the Islamic State.

I spent almost five years working with in Baghdad as the senior political advisor and later deputy to ambassadors John Negroponte, Zalmay Khalilzad, Ryan Crocker and finally Chris Hill. I left Iraq in 2010.

And I then served on the ground in Damascus for a year before we had to close the embassy in February 2012 and I returned home to head for two years the State Department team working on the Syria crisis.

It's been a grim three years, but I see some positive signs in Iraq that suggest guideposts as we think about next steps in Syria.

These signs result from policy approaches to contain and reduce extremist groups that also worked when I was in Iraq years ago.

Over the past several months in Iraq we identified groups on the ground in Iraq that rejected the Islamic State and that were sturdy enough to build upon.

The Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga were not extremely well organized in June 2014 - they had multiple command chains and there was confusion at the time of the fall of Mosul. And to be clear, the political goal of an independent Kurdistan shared by many Kurds is not one that the U.S. Government has endorsed.

Still, the peshmerga represented a reliable core group that could use our help to confront the Islamic State's fighters on the ground.

And despite the collapse of many Iraqi army units, there were reliable special operations army units that again could usefully utilize our help to fight the Islamic State.

These peshmerga and Iraqi special operations forces together with a limited, judicious use of airstrikes pushed Islamic State fighters away from the Mosul dam, from Erbil and Kirkuk parts of Diyala province.

The fight is not at all over, but the Islamic State's advance in Iraq has been blunted.

It's going to be a long fight.

The President, very wisely in my opinion, insisted that we could not fight the Iraqi battle against the Islamic State for them, however. He conditioned big American help on the Iraqis finding a political deal to set up a new government - a sort of unity government - that could rally all Iraqis to fight the Islamic State.

The President rightly understands that it is vital to undercut extremist recruiting among the disaffected Sunni Arab population by means of Iraqi political leaders figuring out a political deal.

I am very encouraged that various tribal figures in Anbar and Hawija, elected provincial councils in Mosul and Salah ad-Din all have come forward to offer to mobilize Sunni Arab fighters against the Islamic State if the new government in Baghdad will join with them. The initial statements I have seen from the new Prime Minister are also encouraging.

The regional states pledging to act with us in Iraq is also encouraging - and something we didn't really have when I was in Iraq years ago. Just the symbolism of the Iraqi Foreign Minister - a senior Shia politician - appearing in Riyadh at Saudi invitation with other Sunni states' representatives was very positive. We're in a better spot in this regard than we were in 2003 or 2007.

But as I said, if there are encouraging signs, we also need to understand that just as it took years to contain and reduce al-Qaida in Iraq, so it will take years again in Iraq. Patience and firm insistence on our political conditions are vital.

Turning to Syria, it's a much harder problem than Iraq and we are long past the chance to find easy answers or sure bets. Still, the same elements used in Iraq offer the best path forward:

- we need to identify friendly forces on the ground and boost their ability to fight the Islamic State;
- we may need to use, judiciously, our own airpower;
- as in Iraq the real fighting will be on the ground, so equipment, ammunition, logistics and even cash matter just as much if not more;
- a sustainable solution requires a new Syrian government via negotiations between Syrians with outside encouragement.

Many Americans question whether there are any moderates left in the Syrian armed opposition.

There are. They are fighting the Islamic State and the Asad regime both, they are, not surprisingly, hard pressed, and they could very much use our help.

I find it odd that the media don't talk about them much. Units like the Hazem Brigade fighting in northwestern Syria that actually helped expel the Islamic State out of that part of Syria last spring. The Hazem Brigade issued a manifesto last March saying it was fighting for a pluralistic Syria where minorities' rights would be protected. Or units like the 101st and 13th divisions, fighting in both northern and southern Syria, led by former Syrian military officers. Or units like the Omari and Yarmouk brigades which are fighting regime forces in southern Syria. There are others too, of course.

Right now, some of these units, and others are locked in battle with the Islamic State near Aleppo in northern Syria. It's a hard fight - US equipment the Islamic State captured from the Iraqi army is being used against those Free Syrian Army fighters. However, these units also have received help from outside and they have fought the Islamic State to a standstill in that part of Syria. It's a desperate fight - the Islamic State is trying to capture vital supply lines for the moderate armed opposition coming down from Turkey.

