

Testimony of
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Options for U.S. Policy Toward Iraq

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished Senators, I am honored to be able to appear before you to discuss possible options to address the grave situation in Iraq.

I think it important to start any such conversation with an acknowledgement of the realities we face. First, it is painful, but necessary, to recognize that the United States has only very limited influence in Iraq today. The George W. Bush Administration, by its many disastrous mistakes, squandered a great deal of the influence we once had there. The Obama Administration, by its misguided neglect, surrendered most of what we had left. Indeed, Iraq now constitutes the hardest of situations for Americans to confront: it is a crisis in which our interests exceed our influence. Consequently, the options we consider moving forward must include methods to help increase U.S. influence to improve our ability to defend our interests.

Second, it is equally critical that we accept the reality that Iraq has fallen once more into civil war. It is not “on the brink of civil war.” It is not “sliding into civil war.” It is not “at risk of a new civil war.” It is in a civil war. This is what civil war looks like. And civil wars have certain dynamics that need to be understood if they are to be ended, or even merely survived.

Iraq’s current situation is the recurrence of the civil war of 2006-2008. In 2007-2008, the United States committed tremendous military and economic resources to pull Iraq out of that first instance of civil war. This time around, Washington has made clear that it will not devote anything like the same resources and there is no other country that can.

This second point is important because intercommunal civil wars like Iraq’s are difficult for external powers to end without either a significant commitment of resources or a terrible slaughter by one or more of the combatants. Given the American public’s understandable unwillingness to re-commit the kind of resources we did in 2007-2008, we are unlikely to bring the Iraqi civil war to a speedy end with minimal bloodshed and still safeguard the range of American interests engaged there. For those reasons, the hard truth we face is that, in the circumstances we currently find ourselves in, our options range from bad to awful.

Nevertheless, doing nothing because all of the options are unpalatable would be the worst choice of all. Civil wars do not just go away if they are ignored. They burn on and on. They also have a bad habit of infecting neighboring states—just as the Syrian civil war has helped reignite the Iraqi civil war. If we try to turn our back on Iraq once again, it will affect its neighbors. It could easily affect the international oil market (and through it, the U.S. economy, which remains heavily dependent on the price of oil no matter how much we may frack). It will also

generate terrorists who will seek to kill Americans. So our option may be awful, but we have no choice but to try to make them work.

Plan A: Rebuilding a (Somewhat) Unified Iraq

Although I believe that the Obama Administration's Iraq policy has been disastrous, and a critical factor in the rekindling of Iraq's civil war,¹ I find myself largely in agreement with the approach they have adopted to deal with the revived civil war. Our first priority should be to try to engineer a new Iraqi government that Kurds, Shi'a and moderate Sunnis can all embrace, so that they can then wage a unified military campaign (with American support) against ISIS and the other Sunni militant groups.²

That needs to remain Washington's priority until it fails because it is the best outcome for all concerned, including the United States. Doing so would be the most likely way to dampen or eliminate the current conflict, and create the fewest causes for future violence. It could also succeed relatively quickly—in a matter of months rather than years like all of the other options. However, it will be extremely difficult to pull off.

The keys to this strategy will be to convince the Kurds not to break from Iraq and convince moderate Sunnis to remain part of the Iraqi political process—and to turn on ISIS and the other Sunni militant groups. As I and other experts on Iraq have written, this will require both a new political leadership and a drastic overhaul of Iraq's political system. With regard to the former condition, at this point, it seems highly unlikely that Nuri al-Maliki can remain prime minister and retain either the Kurds or meaningful Sunni representation in his government. However, even if he were removed and new, more acceptable leaders chosen, there would still be a long way to go.³

Even moderate Sunni leaders are not going to go back to the status quo ante. They now insist on decentralizing power from the center to the periphery, a redistribution of power within the federal government, and a thorough depoliticization of the Iraqi security services so that they cannot be used as a source of repression by what will inevitably be a Shi'a-dominated central government. They are likely to demand to be allowed to form a federal region like the Kurdistan Regional Government, complete with a separate budget and their own military forces akin to the Kurdish Peshmerga.

