COUNCIL on FOREIGN RELATIONS

July 29, 2014

Evaluating U.S. Options for Iraq

Prepared statement by
Dr. Stephen Biddle

Professor of Political Science and International Affairs,
George Washington University

Adjunct Senior Fellow for Defense Policy,
Council on Foreign Relations

Before the
U.S. House Committee on Armed Services
United States House of Representatives
2nd Session, *113*th Congress

Hearing on the "Security Situation in Iraq and Syria: U.S. Policy Options and Implications for the Region"

In early June, militants under the banner of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) launched an offensive that consquered the Iraqi city of Mosul, put to flight around four divisions of the Iraqi Army, and continued southward to within a few miles of Baghdad.[1] In the process, it established control of a contiguous territory comprising much of northwestern Iraq and eastern Syria. How should the United States government respond?

I argue below that none of the available options for response are without serious drawbacks. Of these, the least-bad choices at this point are a combination of limited, conditional military assistance designed chiefly to encourage Iraqi political reform, together with containment initiatives designed to make the war less likely to spread and to reduce U.S. vulnerability if it does. The next-best option would be a

[1] ISIL is known by several names, including ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham) and IS, or the Islamic State (reflecting its claim of state sovereignty over the territoriy it now controls). Below I use ISIL, but this is meant to signify the same entity others have described as ISIS or IS.

minimalist policy of containment only, with no direct military aid to the government of Iraq (GoI). Unconditional military aid is the least attractive of the available alternatives.

Each of these options affects, and is affected by, the civil war across Iraq's western border in Syria. U.S. interests in Iraq have long been affected by the Syrian war, and ISIL's establishment of a contiguous cross-border territory highlights this interconnection. As I argue below, the U.S. interests at stake in Iraq are largely regional issues affected as much by the Syrian war and its consequences as they are by events in Iraq per se. The U.S. government's ability to shape events in Syria, however, is even less than its limited influence in Iraq. Below I thus focus chiefly on U.S. policy toward the GoI, inasmuch as this is our main opportunity to affect outcomes in the region. But I treat U.S. stakes in a context that includes both conflicts.

I assess these options in four steps. First, I discuss the prognosis for the Iraq war in the absence of U.S. assistance to the GoI. Next I assess the U.S. interests at stake in Iraq and Syria. I then evaluate three classes of options for U.S. policy: unconditional military aid, conditional military aid, and containment. I conclude with a more detailed presentation of recommendations and implications.

The Prognosis in Iraq

Notwithstanding ISIL's rapid initial advance, they are unlikely to topple the government of Iraq. ISIL gains continue, but the rate of advance has slowed dramatically and the front is now stabilizing as more reliable Iraqi Army (IA) units have become engaged and, especially, as Shiite militias have entered the war on the government side. Rapid Shiite mobilization and Baghdad's large Shiite population will probably prevent ISIL from driving GoI forces from the capital or advancing southward much beyond it. The war's acute crisis phase is thus over: the Iraqi government will almost certainly survive.

But this does not portend a government offensive able to regain control over ISIL-occupied areas in the old Sunni Triangle. Even U.S. Army and Marine forces with massive air support found these areas difficult to control before 2008; this goal will remain beyond the GoI's reach for a long time to come.

Instead the war will increasingly settle into three zones of relative calm (a comparatively secure Shiite south, Sunni west/northwest, and Kurdish northeast) separated by shifting bands of contested territory. Suicide bombers and other infiltrators will occasionally penetrate opposing territory, but most violence will occur in the contested zones in between, whose location will ebb and flow with the fortunes of war, as we have seen in Syria (and in Iraq itself prior to 2008).

