

Next Steps for U.S. Foreign Policy on Syria and Iraq

Prepared statement by

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Before the

Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

Committee on Foreign Affairs

United States House of Representatives

2nd Session, 113th Congress

Hearing on “Next Steps for U.S. Foreign Policy on Syria and Iraq”

Madam Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify today.

Sixteen months ago I testified before the House Armed Services Committee on the situation in Syria, and in that testimony noted that 100,000 Syrians had already been killed. As you meet today, the number of those killed is now over 200,000. And it now is estimated that more than 7 million Syrians are refugees or displaced persons. These refugee flows have completely changed the demography, the economies, and the politics of Jordan and Lebanon—and all the numbers continue to grow.

And as I noted in that 2013 testimony, the continuation of this conflict is itself a threat to U.S. interests and allies. There are perhaps a million and a half Syrian refugees in Lebanon and the same number in Jordan.

Neither country has the capacity to deal with them. The Kingdom of Jordan is one of our key allies in the Middle East and stability there should be a prime concern of ours. As the conflict continues and more and more jihadis arrive in Syria, we must also wonder about their role in Lebanon and along the Syrian-Israeli border. Their growing presence in the area is another serious threat.

The purpose of this hearing is not to cry over spilt milk but to ask what we do next. In my view, we should have three goals: to alleviate the humanitarian situation and help friendly countries deal with the refugee crisis; to prevent an Iranian victory in Syria that would be a great blow to American interests; and to strike devastating blows at the Islamic State.

All of us share that goal of defeating the Islamic State, or to use the tougher term the President once used, destroying it. But I do not think we have a strategy in place today that can achieve that goal.

Why not? Because we have no sensible Syria strategy. And our strategy in Iraq is comprehensible but unlikely to succeed—in part because there is now one Syria/Iraq military theater, ISIS having obliterated the border. If we have no Syria policy, we have no realistic ISIS policy.

Let me begin with Iraq. The question is who will fight ISIS. Our answer appears to be that a combination of the Iraqi army, Sunni tribes, and the Kurdish Pesh Merga will fight and defeat ISIS—with our help. As of today, that strategy is not yet working. One reason is that we have been slow to commit the forces we are likely to need, sending a few hundred, then a total of 1500, then 1500 more. If we need exactly 3,000 advisers and no more, I am glad we will have them; but I wonder if that is really the right number. If it is not, let's commit to the number we need now rather than in a drawn-out series of announcements that assure we will always have too few forces in theater. Moreover, though we have watched the Pesh Merga have great difficulty dealing with ISIS, we continue to deny those forces the military aid they seek. That will surely not work. If our goal is to limit Iranian influence and defeat ISIS, strengthening the Pesh Merga seems like a logical step. We should take it.

Last week a key Kurdish official, Mansour Barzani of the Kurdish national security council, said this in an interview about military aid:

“We have told the international forces that there is a continuous need to supply the Peshmerga forces with sophisticated arms in order to repel the [ISIS] enemies and defeat them as quickly as possible. The arms that the Peshmerga have today are the old arms that came from the former Iraqi army,” he told Asharq Al-Awsat.

“As for the military assistance that reached the Kurdish region, this comprises medium weaponry and ammunition. The only heavy weaponry that we have yet received is some anti-tank missiles

supplied by Germany. So the Kurdish region has yet to receive any other weapons that will allow us to change the balance of power on the ground in favor of the Peshmerga,” he added.

Barzani particularly criticized Iraqi military assistance to Kurdish forces, which he said was practically non-existent.

“Baghdad should have provided far more [military assistance] than it has. Baghdad should have provided the Peshmerga forces with sophisticated weaponry . . . But we have seen nothing like this,” he said.

He added that the western states who have pledged military assistance to the Peshmerga have yet to meet these promises, calling on the international community to do more as ISIS “is not waiting for us to be armed to attack us.” [<http://www.aawsat.net/2014/11/article55338237>]

As to the Sunni tribes, we appear to be waiting for the government in Baghdad to arm them. A couple of weeks ago Gen. Dempsey was quoted as saying, after a massacre of Sunnis in Anbar province, that “we need to expand the train, advise and assist mission into ... Anbar province. But the precondition for that is that the government of Iraq is willing to arm the tribes.” [<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/10/31/Iraq-s-top-Shiite-calls-on-Baghdad-to-help-Sunni-tribes-after-killings.html>] We may wait a long time to see that happen, and meanwhile ISIS can gain additional victories.

