

**Statement for the Record by Michael P. Mulroy**  
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**Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,**  
**Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism**  
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Chairman Romney, Ranking Member Murphy, Members of the Committee:

It is my pleasure to speak to you today as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East. I look forward to discussing how we can best advance U.S. interests in Iraq.

The U.S.-Iraq security partnership is of vital importance. Our principal objective is to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS. U.S. and Coalition forces are operating in Iraq at the express invitation of the Iraqi government to help Iraqis secure Iraq. When I was last in Baghdad in March, every Iraqi I met with underscored the indispensability of our security partnership. U.S., Coalition, and Iraqi forces fought shoulder to shoulder to defeat ISIS's so-called "caliphate." The best way to honor those shared sacrifices is to bolster Iraq's security forces to prevent an ISIS resurgence and defend its sovereignty against internal and external threats. U.S. national security interests and regional stability hinge on a secure, sovereign Iraq.

At the Department of Defense (DoD), we recognize that the U.S. military effort cannot alone deliver the desired results in Iraq. We see our toolkit as nested within a whole-of-government approach. U.S. commitment to diplomatic and economic action is required to ensure Iraq's long-term stability and security.

Supporting Iraq in providing good governance and economic opportunity can translate battlefield gains into lasting peace. U.S. diplomats represent the vanguard in this endeavor, and we proudly support them.

There is a fundamental premise that shapes much of our thinking on Iraq: Prematurely disengaging would compromise U.S. national security, leave Iraq exposed to other foreign influence, and destabilize the region.

The fight against ISIS is not over, and the road to recovery will be long. Five years ago, ISIS controlled approximately 21,000 square miles of Iraqi territory. That is nearly the size of West Virginia. More than 4 million people in Iraq lived under ISIS's oppressive rule. The group fielded a battlefield force capable of seizing major cities, attracted foreign terrorist fighters from more than 100 countries to Iraq and Syria, and generated at least \$1 million a day in income. It claimed responsibility for a steady drumbeat of terrorist attacks outside of Iraq and Syria, from coordinated mass-casualty attacks, such as in Paris in November 2015, to those conducted by lone actors claiming inspiration from the group. Despite the liberation of ISIS-held territory in Iraq and Syria, ISIS-linked attacks continue abroad, including in Sri Lanka in April 2019.

Ruthless and cruel, ISIS's attempts to establish a caliphate in Iraq and Syria were marked by mass executions and public beheadings. On Iraqi soil, ISIS committed acts of genocide, desecrated holy sites, and nearly destroyed the Iraqi economy. The resulting refugee crisis from Iraq and neighboring Syria rippled across Europe. The group's weaponization of violent propaganda cast a shadow across the world.

When the Government of Iraq requested U.S. support to defeat ISIS in 2014, the United States readily answered. We mobilized a Global Coalition to Defeat

ISIS, which now stands at 80 members, including many with which we work side by side in Iraq. Our State Department colleagues have seen success in fundraising from the Global Coalition, particularly to support humanitarian and stabilization activities, and DoD has received contributions from partners to support counter-ISIS efforts directly. DoD also continues to work with these allies and partners to clear areas liberated from ISIS, train partner forces and provide technical assistance, conduct targeted CT operations to address continuing threats, and support stabilization efforts. Moreover, the United Nations Assistance Mission, UN Investigative Team for Accountability of Da'esh, NATO Mission Iraq, and EU Advisory Mission also represent crucial political and political-military efforts.

The Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), which includes the United States and 15 other nations, brought to bear immense firepower against ISIS through thousands of airstrikes and the expertise of thousands of experienced U.S. and Coalition advisors building the capacity of Iraq's soldiers. CJTF-OIR currently helps train and equip 28 Iraqi brigades composed of thousands of soldiers. U.S. and Coalition forces have trained and equipped more than 212,000 members of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), including our stalwart Kurdish Peshmerga partners in the north. Iraq's Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) ranks among the region's most capable and serves as a testament to the capacity-building enterprise and the importance of sustaining our support.

The CTS, of course, cannot accomplish this mission alone. The Iraqi government has to coordinate the Ministries of Defense, Interior, and Justice, as well as its intelligence services, to disrupt ISIS networks effectively and deny them sanctuary. This requires the capability to detect terrorist activity, analyze facilitation and support networks, and disrupt activity before ISIS can carry out attacks.

In December 2017, the Iraqi government declared all its territory liberated from ISIS control. It was a proud moment not just for Iraqis but for everyone around the world reeling from the group's terror.