Wars of this kind are rarely short. Of 128 civil wars fought between 1945 and 2004, only one-fourth ended within two years. Datasets vary slightly with war definitions and other details, but most put the median duration of such wars at 7-10 years, with an important minority of conflicts dragging on for a generation or more.[2]

[2] James D. Fearon, "Why Do Some Civil Wars Last So Much Longer Than Others?" *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (May 2004), pp. 275-302; Christopher Paul et al., *Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies* (Washington DC: RAND, 2013); David Cunningham, "Veto Players and Civil War Duration," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (October 2006), pp. 875-892; David Collier, "Duration of Civil War," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2004), pp. 253-273.

Such wars end in two broad ways. The first, and more common, is for the stronger side to crush the weaker. Especially in ethno-sectarian identity wars like Iraq's, this can take a very long time: in a war of survival against a sectarian Shiite regime posing an apparent threat of genocide, Sunnis face little choice but to resist to the last cartridge, as others often have.

The other endgame is a negotiated settlement in the meantime. Settlement can shorten such wars. But this requires unusual conditions: the stronger side has to prefer compromise to outright victory in continued fighting; the weaker side must trust the government not to crush it after rebel disarmament; rebels willing to talk must survive counterattack by erstwhile allies who would rather fight on; and both sides must trust the other to observe the agreed terms.[3]

To meet these conditions in Iraq will require, first, that the GoI be persuaded to accommodate Sunni concerns, and to make this accommodation credible to Sunnis. If ISIL looks better than genocide at the hands of a Shiite GoI, then no settlement will be possible and Sunnis will fight to the bitter end. Second, Sunnis willing to negotiate must be able to survive ISIL counterattack. Al Qaeda in Iraq brutally attacked realigning Sunnis in the 2006-7 Anbar Awakening; ISIL will do the same. U.S. troops protected realigning Sunnis then; only a professionalized, capable, demonstrably non-sectarian IA – which does not now exist – would be available this time. And third, there will probably need to be outside guarantees from credible international parties to help stabilize any deal in the aftermath – Iraqis are very unlikely to trust other Iraqis to this purpose. If the war is to be shortened, U.S. policy will need to promote these conditions.

U.S. Stakes in Iraq

Some now say we have no important interests in Iraq and so should stay out. Others say our interests are vital (though they rarely favor a major U.S. ground mission to secure them). In fact, our stakes lie in that awkward middle ground between the vital and the negligible.

These stakes fall into three categories: countering terrorism, preventing humanitarian disaster, and averting economic damage. As for the first, ISIL clearly means us ill, and deploys several thousand foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, some of whom hold Western passports and could return as terrorists. The terrorism peril in Iraq is real, and cannot be ignored.

But ISIL terrorism is not a threat to the American way of life. A major terrorist attack would pose grave political risks for any elected official on whose watch it occurred – but without WMD, its objective threat to U.S. life and property would be limited. Terrorism has never posed existential costs to any Western

[3] Some have suggested partition as a third possible end state for Iraq. Some ethno-sectarian civil wars do end in partition, as the Balkan conflicts did. This is very unlikely in Iraq, however. There are several reasons for this, including the persistent sectarian intermingling of central Iraq: the 2006 fighting reduced, but did not eliminate this. The chief difficulty with partition in Iraq, however, is the economic unviability of the natural Sunni homeland. Unlike the Shiite south or Kurdish northeast of Iraq, Sunni western Iraq and eastern Syria has neither oil nor other natural resources in sufficient quantity. Without this, the rump Sunni state would face a future of either grinding poverty or vassal status as an economic ward of an outside power beyond the control of Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis. Sunnis are unlikely to accept this. Others may try to impose such a partition, but without Sunni compliance this would not end the fighting – it would merely convert a civil war into an international one. Such a result would serve neither U.S. nor Iraqi interests, and is not a viable means of ending the war.

state, nor has terrorism ever been a major contributor to aggregate morbidity-and-mortality in any Western society. Even post-1948 Israel has never seen a year in which terrorists killed more citizens than auto accidents did. This is not grounds for ignoring terrorism, but other dangers pose greater objective perils.

