

How to Save Iraq and Honor American Sacrifice

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The disaster in Iraq has deepened and crystallized over the past 10 days. Terrorist forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS, seized the Mosul Dam, the country's largest and most important source of hydroelectric power, and overran several more cities in northern Iraq, including Sinjar. ISIS pushed back the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, exposing the gravity of one more corrupt decision by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki —his egregious failure to arm the Kurds so they could at least defend themselves.

We now see how unwise the U.S. policy was to trust Mr. Maliki, who resigned Thursday after eight years of misrule. But that should have come as no surprise. Middle East leaders warned us that Mr. Maliki's rank sectarianism and close ties to Tehran could divide Iraq and draw the country into a catastrophe.

Mr. Maliki's failure to unify Iraq's diverse populations is the chief cause of the current crisis, but Washington bears some blame for not taking timely action that could have limited this summer's chaos. The Obama administration could have maintained a limited military training presence in Iraq after 2011; could have acted in Syria last year when the chemical weapons "red line" was crossed; and could have insisted that Mr. Maliki arm the Kurds. But what matters more is what the U.S. can do now.

ISIS's seizure of Sinjar aggravated an already desperate refugee crisis in northern Iraq, forcing tens of thousands of members of the Yazidi religious sect to flee persecution and death. This latest in a 60-day spate of ISIS-inflicted horrors elicited limited military operations by the U.S., with airstrikes under way since last Thursday. This was a welcome response, and it appears to have eased at least temporarily the Yazidi refugee crisis, but ISIS is relentless and we should be under no illusions about what might lie ahead.

The terrorists' assault on the Kurdish north is reminiscent of the conditions that led to Operation Provide Comfort in northern Iraq in 1991, a U.S.-led, NATO-supported humanitarian mission that saved hundreds of thousands of Kurdish refugees from attacks by Saddam Hussein. The effort ultimately required an engagement of five years. President Obama recently said that current U.S. operations in Iraq could "take a while," and he is right. But there are lessons from Operation Provide Comfort that can be applied immediately.

These lessons teach that more must be done—quickly and multilaterally—to save Iraq from a division that could legitimize a terrorist state in the heart of the Middle East. If Iraq is to survive intact, it must do the following:

First, Prime Minister-designate Haider al-Abadi must rapidly form a new government. He is a well-respected member of Iraq's Parliament, having served since 2005. Mr. Abadi should create an inclusive ruling coalition, appoint a new and diverse cabinet, and appoint effective ministers of defense and the interior, which Mr. Maliki failed to do.

Second, Mr. Abadi must restore relations between Baghdad and Iraq's Kurdish and Sunni populations. Without unity of command and effort, the fight against ISIS will fail. Repairing Mr. Maliki's breaches may require strategic concessions such as allowing the Kurds to keep Kirkuk and permitting the Sunnis to form their own region under the constitution.

Third, Iraq must promptly implement, with U.S. and international support, a robust and coherent battle strategy to destroy ISIS. The main elements of America's contribution should include:

- Robust support to and expansion of humanitarian missions, and arming the Kurds directly with sufficient weaponry to ensure that they can defend their region.
- Immediate and greatly expanded aid and assistance to the new Iraqi government.
- A special envoy to ensure direct and immediate communications with Baghdad and with Kurdish, Sunni and Shiite leaders (including tribal sheikhs).
- Intelligence that enables the effective targeting of ISIS command and control.
- Convincing regional leaders that ISIS must be denounced and denied a permanent presence in Iraq.

While we should act multilaterally, we must expand American efforts or risk the continued existence of a terrorist Islamic State and a permanently Balkanized Iraq. Further action might include an Operation Provide Comfort-like mission to rescue Iraq's threatened refugees, an acceleration of aid and arms provision to Baghdad and Erbil, close air support to Iraqi and Kurdish operations, and an aggressive diplomatic initiative to unify the region against ISIS.

On this last point, the U.S. should offer to be an honest broker at a strategic conference that engages Mr. Abadi and his new team with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Turkey and our European allies. Ideally, the conference would produce a joint statement condemning ISIS and agreement on a plan to defeat the terrorists and restore Iraq's territorial integrity.

But securing the Kurdish north should be an immediate priority. Operation Provide Comfort succeeded in part because it involved 25,000 troops from several nations. Saddam Hussein's military knew better than to take them on. The Obama administration should not rule out a similar effort. The U.S. could also remove the absurd and anachronistic designation of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan as Tier Three terrorist organizations. Doing so would be an act of goodwill that would resonate with the beleaguered Kurds.

The crisis in Iraq is several orders of magnitude worse than those we faced in 1991 or at any time since the 2003 invasion. The U.S.—and our allies in Europe and the Middle East—must help Prime Minister-designate Abadi save Iraq. The consequences of failure are too great to opt out.

For the Iraqi people who hope for peace, for all the U.S. service personnel who made such heroic sacrifices in Iraq over the past 23 years, and for U.S. national security, this is the right thing to do.