Our priority now is to ensure that U.S. and Coalition investments in the D-ISIS fight outlive the warfighting of the last five years. With a relatively light U.S. footprint, efforts to train and equip Iraq's security forces continue to reap dividends and prove the effectiveness of our "by, with, and through" approach. In 2008, the United States had more than 150,000 U.S. military forces in Iraq at an expense of nearly \$150 billion in Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funds; today, there are approximately 5,200 U.S. military forces stationed in Iraq, funded with less than \$15 billion in OCO funding.

The ISIS threat in Iraq persists, and the group's enduring defeat in Iraq and Syria is not a foregone conclusion. We see ISIS building clandestine networks across Iraq and Syria, working to undermine the ISF and Syrian Democratic Forces and to create the conditions they need to seize territory in the future. Despite Iraq's growing capability, the Iraqis require additional U.S. and Coalition support to conduct effective counterterrorism and wide-area security operations necessary to keep ISIS at bay. We will continue to empower Iraq's legitimate and professional security forces to protect its sovereignty and prevent an ISIS resurgence.

We are resolute in our commitment to Iraq's security and prosperity, but critics of our military presence often insinuate vague ulterior motives. The premise of our capacity-building initiative is to help *Iraqis* secure Iraq. The more capable Iraq's security institutions are, the more resilient Iraq will be in the face of terrorists and malign regional actors bent on coercion and exploitation.

Iran is foremost among those malign actors. Iran's cynical interference undermines Iraqi interests and jeopardizes Iraqi stability. Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) have come to embody this challenge, although the problem set is far from black and white. Disciplined PMF elements, we recognize, fought bravely against ISIS and earned public respect. But in recent years, Iran-backed, semi-autonomous militias have consistently flouted the Government of Iraq and turned to local criminality for self-enrichment. We see Iran using this playbook throughout the region; they hide behind proxies and use them to fight Tehran's fight. Our primary concern is the extent to which noncompliant militias, more loyal to Tehran than Baghdad, undermine the Iraqi Prime Minister's legitimate authority, prey on ordinary Iraqis, and destabilize the fragile communities recently liberated from ISIS control.

It is in Iraq's own interest to unburden itself from Iranian exploitation. Iraqi sovereignty depends on it, and no one craves that independence more than Iraqis. The prospect of coercive militias preventing local communities from recovering from the trauma of ISIS risks sparking further violent extremism and insurgency. DoD is committed to supporting State Department-led engagements with the Iraqi government on this issue. We are encouraged by the Prime Minister's July 1 decree bringing all militias under formal government control.

At the end of the day, the best way to counter Iran's malign influence in Iraq is to continue supporting the Iraqis and delivering visible good for the Iraqi people. No other country can match the world-class security assistance we provide, let alone our ability to mobilize international diplomatic and financial resources to support Iraq's long-term prosperity.

Another high priority for DoD concerns Baghdad-Erbil relations. The seams separating Kurdish and federal Iraqi security forces in northern Iraq's so-called

disputed territories are susceptible to ISIS resurgence. As is the case with the CTS and the Iraqi Army, the Peshmerga are trusted U.S. partners in the fight against terrorism. It is crucial that the Government of Iraq and Kurdistan Regional Government work through their political differences and coordinate security for those areas. Otherwise, ISIS will surely exploit security vacuums and gather steam.

There is also the growing risk that ISIS—notoriously adept at building clandestine networks—will exploit not only the populations of captured ISIS fighters now in prison in Iraq but also their family members, who may reside in local communities or in internally displaced person camps. At present, it has been reported that tens of thousands of Iraqis could soon return from Syria, the vast majority of them women and children, many possibly linked to ISIS fighters and who likely still subscribe to the terrorist ideology that helped give rise to ISIS. It has also been reported that some 45,000 children born in ISIS-controlled territory in Iraq remain in limbo because of their lack of recognized birth records.. The exploitation of Iraqis by ISIS, and the marginalization of ISIS victims leads many observers to deem the problem a “ticking time bomb,” given the risk of producing a new generation of violent extremists if there is not a reintegration process and if they are not treated humanely.

Chairman Romney, Ranking Member Murphy, only with a long-term security partnership can Iraq prevent ISIS’ from territorial resurgence that would threaten the U.S. homeland, Iraq, the region, and the world. The Defense Department’s continued work in the security sector will afford diplomats the political space to help Iraq resolve its systemic challenges. Over time we will incrementally economize our footprint, normalize our security cooperation, and sustain an increasingly mature partnership with Iraqi security institutions.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to your questions.