Iraq's humanitarian stakes are enormous. The Iraq war will probably look much like Syria's soon, and may in time look a lot like Iraq itself circa 2006. In Syria over 50,000 civilians have already died, with no end in sight; in Iraq more than 120,000 were killed between 2003 and 2011.[4] A renewed Iraq war of 7-10 years' duration could easily produce another 100,000 innocent lives lost. The United States has not often intervened militarily into ongoing civil wars on purely humanitarian grounds, but the scale of potential suffering here is large.

And far worse could be in store if Iraq's war spreads. Historically, civil wars of this kind often spill across borders. Of 142 civil wars fought between 1950 and 1999, fully 61 saw major military intervention by neighboring states at some point.[5] Subversion wherein states weaken rivals by supporting insurgency to kindle civil warfare is even more common.[6] The Iraq war may be especially vulnerable to such contagion dynamics given the deep Sunni-Shia faultline running throughout the region, the overarching regional proxy war already ongoing between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran, and the continuing spillover from Syria into its neighbors. Of course a truly regional war would require many infections; it is not the likeliest case. But the prospect cannot safely be excluded, the cumulative risk grows the longer the Iraq war drags on, and if the conflict does spread, even partially, the consequences multiply accordingly.[7]

Finally, there are important economic stakes in Iraq. U.S. economic exposure to Gulf oil shocks may be declining as efficiency improves and U.S. shale oil and gas develop, but serious risks will remain for the foreseeable future. Oil is a fungible, globally traded commodity, and regardless of the source of U.S.

---

[4] Fatality data are drawn from https://www.iraqbodycount.org/ and Laia Balcells, Lionel Beehner and Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, "How Should We Count the War Dead in Syria?" Washington Post Monkey Cage blog, May 1 2014: http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/05/01/how-should-we-count-the-war-dead-in-syria/

[5] Data are drawn from Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Friedman, and Stephen Long, "Civil War Intervention and the Problem of Iraq," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (March 2012), pp. 85-98; replication files are posted at http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/friedman/files/bfl_isq_data.zip. Note that these data use a less restrictive domain definition than those documented in note 2, thus including a larger number of lower-intensity conflicts as civil wars. This is conservative with respect to the intervention rate cited above, as intervention rates are typically higher in higher-intensity conflicts – hence the less-intense conflicts included in the data underlying the rate above would tend to depress that rate relative to a sample comprising more-intense wars; the sample in note 2 would thus presumably yield a higher intervention rate than the 43 percent figure (61 of 142 wars) cited above.

[6] Idean Salehyan, "The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (2010), pp. 493-515.

[7] A statistical analysis conducted before the outbreak of civil war in Syria assessed a greater than 20 percent probability that a renewed war in Iraq would spread beyond its borders to two or more neighboring states if Iraqi warfare lasted five years or more; arguably the current fighting in Iraq represents an initial stage in this process of contagion already, which would imply that the odds of further spread are now higher. See Biddle, Friedman, and Long, "Civil War Intervention and the Problem of Iraq," at pp. 94-96.

consumption, any major reduction in world supply will increase prices, both to the U.S. and our trading partners. A serious reduction in Gulf production would be a globally significant economic threat.

The cost, however, varies with the war's extent and duration. A seven-year war that cut Iraqi output to 2006 levels but did not spread could remove one million barrels a day (mbd) from world supply; by contrast a regionwide war that cut production by 50 percent across the GCC could remove 13 mbd or nearly 15% of worldwide production. There are many uncertainties in estimating effects from oil shocks, but the best available analysis suggests that the first case might increase oil prices by 8-10 percent and cut U.S. GDP by four-tenths of a percentage point. This would be regrettable, but manageable. The latter case is a very different story. It would exceed the largest previous Gulf oil shock (the 1973-4 OPEC embargo) by nearly a factor of four; the best available analysis suggests this might double world oil prices, cutting U.S. GDP by 3-5 percentage points.[8] At 2014 levels, this would imply $450-750 billion a year in lost output.