For their part, the Kurds will want even more than that. At this point, given the extensive autonomy that the KRG already enjoys, coupled with the territorial and administrative gains it has won in the wake of the ISIS offensive, greater federalism probably won't be an adequate alternative to independence for the Kurds. If the Kurds can be prevented from seceding, it will probably require Baghdad to accept a confederal arrangement with Erbil.

The difference here is that in a typical federal system, resources and authorities are generated from the center and delegated to the periphery for all but a limited number of constrained functions. However, keeping the Kurds on board will likely necessitate a shift to one

¹ This should not be taken to imply that I believe Iraq's current problems are entirely the fault of the Obama Administration. Quite the contrary. I believe that the George W. Bush Administration is at least equally to blame, and arguably more so.

² Full disclosure: I proposed that the United States adopt this policy the day after Mosul fell and before the Administration embraced it. See Kenneth M. Pollack, "How to Pull Iraq Back from the Abyss," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 10, 2014.

³ For a fuller description of the political reforms that would be required to make this scenario work, see Zalmay Khalilzad and Kenneth M. Pollack, "How to Save Iraq," *The New Republic Online*, July 22, 2014, available at <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118794/federalism-could-save-iraq-falling-apart-due-civil-war>.

in which resources and authority begin in the periphery and then are shared with the center for specific purposes and under specific constraints.

The Kurds are likely to insist that the KRG maintain the current lines of control in disputed territories unchanged until a referendum can be conducted in accordance with article 140 of the Iraqi constitution. Baghdad will have to recognize Erbil's right to develop and market the oil it produces as the new status quo. As for oil revenues, Erbil will demand that it be allowed to keep the Kirkuk oil fields it has now secured, and agree that Baghdad and Erbil each be allowed to pump as much oil as they like and pay all of their own expenses from those revenues.

Assuming that moderate Sunnis, Kurds and moderate Shi'a can all agree on these various changes, we could see the resurrection of a unified Iraqi polity. It is reasonable to assume that in those happy circumstances, many Sunni tribes will be ready to fight ISIS and the other Sunni militant groups—and to accept assistance from the United States to do so. (Although they have made clear that they will not accept assistance from the Iraqi security forces until they have been thoroughly depoliticized.) Moreover, these are really the only circumstances in which the United States should be willing to provide large-scale military assistance to the Iraqi government to fight ISIS and the other militant groups. Only in those circumstances will such assistance be seen as non-partisan, meant to help all Iraqis and not just the Shi'a (and their Iranian allies).

However, what is important to note about this scenario is that replacing Prime Minister Maliki, if that can be accomplished at all, is a necessary but not sufficient condition to end the conflict on the best terms imaginable for the United States (and Iraq). Even after Maliki is removed, the Iraqis will have to sort out far-reaching reforms and redistributions of power and wealth. As hard as all of that will be, there is the added danger that given the overwhelming distrust among all of the Iraqi parties, the Sunnis tribes will refuse to take any action against the Sunni militants until all of the political negotiations have been concluded. Having been burned so many times in the past, that will be a reasonable inclination on their part. However, if they do so, it could be months or years before they work things out and are ready to turn on ISIS and the other militants. By then it would be much harder to rid the country of the Sunni militants and those groups may well have done a great deal of damage already, including possibly mounting terrorist attacks abroad.

One area in which I think that the Obama Administration could be doing a better job to foster this approach to the revived Iraqi civil war would be to lean in, rather than leaning back. What I mean by this is that moderate Iraqis from across the political and ethno-sectarian spectrum have complained that while the Administration is loudly demanding a wide range of changes in Iraq's political leadership and reforms of the Iraqi political process, they have so far been vague and equivocal in describing what the United States would do to help a new and reformed Iraqi government. Given how many Iraqis already believe that President Obama wants nothing to do with Iraq and will never provide meaningful assistance, such reserve only undercuts what little influence the United States has left in Iraq.