We should step back for a moment and see how our overall policies may appear from the Sunni perspective. In Syria, which I will come back to shortly, we’ve watched 200,000 mostly Sunnis killed, and watched continuing criminal attacks against the Sunni civilian population using artillery and so-called barrel bombs, and done almost nothing. We backed away from our own red line when chemical warfare was used against Sunni civilians there. It appears that we and other Western governments will be arming the Kurds before we will be arming the Sunnis in Iraq. We bombed near Kobani in Syria to save Kurds. We acted to save the Yazidis in Iraq, but not the Sunnis there or in Syria. We may be about to conclude our negotiation with Iran over nuclear weapons. The President just sent a letter to the Ayatollah Khamenei in which he “sought to assuage Iran’s concerns about the future of its close ally, President Bashar al-Assad of Syria,” according to *The Wall Street Journal*. The *Journal* says the letter “states that the U.S.’s military operations inside Syria aren’t targeted at Mr. Assad or his security forces.” What are Sunnis to make of that, when Assad continues to kill Sunni civilians every single day? [<http://online.wsj.com/articles/obama-wrote-secret-letter-to-irans-khamenei-about-fighting-islamic-state-1415295291>]

We all want to defeat and destroy ISIS. But recruiting for ISIS continues, on the basis that Sunnis are threatened and must be defended. To young Sunni males from Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and even the United States, this will continue to be an attractive argument unless we can defeat ISIS ideologically as well as militarily. Today, our policies can too easily be depicted by ISIS propaganda as indifferent or hostile to Sunnis and indeed as seeking an accommodation with Shia forces and with Iran.

It is in that context that I turn to Syria. In Syria, we have no answer at all to the question who will fight ISIS—unless our answer is the Assad regime and its Iranian and Hezbollah supporters. Our plans for helping turn the rebels into a more effective fighting force have been extremely slow to develop. As you know, that step was urged several years ago by Secretary Clinton and CIA Director and later Secretary of Defense Panetta, and then over a year ago by Secretary Kerry. Unfortunately their good advice was rejected by the President, so we are way behind now and the programs are unfolding very slowly-- to be kind. If you detect a note of urgency in how the administration is handling this question, I do not.

Instead we appear to be falling into a sort of alliance with Iran and with the Assad regime. But it is the vicious brutality and the war crimes of that regime against the 75% of Syrians who are Sunnis that largely created ISIS, which then grew with great speed and moved also into Iraq.

In my view a Syria policy that relies on Iran, Hezbollah, and the Assad regime cannot succeed. And if we have no realistic Syria strategy, we have no realistic Iraq strategy, because ISIS will just move a bit west into Syria to rest and recruit and rearm.

Let me cite here the words of Ambassador Fred Hof, now at the Atlantic Council but from 2009 to 2012 a key Obama administration official handling Syria policy. Like former ambassador Robert Ford, the other key official handling Syria policy, Hof resigned when he could no longer really defend the policy. Here's part of what he wrote last week:

At Andrews Joint Base on March 14, 2014 President Barack Obama told visiting uniformed defense chiefs that a key aspect of destroying the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, also known as ISIL and the Islamic State) would be the promotion of moderate, legitimate governance inside Syria; governance that would ultimately be extended to all Syrians. On November 7, 2014 the White House published its strategy for "degrading and ultimately defeating ISIL:" nine lines of effort to that end. Which of the nine addressed the all-important element of moderate, legitimate governance in Syria? None. What is going on here? [...]

It is understandable that the United States and the coalition it has assembled have as the near-term top military priority the slowing and reversal of ISIS military momentum in Iraq. Yet something else seems to be unfolding: the virtual erasure of Syria from the equation, and less than a month after President Obama assured coalition defense chiefs that he fully understood the centrality of good governance in Syria to the destruction of ISIS. Indeed, the White House press statement introducing the November 7 fact sheet on strategy avoids mentioning Syria altogether. [...]

The Assad regime cannot—short of its voluntary departure—be part of the legitimate governance answer in Syria. Its application of war crimes and crimes against humanity—all administered with a strong sectarian flavor—made central and eastern Syria fertile ground for ISIS and its foreign fighters. It works in tandem with ISIS to terrorize Syrians and erase the nationalist opposition.