A long Iraq war would threaten just such a reduction. Insurgents have strong incentives to weaken rivals by targeting their war-supporting economy, and Gulf states' pipelines, pumping stations, and other oil infrastructure offer a natural target. In fact oil's war-supporting potential is a major incentive for contagion in the Gulf: a classical strategy for weakening Sunni rebels would be to foment Shiite unrest in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, embroiling the support base for Sunni rebels in a civil war of its own that would drain resources from Saudi proxies abroad. Or a deepening proxy war could persuade Iran to escalate by closing the Strait of Hormuz to weaken its Saudi foe. Sunnis face similar incentives versus Shiite infrastructure, and such dangers imperil every state in the region to at least some degree.

Taken together, these stakes are real but not existential. Of them, the economic stake poses the most direct threat to objective U.S. hard security interests. A regional war that cost the United States $450-750 billion a year in lost output would be a setback of major proportions. But even a long war might not spread, and even a war that spread might not engulf the entire region; a localized war with a limited effect on Iraqi production would pose much smaller stakes. And even the worst case, bad as it would be, would not be another Great Depression. The net result is a war that is too important to ignore, but not important enough to warrant total commitment or unlimited liability.

Policy Options

U.S. options can be divided into three broad categories: (1) unconditional assistance to the GoI, (2) conditional assistance, and (3) containment without direct intervention in Iraq. Either the second or third are defensible, though the second is preferable.

Unconditional assistance could include arms transfers, training, advising, intelligence cooperation, increased surveillance overflights, or airstrikes. At best, these would affect the war's outcome at the margin. The GoI will likely survive the initial crisis without further U.S. aid; if so, this will become a long, grinding war fought in contested populated areas with intermingled and mostly irregular combatants. No plausible

[8] Kenneth R. Vincent, "The Economic Costs of Persian Gulf Oil Supply Disruptions," in Charles L. Glaser and Rosemary A. Kelanic, eds., *Crude Calculus: Reexamining the Energy Logic of the U.S. Military Commitment to the Persian Gulf* (Stanford University Press, forthcoming), ch. 3.

U.S. aid will change this. From 2003-8 the United States contributed vastly more air power than it is likely to do today – plus more than 100,000 heavily armed U.S. troops on the ground – yet even this failed to resolve a similar war promptly or decisively. A much smaller U.S. contribution now is very unlikely to transform such a conflict, especially when teamed with an Iraqi ground force of distinctly limited capability. In fact, such aid could make things worse by reducing Iraqi incentives to reform and professionalize the IA, or to accommodate Sunni interests politically. This is because either policy poses real risks for Maliki or his successors; if American airstrikes can at least keep Sunnis at bay, then why gamble with inclusiveness or replace handpicked loyalists in the officer corps with trained professionals whose apolitical selection could create an army unwilling to act as Maliki's political enforcers, and whose independence of mind might even pose a threat of coup d'etat? Simple assistance without enforceable conditions would thus merely lengthen the war by forestalling any meaningful settlement prospect – this would undermine U.S. interests, not advance them.

The real value of military assistance would be if it is *conditional* and can therefore be used as leverage to encourage the GoI to (1) create a professional, inclusive IA which could defend realigning Sunnis from ISIL counterattack and persuade Sunnis that they could trust it, and (2) accommodate Sunni interests more broadly through the political process. If so, this might shorten the war by building the preconditions for settlement, thereby limiting the damage to U.S. economic and humanitarian interests. Hence the second major option is to offer aid, but only on the condition that the GoI implements the necessary military and political reforms.