Instead, the only way to increase American leverage with the Iraqis is to enumerate plainly the kinds of support that the United States would be willing to provide to a reformed, reunified Iraqi government. This support should include drone strikes, the provision of weapons and reconnaissance assets, greater intelligence support and targeting assistance, improved and expanded training for Iraqi forces, and potentially even manned airstrikes. Better still, it could include a commitment to make the 2008 Strategic Framework Agreement into the kind of across-the-board bilateral assistance relationship always envisioned, but never actually implemented by

the Obama Administration. This would entail technical, administrative and possibly even financial assistance for the full panoply of Iraqis needs—military, agriculture, education, energy, telecommunications, transportation, diplomatic, and virtually anything else the Iraqis might need. An American commitment to provide such assistance would be enormously popular among average Iraqis, and therefore would buy Washington considerable influence with their leaders. It would also galvanize Iraq’s economy and help knit its fractured society back together—two more keys to preventing yet another outbreak of civil war.

Plan B: Syria First

If the United States, working in conjunction with our regional allies, the Iraqis themselves and (necessarily) the Iranians cannot forge a new Iraqi national consensus and power-sharing arrangement, the civil war will worsen.

Intercommunal civil wars like Iraq’s share a number of unhelpful qualities. First, they tend to stalemate along the internal ethno-sectarian dividing lines of the country. Those divides become the frontlines, and they tend to be very, very bloody. Second, they tend to empower the worst elements in every society. It is the radicals who take advantage of the chaos and the fear, using it to kill off or drown out moderate rivals who are typically not ruthless enough to retain power. Of course, the radicals typically prosper from the conflict and have little interest in seeing it end except in complete victory.

Third, in part for that reason, intercommunal civil wars tend to burn on for years, sometimes even decades. The Algerian civil war ran from 1991 to 2002. The Lebanese civil war lasted from 1975-1991 and ended only because of Syrian intervention. The Congolese civil war has been roiling on since 1994. Somalia since 1991. Afghanistan has arguably careened from civil war to civil war since 1979, or more conventionally since 1989.

And fourth, they always produce spillover.⁴ Spillover typically takes six different forms: terrorism, refugees, secessionism, radicalization of neighboring populations, economic downturns, and intervention by neighboring states. At its worst, spillover from an intercommunal civil war can help cause a civil war in another state (as spillover from Lebanon caused the 1976-1982 Syrian civil war, and the current Syrian civil war helped reignite the Iraqi civil war). Or it can metastasize into a regional war as neighboring states intervene to halt the other manifestations of spillover and/or to secure their interests against the predations of other states. That’s how Israel and Syria came to blows over Lebanon in the 1980s and why seven different African states intervened in Congo, producing what is often referred to as “Africa’s world war.” For a variety of reasons, spillover from a protracted Iraqi civil war could be very bad, threatening U.S. allies like Turkey and Jordan and critical oil producers like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iran.

For all of these reasons, I believe that even if the current gambit fails, the United States will have a strong interest in seeing the civil war there ended. The problem, once again, is that doing so will be even harder with the limited resources that the U.S. is willing to employ. It will mean finding ways to appeal to both moderate Shi’a and moderate Sunnis in Iraq, help them to defeat their own radicals and then convince them to make peace with one another—and ideally forge a new power-sharing arrangement that would preserve a relatively unified Iraq. (Or a

⁴ On spillover from intercommunal civil wars, its causes, manifestations and efforts to stem it, see Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, *Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover from an Iraqi Civil War* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2006).

relatively unified Arab Iraq since it is highly unlikely the Kurds will refrain from independence under conditions of all-out civil war in Arab Iraq.)

