

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## The Way Forward in Iraq

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The situation in Iraq remains grave. Spiraling violence, political instability, and a humanitarian crisis caused by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) could impact U.S. vital interests. The Obama Administration has an obligation to take responsible action. Congress should insist the President take immediate, suitable, and appropriate measures to safeguard American interests.

Further, President Obama was right when he said, “I don’t think we’re going to solve this problem in weeks. This is going to be a long-term project.” Therefore, Congress needs to look to the long term, ensuring that the instruments of national power are sufficient to stem the rise of a new global transnational terrorist threat and spreading war in the Middle East, which could lead to greater and even more dangerous and destructive conflict.

### Why the U.S. Should Care

Two key U.S. interests are at risk as a result of the current situation. The first is the defense of the American homeland, as well as American assets and individuals overseas. For many months, pipelines have been funneling foreign fighters into the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. One recent estimate put the number at over 10,000, including over 3,000 Westerners.

Recruiting foreign fighters is a well-established tactic employed by Islamist extremist groups. Fighters not only add to the ranks undertaking terrorist acts, insurgency, and military campaigns in the operational area; they also become instruments to spread terrorist violence—establishing or inspiring terrorist cells in other countries, spreading propaganda, and providing a cadre of leadership and trained technical advisors for extremist movements in other countries.

As documented by the 9/11 Commission, a base of operations in Afghanistan was a prerequisite for the planning and execution of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Even without a new established base of operations on the scale of what al-Qaeda established in Afghanistan, Islamists have plotted at least 63 attacks against the U.S. since 9/11, including three that were successful. A terrorist state in Iraq, committed to attacking the West, would represent an even greater threat against the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests and allies in the West. This base would have more resources and greater access to the West than al-Qaeda did prior to 9/11.

A second U.S. interest is the adverse consequences that could result from the war in Iraq spilling over into other countries and destabilizing the region. In particular, one consequence of the current insurgent campaign is the potential to spark a broader sectarian conflict that could engulf U.S. allies in the Middle East and cause worldwide disruptions.

The President’s focus on humanitarian interests in the Iraq conflict misses the big picture. The best way for the U.S. to mitigate human suffering in Iraq is to help restore peace and stability in the country.

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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at  
<http://report.heritage.org/ib4262>

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## Why the U.S. Should Worry

Three issues raise immediate concern for U.S. interests.

First, ISIS has proven to be a formidable threat, using financial resources, military capability, and information warfare to establish a foothold in a significant portion of Iraq. Further, reported abuses within the country and threats against the West suggest that ISIS represents a threat at least as serious as that posed by the al-Qaeda network.

Second, the inability of the Iraqis to establish a stable and responsible central government means that Iraq could permanently fragment. The devolution of Iraq would likely spur further sectarian competition and economic disruption and create new opportunities for extremist activity.

Third, the collapse of the Iraqi military in the field leaves the country without an effective non-sectarian security force to provide for public safety, let alone deal with the ISIS invasion.

## Next Steps

### 1. The U.S. should keep Kurdistan in the fight.

This region of the country is an irreplaceable bulwark against Islamist expansion and a critical contributor to rebuilding the Iraqi economy.

**2. Iraqis need a stable unity government in Baghdad.** Without a government committed to representing all Iraqis and reestablishing sovereignty over all Iraqi territory, saving Iraq will be an almost impossible task. Stability in Baghdad is a prerequisite for getting effective Iraqi security forces back in the fight.

**3. Remember Jordan.** Jordan is a keystone of stability in the region. It would be a tragedy if the conflict in Iraq spilled over and destabilized this small but important country.

**4. Worry about Iran.** Iran remains an active state sponsor of terrorism with a terrible human rights record and a penchant for meddling in Iraqi affairs. Further, despite international efforts, significant concerns remain over the Iranian nuclear program. The U.S. should be working to marginalize Iran's influence in the region and particularly in Iraq.

## Congress Can Help

Congress should:

- Urge the President to help the Iraqi people deal with the threat of ISIS.
- Work with the President in establishing a coalition of friends and allies to vigorously combat the terrorist pipelines bringing foreign fighters into and out of Iraq.
- Refuse to endorse or support any agreement that does not eliminate concerns over an Iranian nuclear weapons program. Further, Congress should work to reestablish the strongest possible sanctions regime.
- Review the recently released report of the National Defense Panel and resolve the critical shortfalls it identifies in military capabilities and long-term readiness that will be required to protect U.S. vital interests in the Middle East and other parts of the world.

## First, Stop Losing

The first step in winning any war is to stop losing. The U.S. should assist the Iraqis in taking back their country and winning a future that promises peace and prosperity rather than violence and oppression.

These steps will not resolve the immediate crisis in Iraq, but they are the necessary first steps in taking the long, painful road back to security, stability, and prosperity in the region.

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