Conditionality's importance stems from the unusual circumstances needed to settle civil wars before they run their natural course. In particular, an early settlement to the Iraq war would require that the GoI exploit the natural fissures within the Sunni alliance – especially, those between an Islamist radical ISIL core and their more-secular Sunni tribal allies – splitting the latter from the former, negotiating with the latter, and isolating radical hold-outs who would then be too weak to wage war. This is essentially how Iraq's violence fell in 2007: in the Anbar Awakening and ensuing Sons of Iraq (SOI) movement, Sunni tribal leaders split off from their erstwhile radical allies in al Qaeda's Iraqi affiliate AQI (Al Qaeda in Iraq) and negotiated local ceasefires with U.S. military commanders. But splits of this kind are almost always violent. Factionalism is a constant danger in insurgent movements, and defection by dissident factions threatens the others with annihilation by larger, better-equipped state militaries when the defectors tell the state what they know.[9] Self-preservation thus compels insurgents to put down incipient defections with brutal violence lest the defection spread, and radical Islamists like AQI have been unusually ruthless in this regard. For such a divide-and-negotiate strategy to succeed, would-be Sunni dissidents would thus require credible defenders to protect them from brutal counterattack by those still aligned with ISIL. In 2007, the U.S. surge provided such defenders. American troops were never liked, but when deployed among the Iraqi population in sufficient numbers they were able to negotiate local deals with would-be SOIs; Sunni tribal leaders who were willing to trust Americans in ways they would not trust Shiite IA leadership then gave the Americans crucial intelligence on AQI cell structure, whereabouts of bomb-making factories and safe-houses, and AQI roadside bomb sites. The combination of Sunni tribal knowledge of AQI and U.S. military firepower then

[9] See, for example, Paul Staniland, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Insurgent Fratricide, Ethnic Defection, and the Rise of Pro-State Paramilitaries," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (February 2012), pp. 16–40; and Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

quickly rolled up insurgent hold-outs and AQI, the insurgency shrank rapidly, and violence plummeted.[10] But for this to work in the future, an alternative to the U.S. military must be found. Today's IA cannot play this role: it is deeply sectarian and politicized, and will not be trusted by potential Sunni dissidents in ways that the U.S. military was in 2007. Nor will most Sunnis be willing to trust a sectarian GoI to respect their interests even if they could survive ISIL counterattack. For a 2007-like realignment to allow a negotiated settlement this time around will thus require both political accommodation by the GoI and a visibly, reliably professionalized and non-sectarian Iraqi Army that can credibly defend realigning Sunnis from ISIL counterattack. Given the political risks a truly professionalized military poses to Maliki or his successors, however, this kind of reform will not happen naturally or automatically – it will require effective outside pressure. And this will require leverage.

But this leverage is not inherent in the simple fact of U.S. aid or the scale of U.S. assistance. Merely providing aid does not create leverage – only if aid is conditional, with strings attached and a credible threat to withdraw it if the conditions are unmet, does aid yield leverage.[11] Unconditional aid gives the recipient no incentive to adopt policies they would rather avoid – if the same U.S. aid is forthcoming anyway, why adopt unpleasant policies preferred by Americans? For the aid to produce GoI policy change, it must be clear to the GoI that the aid will only be provided if the reforms are undertaken – and that the aid will be withdrawn if the GoI subsequently backslides or reneges on promises of change.

And this implies that assistance should, wherever possible, be provided in revocable ways that can be turned on, or off, by degree. In 2007, U.S. logistical support to the Iraqi army and police served this purpose well: if Maliki refused to fire sectarian brigade commanders, those brigades could be denied fuel, food, or ammunition until he did.[12] Once we created an independent IA logistical system we forfeited this opportunity for leverage. We should avoid similar mistakes this time around. And a real ability to walk away is critical if the USG is to avoid being drawn into an escalatory quagmire should initial aid fail to end the war. Perhaps the greatest risk of any U.S. assistance to the GoI is mission-creep and escalation if limited efforts fail. Revocable means, framed in conditional terms with periodic marginal withdrawal for demonstration to the GoI, are an important hedge against this risk.[13]

---

[10] For a more detailed account, see Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Friedman and Jacob Shapiro, "Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?" *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Summer 2012), pp. 7-40.