Doing so in Iraq would probably mean starting in Syria. That may seem counterintuitive, but Syria offers an important clarity lacking in current Iraq. If Iraq is engulfed in full-scale civil war with no hope that political change in Baghdad could end the conflict, the United States will have a particularly problematic dilemma: we will have mixed feelings about both the Shi'a-dominated government and the Sunni-dominated opposition. We will hate ISIS and the Sunni radicals, but not the Sunni tribes and moderates allied with them. We will hate the Shi'a radicals and mistrust their Iranian allies, but not the Shi'a moderates who will inevitably have to join their co-religionists. Supplying both sides in any civil war is a non-starter, but in Iraq those circumstances will make it (or *should* make it) impossible to decide which side to back. In that one respect, Syria is much easier. There the United States unequivocally backs the Sunni-dominated opposition against the Shi'a-dominated regime.

That situation would enable the United States to make a significantly greater effort to build a new, conventionally-trained, -armed and -organized Syrian opposition army. One that could defeat the forces of both the regime and the Sunni Islamist radicals.⁵ Although such an effort would likely take anywhere from 2-5 years, it has a number of important advantages. First, it is entirely feasible—especially if coupled with Western air power. It would create the best conditions for a stable Syria, which would eliminate the spillover into Iraq, including the ability of ISIS and other radical groups to employ Syria as a base and recruiting ground to support operations in Iraq. Moreover, it would create a moderate, non-partisan but largely Sunni force that could appeal to moderate Sunni tribesmen in Iraq. Indeed, a moderate, mostly Sunni, opposition army triumphing in Syria would be a tremendous draw for the Sunnis of Iraq—a model of what they might become if they rid themselves of ISIS, as well as an ally in that fight.

Finally, if the United States were to help create such a new model Syrian opposition army, one that could then serve as a conduit for American assistance to Iraqi Sunnis as well, Washington would then be ideally placed to reach out to moderate Shi'a groups in Iraq. The defeat of the Asad regime in Syria would doubtless terrify many Iraqi Shi'a that the Syrian opposition army planned to turn on them as well. As their trainers, advisors, paymasters, and weapons suppliers, the United States could then offer to rein in the new Syrian army and even to provide similar assistance to moderate Iraqi Shi'a groups to enable them to defeat their own radicals. If they accepted, and they would have strong incentives to do so, they too would be beholden to the United States, creating the best circumstances possible for the U.S. to broker a deal between the moderate Sunnis and the moderate Shi'a (of both Iraq and Syria).

Plan C: Seeking a Stable Partition

Building a new Syrian Army and helping it to defeat both the Asad regime and the Sunni militants would be time-consuming and require more resources than the U.S. has so far committed there, but it is hardly impossible. If we succeeded, then using that force to help Iraqi Sunnis turn on their own militants would also be a realistic aspiration. And if that too succeeded,

⁵ For a fuller description of this strategy, see Kenneth M. Pollack, "An Army to Defeat Assad: How to Turn Syria's Opposition into a Real Fighting Force," forthcoming, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (September/October 2014). Also see, Daniel L. Byman, Michael Doran, Kenneth M. Pollack and Salman Shaikh, "Saving Syria: Assessing Options for Regime Change," Middle East Memo No. 21, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, March 15, 2012.

then it is reasonable to believe that those circumstances could then be employed to convince Iraq's Shi'a to do the same. Finally making possible a negotiated settlement in Iraq.

Certainly there is no reason that any of this is impossible. But none of it will be easy. And each additional step adds degrees of time, cost and difficulty. Even if we were willing to invest the time and resources to give this strategy the greatest likelihood of succeeding, it could take many years to seal the final deal. And there is no guarantee that every link in the chain would succeed enough to make the next link plausible.

