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To Defeat Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Stronger Counterterrorism Cooperation Needed

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Iraq faces major political, national security, and economic challenges that should be addressed by the new government that emerges from the April 30 elections. Last year, more than 7,800 civilians and 1,050 members of the security forces were killed in political violence and terrorist attacks, making it Iraq's deadliest year since 2008.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), formerly known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq, has staged a bloody comeback and seized large swaths of territory in western Iraq. Its leader has threatened attacks against the U.S. homeland, and it is recruiting foreign fighters in Syria who could carry out this threat. Washington urgently needs to step up cooperation with Iraq to address this mounting threat.

The Resurgence of al-Qaeda

Iraq's internal security severely deteriorated after the total withdrawal of U.S. troops in December 2011. Al-Qaeda forces, which had been degraded by U.S. and Iraqi security forces in an intensive counterterrorism campaign from 2006 to 2011, made a bloody comeback. The abrupt U.S. military exit greatly weakened Iraqi counterterrorism, intelligence gathering, and special-operations capabilities,

allowing al-Qaeda to revive in a more permissive environment.

The spillover of Syria's increasingly sectarian civil war has also fueled rising sectarian tensions in Iraq. But Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki also bears a considerable share of the blame for fostering a polarized political atmosphere that has pushed growing numbers of Sunnis into the arms of al-Qaeda. Within days of the U.S. troop withdrawal, he moved to consolidate his own power and that of his Shia coalition partners while marginalizing moderate Sunni political leaders.

Maliki also reneged on promises to support the Awakening movement, a Sunni tribal backlash against the brutal and indiscriminate violence of al-Qaeda. When Iraq's Sunni Arab minority protested against the increasingly sectarian policies of Maliki's Shia-dominated government, security forces forcibly suppressed the protests. ISIS exploited the sectarian crisis by seizing the city of Fallujah, a hotbed of Sunni Islamist insurgency. Iraq's army, handicapped by the loss of training and support after the U.S. pullout, has been unable to recapture Fallujah in the face of stiff resistance from ISIS, which has imported sophisticated weapons captured in Syria.

Closer U.S. Engagement Needed

Iraq's April 30 elections, the first since the U.S. withdrawal, offer an opportunity for a fresh start in addressing Iraq's festering problems. According to preliminary results, Maliki's State of Law coalition won the largest share of parliamentary seats: 92 out of a total of 328. Maliki must now cobble together a multi-party coalition government. These negotiations are likely to be protracted: It took nine months to form Iraq's last government after the 2010 elections.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
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The Obama Administration, which underestimated the threat posed by al-Qaeda in Iraq and overestimated Baghdad's ability to address political and security challenges, should step up its engagement with Iraqi leaders to help them stabilize an increasingly precarious political situation and defeat ISIS. Specifically, Washington should:

- **Provide arms and assistance to help Iraq defeat ISIS.** Washington and Baghdad share a common interest in defeating ISIS, whose leader threatened Americans with attacks “in the heart of your land” in July 2012. Washington should step up intelligence sharing and counterterrorism cooperation with Baghdad. The U.S. has sold Iraq small arms, M1A1 tanks, and Hellfire missiles. F-16 warplanes and Apache helicopter gunships are on order. Baghdad also wants to buy armed drones, but it would be unwise to transfer such sophisticated weapons unless Washington is certain that the Iraqi government will not use them against legitimate nonviolent opposition groups or pass the technology on to Iran. If Baghdad wants to deploy armed drones, then they should be kept under strict American control.
- **Press Maliki to reconcile with Iraq's Sunni Arab and Kurdish leaders.** Baghdad cannot kill its way out of the rekindled Sunni Arab insurgency. Washington should condition greater aid on the establishment of an inclusive new government that will make national reconciliation a paramount priority to defuse the poisonous sectarian politics that have enabled al-Qaeda's comeback. American diplomats should remain energetically engaged to leverage U.S. aid to broker agreements that will advance ethno-sectarian power-sharing with Sunnis and Kurds, reform the de-Baathification process, and encourage national reconciliation, perhaps through a version of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Washington should also help break the political deadlock over how to manage and share Iraq's oil wealth to defuse the growing crisis over Kurdish oil exports through a Turkish pipeline.
- **Normalize relations with Iraq's Kurdish political parties.** Iraqi Kurds were important U.S. allies in overthrowing Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in 2003 and remain an indispensable build-

ing block of Iraq's stability. The Kurdish region in northern Iraq has been relatively prosperous, secure, and stable, but it faces a growing threat from ISIS, which has launched a series of terrorist bombings and is reportedly recruiting Kurds in Syria to launch more attacks. The Kurds could play an important role in combating ISIS, but President Massoud Barzani, the leader of Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), cancelled a visit to Washington earlier this year because of the failure of the U.S. to remove a long-standing barrier to closer relations: the designation of Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party and the rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan as “Tier 3” organizations deemed to have provided material support to terrorists under the 2001 PATRIOT Act. The overly broad language of the PATRIOT Act automatically penalized the two organizations because they battled Iraq's national government. No distinctions were made about the nature of Saddam's dictatorship or whether the U.S. supported the groups against his regime. Members of the groups were barred from obtaining visas to travel to the U.S. unless they received waivers. Both the Bush and Obama Administrations promised the KRG that they would correct this anomaly but have failed to fulfill that promise. Congress should take action to remove the Kurdish groups from the Tier 3 category to clear the way for enhanced Kurdish cooperation in fighting ISIS and stabilizing Iraq.

A Crucial Theater

Iraq is a crucial theater in the war against al-Qaeda and a key oil producer whose surging oil exports are increasingly important for the world oil market. The Obama Administration has neglected to adequately address the metastasizing threat of al-Qaeda in Iraq. It should work much more closely with the new Iraqi government to combat ISIS and implement a comprehensive national reconciliation strategy to drain away support for the Sunni insurgency and stabilize Iraq.

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