[11] Empirical research shows little evidence that unconditional U.S. military aid causes recipients to adopt policies favored by the United States; in fact, unconditional aid recipients are *less* likely than other states to align policies with U.S. preferences: Patricia L. Sullivan, Brock Tessman, and Xiaojun Li, "US Military Aid and Recipient State Cooperation," *Foreign Policy Analysis* Vol. 7 (2011) , pp. 275–294.

[12] On the use of coercive leverage by David Petraeus and Ryan Crocker in Iraq in 2007, see e.g., Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), pp. 263-4, 341; Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), pp. 81, 156, 261, 331.

[13] A detailed discussion of specific military options is beyond my scope here, but it is worth briefly comparing some of the relative merits of transferring equipment, training Iraqi troops, and flying U.S. airstrikes in support of Iraqi forces in this context. In particular, airstrikes have the advantage of being entirely within U.S. control for the duration of the effort. If the GoI backslides on political commitments, U.S. airstrikes can be reduced or withheld, then restored when GoI policies change. By contrast, providing Iraq with an air force of its own by transferring attack helicopters, high-performance fixed wing aircraft, or armed

Even then, real leverage is proportional to the scale of the carrots that are offered if the conditions are met; these carrots are not going to be enormous in 2014. Few have proposed returning a force of 100,000 American troops to help the GoI wage the emerging Iraqi civil war, and none of the options now commonly discussed are anywhere near this scale or importance. Given the real limits on the foreseeable scope of U.S. assistance, the leverage that will result will be correspondingly limited.

A realistic strategy would therefore have to be long-term and incremental: we are unlikely to have the leverage needed to produce rapid change. The achievable best case is likelier to be gradual reform encouraged by persistent pressure in the form of conditional assistance. Gradual reform is less threatening to the Iraqi leadership, and as such may be achievable with pressure on a scale that we can actually bring to bear. But this will require a long-term politico-military campaign aimed as much at the structure of the IA and the politics of the GoI as it is on the battlefield struggle with ISIL. In fact, the potential political leverage deriving from U.S. military aid, modest as it may be, is its primary contribution – no realistic scale of U.S. aid can end the war quickly or decisively on the battlefield. If U.S. military aid is to have any meaningful effect on the duration or destructiveness of the emerging civil war it will thus be through its potential effect on the GoI's incentives to reform. And this will require a complex, persistent, incremental effort that integrates military tools with political goals. As such, conditional military assistance must be seen as a long-term project wherein U.S. influence will be resisted at every step, and where the conditions will need to be enforced repeatedly through credible threats made credible by periodic, actual withdrawal of some or all assistance. If this is beyond the capacity of the U.S. government to manage, then we would be better served by withholding further military aid altogether: the result of unconditional aid could be worse than no U.S. military assistance at all.

Policies to create leaverage in Iraq must also contend with Iran's ability to replace the U.S. if the GoI rejects U.S. conditions. This is not grounds for offering unconditional U.S. aid. But the GoI's Iran card does make U.S. leverage harder, and it means the U.S. should try to forestall the problem if it chooses to assist the GoI. Two approaches to this end warrant consideration. First, it is worth exploring policy coordination with Tehran to reduce the GoI's ability to play us off against each other. Second, it is worth considering the careful use of conditional sticks to accompany conditional carrots for leverage with the GoI. The GoI may be able to get assistance carrots from Iran instead of the U.S., but if the U.S. is prepared to impose costs on Baghdad if reforms are not undertaken this would be harder for the GoI to offset with Iranian aid. Such costs could include subtle U.S. signals of willingness to support greater Kurdish autonomy – or even Kurdish independence if this can be pursued without undue damage to U.S.-Turkish relations. Or such costs could include a major expansion in U.S. military assistance to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) or other relatively