If the fact sheet of November 7, 2014 truly reflects the administration's strategy to combat ISIS, it is missing a major piece: Syria. Until that piece is covered in a way that addresses reality in Syria, the overall strategy itself will inevitably fall short of the goal of "degrading and ultimately defeating ISIS." [November 12, 2014, "Countering ISIS: Obama Administration Strategy" by Frederic C. Hof, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/countering-isis-obama-administration-strategy>]

I agree fully with this analysis.

I would add that such a policy will be seen by everyone in the region as a defeat of the United States by Iran. On one side, Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia support Assad; on the other, the United States, EU, and our Sunni Arab friends from the Gulf say he must go. Does it matter who wins? Yes—because around the world but especially in the Middle East allies and enemies will judge the power, influence, and willpower of the United States and our friends in no small part by the outcome of this conflict.

Should the Assad regime be replaced by a Sunni regime oriented toward Syria's Sunni neighbors, this will be a huge defeat for Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. Involvement in Syria is already arousing discontent among Lebanon's populace, including Shia who wonder why their sons are dying for Bashar al-Assad, and a defeat in Syria will undermine Hezbollah inside Lebanon. Its power has been rising there for decades; now, a turning point might be reached and it might start declining. Given Hezbollah's global reach as a terrorist group, that's very much in our interest.

Similarly and even more importantly, the unceasing rise of Iranian power in the region would be seen to have been stopped if the Assad regime falls. Iran's influence has been viewed as growing steadily—partly due to the demise of a hostile Sunni regime in Iraq (at America's hands) and to growing Iranian influence there; partly to Iran's perceived role in places like Bahrain, Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, and most recently in Yemen; partly to Iran's steadily advancing nuclear program; and partly to the sense that America, the overwhelming power in the Middle East since World War II, lacked the desire or ability to stop Iran. If we defeat Iran in Syria, all this is changed and what King Abdullah of Jordan once called the "Shia crescent" stops being cemented.

Remember that Iran's only Arab ally is Syria, which also provides it with Mediterranean ports and a land bridge to Hezbollah in Lebanon—and through Hezbollah, Iran gets a border with Israel. This all changes if Assad falls.

Conversely, what happens if we decide the game in Syria is not worth the fight, and the war goes on until Assad more or less crushes the rebellion? What happens if we make common cause with Iran and Assad? Many more refugees, threatening stability in Jordan and Lebanon. Iranian ascendancy, strengthening

Hezbollah inside Lebanon and Iran throughout the Middle East. An emboldened Iran, seeing a lack of American desire to confront it, is logically more likely to become more aggressive in Bahrain, the home of our Fifth Fleet, in Saudi Arabia's heavily Shia Eastern Province, in Yemen, and in its own nuclear program.

So what should our next steps be? As I have mentioned, I believe we should be doing far more to equip the Pesh Merga, the Sunni tribes in Iraq, and the Syrian rebel groups. As to the latter, I do not trust the self-fulfilling prophecies that say they cannot fight when they have in fact been fighting, for years now, without our help and with enormous losses of men.

To defeat ISIS we must change the situation in Syria. The Assad regime is a jihadi manufacturing machine. I also believe we should consider again a strike at Assad's air assets as part of our activities in Syria. Air power continues to be an important weapon for Assad against the rebels. We need to make it clear to Assad that those assets may not be used to terrorize the populace and murder thousands more civilians in more war crimes and crimes against humanity. We face today the situation where we occupy Syrian air space but Assad's air force can carry out any crime against humanity and any air strike against civilians or rebel forces that it wishes. As we know, Assad has often used his military far more enthusiastically against the rebels and against civilians than against the jihadis. We need to tell him the rules are going to change. He can use those air assets against ISIS –or he will lose them.

We must realize that if we continue to target and weaken ISIS without stepping up our help to the rebel forces, what we are doing is clearing the field for the Assad regime. It should not be acceptable to us to create a situation where regime forces move in after ISIS forces move back due to U.S. bombing. So it is time to get serious about building a Syrian rebel force that can some day take power in Syria because it represents and is based in the 75% of the population that is Sunni. Fred Hof put it best in an interview last month:

A Goldilocks approach of trying to recruit and build a force just good enough to beat ISIL but not quite good enough to the beat the regime simply won't work."

[<http://www.businessinsider.com/obama-isis-syria-rebels-assad-2014-10#ixzz3J3PJD0PI>]

Thank you again for inviting me to testify. We all realize that the situation in Iraq and Syria is extremely complex and that every path ahead is fraught with difficulty. But we also recognize that American interests are at stake here, so I thank this Subcommittee for delving deeply into the challenges we face and the alternative policies from which we must choose.