With that in mind, I believe that the U.S. should also consider a more straightforward alternative, namely to should be to try to end the fighting by convincing all sides to recognize the de facto division of the country that is likely to take place. As noted, the battle lines between Sunni and Shi'a militias are likely to run roughly along the blurry dividing lines between their communities. Tragically, those lines are likely to sharpen as a result of the widespread ethnic cleansing that will accompany the fighting and that has already begun again. The Kurds, will almost certainly opt for independence under these circumstances, and even if they refrain from a formal declaration, they will be independent in all but name.

In theory, a simpler alternative to trying to put Iraq back together again, would be to recognize its partition and convince the parties to accept that reality and stop fighting. Of course, what seems simple and obvious in theory often proves anything but that in practice.

Indeed, there is a dangerous mythology taking hold in Washington that partition might be easy because Iraq has since been sorted out into neat, easily divided cantonments. That is simply false. While there are far fewer mixed towns and neighborhoods, they still exist, and even the homogeneous towns and neighborhoods remain heavily intermingled across central Iraq, including in Baghdad. Moreover, both the Sunni and the Shi'a militias are claiming territory largely inhabited by the sects of the other. All of that indicates that it would probably take years of horrible bloodshed to convince both the Sunni and Shi'a leaderships to agree to partition, let alone on where to divide the country.

Thus, the challenge for the United States would be how to assist a process by which the various Iraqi factions recognized that continued fighting was fruitless and they should agree to a ceasefire and a functional division of the country to end the war altogether. That too will not be easy. Again, the key will be to empower moderates on both sides (Sunni and Shi'a) to enable them to defeat the radicals and then strike a workable deal with one another. (By definition, a moderate in an intercommunal civil war is someone willing to work with the other side.)

In theory, (there's that phrase again), the United States might provide military support to both Sunni and Shi'a moderates to help them triumph over their respective extremists in their respective cantonments. In practice, they are just as likely to try to use that assistance against each other as against the extremists. And if military assistance is not the right way to influence such groups waging an all-out civil war, it is even harder to imagine that any other form of assistance would have greater sway with them. Historically, only the threat of punishment has carried that kind of weight in such circumstances, but that would require a willingness on the part of the United States to become very heavily involved in the Iraqi civil war, quite possibly including with combat troops, which makes it a non-starter.

Thus, the reality of a partition strategy is that, absent a willingness on the part of the U.S. to impose it by cracking heads, we will probably find ourselves on the sidelines, waiting and hoping that the Iraqi militia leaders will eventually recognize the futility of their combat and agree to accept Americans (or others) to step in as mediators and broker a disengagement and partition. That's not impossible. But typically, it is a long time coming, and in the meantime

Iraqis will die while the region will suffer all of the effects of spillover. Partition may ultimately be the outcome in Iraq, but absent a plausible mechanism for the United States to convince the militias to agree to it in the near term, it will be difficult to adopt it as an actual strategy. As Colin Powell famously remarked, ‘Hope is not a strategy,’ and hoping that Iraqi militia leaders recognize the error of their ways is not a good way to safeguard American interests in the region.

Plan D: Containment

Inevitably, America’s last option would be containment.⁶ We could simply opt to leave Iraq to its fate and try as best we might to block or mitigate the spillover onto its neighbors. In fact, unless and until we could find a way to convince the militias to stop fighting, the “partition” approach described above would have to rely on containment. To some extent, so too would a strategy of remaking Iraqi politics by building a new Syrian opposition army that could stabilize Syria and then help stabilize Iraq since that would be a long time in the making if it succeeded at all. In short, the United States is probably going to rely on at least some aspects of a containment strategy toward Iraq under any circumstances unless we are able to help forge a new Iraqi political leadership and power-sharing agreement that stops the civil war in its tracks.

The problem with containment is that it does not work very well. Historically, few nations have been able to stave off the worst aspects of spillover from an intercommunal civil war for very long. Most countries find themselves suffering worse and worse, and often getting drawn into the civil wars the longer they drag on. It is harder to find good cases of neighboring countries that successfully minimized the impact of spillover on themselves.