---

drones offers continuing leverage only if the Iraqis lack the ability to support the aircraft themselves – real leverage requires a credible U.S. threat to withdraw support or maintenance in ways that would ground the aircraft if the GoI fails to sustain reforms. Providing a self-sufficient logistical infrastructure for sustaining such airpower would reduce U.S. costs, but it would also undermine any political leverage achievable from the aid. Training poses similar complexities. Creating a self-sufficient IA may or may not improve its battlefield performance, but it does not convey leverage. Training in perishable skills thus has very different political properties than more persistent skill development. If the U.S. is serious about using aid to develop leverage, then any aid must thus be assessed in its political as well its military dimensions – and the former is more important than the latter.

moderate Sunni rebel groups in Syria.[14] Baghdad is unlikely to draw fine distinctions among varieties of Sunni armed groups, all of which it sees as enemies. Moreover, Baghdad is effectively allied with Assad in Syria, and would surely view U.S. heavy weapons for Assad's enemies as a threat to both regimes. Of course the United States could not credibly threaten to punish Baghdad directly if Maliki turned to Iran for military assistance without Washington's conditions – but a combination of diplomatic gestures on Kurdistan and military aid to moderate Sunnis in Syria might nonetheless offer a prospect to inflict indirect costs that might help discourage a GoI turn to Iran and preserve some degree of U.S. leverage thereby.

Nor is Maliki's status central to U.S. leverage. Iraqi sectarianism is structural and systematic, not personal. Unless the underlying GoI interest calculus is changed by persistent, systematic U.S. conditionality, the next Iraqi PM will face the same incentives Maliki does. And the worst possible outcome is to visibly explore alternatives to Maliki without actually deposing him. In Afghanistan, this practice poisoned U.S. relations with Karzai in 2009; if the USG decides that Maliki's personality is somehow uniquely problematic then the U.S. must go all-in on his replacement and do everything possible short of violence to produce a different leader.

The third broad U.S. policy option is containment. This is not exclusive of the other two, and in fact it would reinforce U.S. leverage in conditional aid by enhancing the credibility of U.S. threats to walk away if the GoI declines reform. It should be pursued regardless of decisions on U.S. military aid. But it could also stand alone as an alternative to deeper engagement. In this role it would sacrifice whatever prospects that conditional aid might offer to shorten the war. But in exchange it avoids the downside risks of U.S. military assistance: it would not hazard entanglement and mission creep as any military aid would, and it would not discourage GoI/IA reform as unconditional aid would do.

Some containment measures are already USG policy, such as aid to neighboring states in managing refugee flows or diplomatic pressure on neighbors to limit meddling. These efforts could be expanded,

[14] Many have long argued for greater U.S. assistance to the FSA, and it is now U.S. policy to provide weapons and training to the group. This could be expanded, whether as part of a larger strategy for shaping GoI policy or as a means of securing U.S. aims in Syria per se. Aid to the FSA has many limitations in the latter role, however. Nonstate actors' military capability is shaped powerfully by their internal politics – in fact, such actors' politics are a much stronger determinant of their military power than their weapons, equipment, or training. And the FSA has deeply problematic internal politics, characterized by factionalism, rivalry, inability to coordinate policies, and inability to cooperate in pursuit of common goals. Given this, it is very unlikely that expanded aid will enable them to topple Assad or destroy ISIL. Instead, empirical research mostly suggests that expanded aid to the FSA would just prolong the war and increase its casualty toll: as a general matter, increased aid to one civil war combatant rarely enables decisive victory when the other side also has outside support. Instead, aid to one side typically spurs the other side's patron to increase its aid in turn. This yields greater firepower on both sides, which typically increases the violence, lengthens the war, and increases the casualty toll, but rarely yields a quick victory for either combatant: see, e.g., Patrick M Regan, Third-Party Inteventions and the Duration of Intrastate Conflicts, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vo. 46, No. 1 (2002), pp. 55-73; Dylan Balch-Lindsay and Andrew Enterline, "Killing Time: The World Politics of Civil War Duration, 1820-1992," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 44 (2000), pp. 615-642; Nicholas Sambanis and Inbrahim A. Elbadawi, "External Interventions and the Duration of Civil Wars." Policy Research Working Papers, World Bank, September 2000. In the Syrian case, increased U.S., Saudi, Qatari or other aid to Sunni rebels would give Iran a strong incentive to increase its aid to Assad in turn, prolonging the stalemate but at higher levels of violence. U.S. aid to the FSA might help it avert potential conquest by ISIL should the latter grow strong enough to threaten this, but without some larger political strategy for war termination it is thus unlikely to achieve much more than this minimal goal, and could easily just prolong the war – which would increase the risk of contagion and risk undermining U.S. policy aims rather than advancing them.