Helping those units, right now, around Aleppo could secure supply routes and boost the morale of the moderate fighters. Asad's forces are some distance away and far too stretched already to hold ground northeast of Aleppo. Thus, we and our friends ramping up help there would not benefit Asad nearly as much as the moderate opposition.

We do need multiple changes in approach. Larger, more reliable logistics help, including provision of ammunition and cash, are a must if we hope to make any headway against the Islamic State. And just as important, regional allies must stop competing with each other for influence by provisioning different groups in an

uncoordinated fashion and instead blend their efforts in a broader strategic plan with the Syrian fighters' commanders.

And we must understand two vital points going in:

- the moderate armed opposition's biggest enemy is not the Islamic State. It is the Asad regime which has killed far more Syrians than has the detestable Islamic State. And they won't stop fighting the Asad regime even as they advance against the Islamic State.

- moreover, in the desperately hard-fought battle against the Asad regime, moderate forces have and will tactically coordinate with the al-Qaida-linked Nusra Front on the ground. This is due to operational necessity, made more urgent by the shortage of supplies.

This coordination has nothing to do with ideological sympathy - indeed, groups such as the ones I mentioned have criticized the Nusra Front's politics and even refused to work with its leaders in towns recaptured from the regime.

Until the moderate elements are so strong that they don't need Nusra to pressure the regime successfully, the moderate elements will accept working militarily with Nusra.

As we think medium- and longer-term, a large moderate opposition force will be vital to holding ground seized back from the Islamic State. It will also be necessary to contain the Nusra Front one day. I do not see any other force that could do this short of a US-led foreign force and even that would be extremely hard to sell politically in the region and in the broader international arena. I therefore welcome the Administration's proposal to move to a Title 10 program.

However, just as in Iraq, the sustainable solution is to find a way to rally more Syrians against the Islamic State. The Asad regime's brutality has helped the Islamic State's rapid growth in Syria. Working with the Asad regime would be a golden gift to help the Islamic State's recruiting in Syria and beyond. And there aren't Asad forces to spare for central and eastern Syria anyway.

Instead, as in Iraq, the endgame in Syria has to be a new government able to rally the armed opposition and the remaining regime forces together to fight the Islamic State.

And we should know from the Libya experience, and our Iraq experience, that negotiating the creation of that new government in Syria, not trying to topple it, is the only way to preserve what remains of the Syrian state.

Getting to negotiations will be very, very hard. Our Geneva efforts failed quickly. But seven months later, the regime's forces have taken heavy casualties at the hands of the Free Syrian Army and the Islamic State. Asad's remaining forces are more stretched and tired. There are new signs of dissent among Asad's ranks.

Asad's supporters may be tired but they don't see a place to jump. They fear extermination at the hands of the Islamic State and the al-Qaida-linked Nusra Front. I don't blame them.

The best way to give them a sense that there is a third way for a new government - one that is neither the current regime nor an Islamic extremist state - is for the moderate opposition to reach out to Asad's supporters and to put forward ideas about how together they could assemble a new government.

Asad won't like this, but that's not the point. The point is that others inside the regime's ranks should and could drag the top Syrian leadership back to negotiations.

Thus, as we ramp up help to the Syrian moderate armed opposition, we also should insist that the opposition redouble efforts to reach out to regime elements and pursue discussions about a deal for a new government. There are steps the moderate opposition could take right now to send the right signal - treating prisoners well and offering to exchange them would be an excellent start.

I do not think any of this will be fast or easy. I do think that both sides are tiring, and that could help get to the negotiations for a new government. The conclusion of a few local ceasefire deals here and there indicates that local commanders at least are willing to talk.

Lastly, I welcome the Administration's decision which, when implemented with real resources and actions, will gain support of regional allies. In Iraq when I was there we worked without regional support with the exception of Kuwait. The Administration is making a strong pitch for regional political and material backing. If we show determination, the regional states who have long wanted to see the Syrian crisis resolved will back us, even if some necessarily do it quietly.

Going forward, we have to be determined and committed. The first step is for the Congress to approve the President's proposal to help Syrian moderate armed groups. And as we begin our efforts under Title X and back moderate fighters on the ground, we will need to be strategically patient and very tough with our allies and the moderate opposition when they stray outside the agreed lines of scrimmage. The Islamic State problem has grown over the course of three years. Putting it down again in Iraq and Syria likely will last years more. But based on what I saw in Iraq years ago, it is achievable.