In many cases states have simply tried to weather the storm and paid a heavy price for doing so. Others have been driven to do what they could to end the conflict instead. Syria spent at least eight years trying to end the Lebanese civil war before the 1989 Ta’if accords and the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War gave it the opportunity to finally do so. Israel’s 1982 invasion was also a bid to end the Lebanese civil war after its previous efforts to contain it had failed, and when this too failed Jerusalem tried to go back to managing spillover. By 2000, it was clear that this was again ineffective and so Israel simply pulled out of Lebanon altogether in a vain effort to prevent further spillover. Withdrawing from Lebanon was smart for Israel for many reasons, but it has not put an end to its Lebanon problem. In the Balkans, the United States and its NATO allies realized that it was impossible to manage the Bosnian or Kosovar civil wars and so in both cases they employed coercion—including the deployment of massive ground forces—to bring them to an end. Pakistan opted to try to end the Afghan civil war by building and encouraging the Taliban, an effort that, 20 years later, has left Pakistan riven by internal conflict of its own.

Nevertheless, we may well have nothing left but to try to contain the spillover from an Iraqi civil war. From America’s perspective that will require pursuing a number of critical courses of action.

Provide Whatever Assistance we can to Iraqi Civilians and Refugees. In this scenario Iraq’s civil war will rage on, fueled by its militias and, unfortunately, its neighbors. The biggest losers will be the people of Iraq themselves. Hundreds of thousands are likely to die. Millions will be forced to flee their homes and suffer other tragedies. Those people represent both a moral responsibility and a strategic threat since they constitute ideal recruitment pools for militias and terrorists. Especially if the United States opts not to do anything to try to bring the civil war to a rapid end, but also if we are merely forced to wait for other aspects of our strategy to gain

⁶ For more on the methodologies of containment, see Byman and Pollack, *Things Fall Apart*, op. cit.

traction, we should and must provide what support we can to the people of Iraq, both those who remain and those who flee. Undoubtedly various international NGOs and UN agencies will do what they can, but without the resources of nation-states, they will not be able to do much.

Provide Support to Iraq's Neighbors. The historical evidence from other intercommunal civil war suggests that the United States should provide assistance to Iraq's neighbors to reduce the likelihood that their own deprivation will create sympathy for, or incite emulation of, the actions of their compatriots in Iraq. The more content the people of neighboring states, the less likely they will be to want to get involved in someone else's civil war. Aid also provides some leverage with the government in question, making them more likely to hesitate before going against U.S. wishes. Generous aid packages can be explicitly provided with the proviso that they will be stopped (and sanctions possibly applied instead) if the receiving country intervenes in the Iraqi conflict.

That would mean continuing and even expanding the roughly \$660 million in aid the United States is providing Jordan this year. It will probably mean increased assistance to Turkey to help it deal with both refugees and terrorism emanating from the intertwined Iraqi-Syrian civil wars.

The more difficult questions will be how to help Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Neither Kuwait nor Saudi Arabia need American financial assistance, although both might need greater security cooperation to deal with terrorists and militiamen spilling over their borders in search of either targets or sanctuary.

However, the bigger problem that both Kuwait and Saudi are likely to face will be the radicalization of their populations, a problem both were beginning to face in 2006 before the U.S. "Surge" shut down the first manifestation of civil war in Iraq. Saudi and Kuwaiti Shi'a minorities will doubtless sympathize with—and be galvanized by—the Shi'a of Iraq and Syria. Their Sunni majorities will side with the Sunni oppositions in both and will demand that their governments do ever more to support the Sunni fighters. It will almost certainly lead to widespread Gulf covert support to the Sunni militias in Iraq and Syria, potentially including ISIS and the other militant groups. Historically, such covert support can backfire against the country providing the support, as Pakistani support for the Taliban, Jordanian support for the PLO, and Turkish support for the Syrian opposition has. It can also lead to conventional interventions into the civil war when the covert support proves inadequate to the task. That's how Syria and Israel got sucked into Lebanon.