however. Others, such as encouragement to Saudi Arabia to invest in less-vulnerable pipelines to circumvent the Strait of Hormuz or to accommodate Shiite interests in the Eastern Province to ward off Iraqi contagion, would be worthy but are unlikely to succeed given limited U.S. leverage in the region.

Among the most helpful containment policies might be to expand U.S. and allied strategic petroleum reserves (SPRs) to reduce U.S. economic vulnerability, and to explore the implementation requirements for their effective use. IEA procedures for coordinating international releases, for example, were designed for a different era; it would be prudent to review these to determine their adequacy for a much larger, longer-duration problem in the event of Iraqi contagion. The politics and market psychology of such releases could be complex; strategies to encourage calm may need advance preparation and test. Legal constraints such as prohibitions on exporting U.S. SPR stocks may warrant review to ensure that any releases yield maximum price restraint for a fungible commodity. SPR expansion would not be cheap, but compared to the cost of a major disruption it could be a wise investment. And unlike many other options, the USG can shape its own SPR expansion and use without others' assent.

Recommendations and Implications

Overall, then, no matter what the United States does, the Iraq conflict is likely to become a long, ugly, ethno-sectarian civil war whose duration could easily run another 7-10 years, and which will probably last at least another 1-2 years regardless of U.S. policy.

Americans have important, but limited, interests at stake in this conflict. Unfortunately, however, none of the options available at this point offers a low-cost, high-reliability way to secure these interests.

The least-bad option is to play the long game and orient U.S. policy toward shaping conditions needed to shorten this long war: the appropriate U.S. policy objective should be to end the fighting within 2-4 years rather than 7-10. The best route to achieving this end is to build U.S. leverage over time via strictly conditional assistance designed to nudge the Iraqi government gradually toward inclusiveness and accommodation of legitimate Sunni interests. If successful, this policy can eventually set the conditions needed to drive wedges between Sunni factions, split the coalition between ISIL and secular Sunni insurgents, marginalize ISIL radicals, and settle the war before it runs its natural course.

But this will require sustained, systematic conditionality in any U.S. aid to the Iraqi government. A short term overreaction to apparent crisis that locks the United States into unconditional assistance would reinforce GoI sectarianism, lengthen the war rather than shorten it, and undermine U.S. interests.

An effective policy must also include measures to contain the war's damage to the U.S. economy. Damage mitigation is partly a matter of shortening the war, but it must also include efforts to contain its effects. In fact, containment – alone – is itself a defensible policy. Though its upside potential is limited, so are its downside risks. Conditional aid demands a long, complex, politico-military tug of war with the GoI that could make things worse if it fails, and entrap the U.S. in a quagmire; it exchange it offers some chance to shorten the war, but its risks are real. Containment alone is the next-best policy, and any conditional aid

strategy should include measures to contain the conflict and reduce U.S. vulnerability should containment fail.

The worst approach here is not under-reaction – it is over-reaction without conditionality. Assistance without conditions not only shares the risk of entrapment with conditional aid, it may actually make things worse by discouraging the GoI reforms needed to shorten the war. Among my most important recommendations is thus to avoid this worst-case policy, notwithstanding the inevitable calls from more hawkish voices to adopt it.