Dissuade Intervention. Consequently, the United States, hopefully along with its European and Asian allies, will have to make a major effort to convince Iraq's neighbors not to intervene in an Iraqi civil war. Given the extent of their involvement already, this will be difficult to do. Our efforts should include the economic aid described above, as well as specific benefits tailored to the needs of individual countries. For Jordan and Saudi Arabia it might be yet another quixotic tilt at an Israeli-Palestinian peace, thereby addressing another of their major concerns. For Turkey, it might be financial aid or NATO security assistance. Again, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait would be the biggest challenges and the best Washington might do would be merely to try to convince them that it would be counterproductive and unnecessary to intervene—unnecessary because the U.S. and its allies will make a major effort to keep Iran from intervening, which will be their greatest worry.

Preventing Iran from intervening, especially given how much it is already involved in Iraqi affairs, is going to be the biggest headache of all. Given Iran's immense interests in Iraq, deepening Iranian intervention is likely to go hand-in-hand with a worsening civil war. And that is a foregone conclusion in a scenario of containment. For Tehran, the United States may have to lay down "red lines" regarding what is absolutely impermissible—like sending uniformed Iranian military units into Iraq or annexing Iraqi territory, both of which could prompt the Sunni Arab states to do the same. Of course, the U.S. and its allies would also have to lay out what they would do to Iran if it were to cross any of those red lines and that will inevitably be complicated by the status of nuclear negotiations with Tehran, regardless of the status of those negotiations.

Direct Strikes at the Terrorist Infrastructure in Iraq. If the United States opts merely to contain an Iraqi civil war, we will have to accept some level of terrorist activity there. However, we would have to try to limit the ability of terrorists (Sunni and possibly Shi'a as well) to use Iraq as a haven for attacks outside the country. That will mean reliance on the kind of approach that Vice President Biden purportedly favored in Afghanistan rather than the "surge" of troops that President Obama opted for instead. It would mean employing air assets (manned and unmanned), special operations forces, and all manner of intelligence and reconnaissance systems to identify and strike key terrorists and their infrastructure (training camps, bomb factories, arms caches, etc.) before they could pose a danger to Americans. Thus, the U.S. would continue to make intelligence collection in Iraq a high priority, and whenever such a facility was identified, Shi'i or Sunni, American forces would move in quickly to destroy it.

Of course, such an effort would need bases to operate. Jordan and Kuwait are obvious candidates. However, in this scenario, Iraqi Kurdistan would probably be the best of all. Indeed, the United States could tie its willingness to recognize an independent Kurdistan (and provide them with the kind of military support they will need to hold off Iran as well as ISIS and the Sunni Arab militant groups) to Erbil's willingness to host American counterterrorism (CT) forces. It seems highly likely that the Kurds would jump at that opportunity, making it far more palatable to run a discrete CT campaign from independent Iraqi Kurdistan than anywhere else.

Learning the Lesson of Iraq

Mr. Chairman, as I reflect on the list of options I have described above, I find myself deeply depressed. This is a miserable set of choices. But they reflect the reality of our circumstances in Iraq.

Whatever options we choose to pursue there, I find myself hoping that at the very least, we will recognize that the best option of all was to have never allowed ourselves and the Iraqis to get to this point. They have been sucked into a civil war that feeds upon itself, and we are left with almost nothing we can do, either to save them or prevent that maelstrom from wrecking vital American interests. The mistakes of both the Bush '43 and Obama Administrations led us to this point because neither was willing to acknowledge that we cannot break a country in a vital part of the world and then walk away from it. And neither was willing to practice the sage aphorism that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Today we have but an ounce of cure for a malady raging out of control, one that could easily kill the patient and who knows what else. Perhaps the best that might come of it would be if we learn not to do so again.

