



# 6 Steps the Trump Administration Should Take in Iraq

By Andrew Kim, Daniel Benaim, and Hardin Lang February 13, 2017

The ongoing battle to retake Iraq from the Islamic State, or IS, also known as ISIS or ISIL, is one of the most dynamic foreign policy challenges that the Trump administration confronts as it takes office. A fierce fight is underway to recapture Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul, with American soldiers operating near the frontlines of a bewilderingly complicated battle space. Major questions remain regarding how Mosul will be stabilized and governed once the city is liberated, and how a still-fractured Iraq can approach the enduring challenge of national reconciliation.

President Donald Trump has issued a new executive order requesting an anti-IS strategy in 30 days.<sup>1</sup> But the new president has already undercut America's position in Iraq through his words and deeds. He has repeated his campaign calls for the United States to take Iraq's oil as spoils of war, including in front of a memorial to fallen Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA, officers.<sup>2</sup> And his first major action related to Iraq—an executive order restricting Iraqis' travel to America—insults the nation's Iraqi partners who have been at the frontline of the fight against IS and weakens U.S. influence in Iraq.<sup>3</sup>

The Trump administration's reckless rhetoric on Iran, including Trump's accusation that Iran is "taking over more and more of Iraq," undercuts the anti-IS campaign and undermines broader efforts to counter Iran's malign regional influence.<sup>4</sup> The 2003 Iraq war ended a U.S. policy of dual containment of Iran and Iraq, and the fallout from the Iraq war contributed to Iran's rising influence across the region. More than a decade later, however, Iraqi nationalism remains strong, and the recent enhanced U.S.-Iraqi cooperation in countering IS has helped reaffirm Iraq as an independent actor not beholden to any other regional forces, including Iran. Trump's saber-rattling against Iran risks making Iraq a battleground for the United States and Iran. It heightens the chances of conflict between U.S. troops and Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia militants—an outcome that would set back the campaign against IS and quickly wear out America's welcome in Iraq.

The time is now for President Trump to change course and set a more responsible path for U.S.-Iraqi relations. His team will confront policy decisions in its first 100 days that will have consequences for years to come. The good news is that the new administration inherits an anti-IS campaign with considerable momentum. President

Barack Obama left behind a global coalition on the cusp of a major military victory in Mosul.<sup>5</sup> With U.S. and coalition support, Iraqis have already liberated most of their country and are now degrading remaining IS sanctuaries.<sup>6</sup>

Trump's challenge will be to correct his early missteps, see the last administration's effort through to its conclusion, and chart a stable course for post-IS Iraq. To this end, the Trump administration should take the following six steps.

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## 1. Treat Iraqis fighting IS with respect and reassure the Iraqi government of continued U.S. commitment

Despite having retired generals in his cabinet who have military experience in Iraq, President Trump remains an unknown quantity to Iraqi political leaders; many have concerns about his rhetoric. The president's incendiary comments about Islam, torture, and stealing Iraq's oil all play directly into the hands of Shia hardliners and Iranian-backed militias pushing for the United States to withdraw again from Iraq.<sup>7</sup> Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi's ability to partner with America against IS depends on maintaining a degree of political support from a range of Iraqi politicians. Trump's recent actions isolate Al-Abadi and empower those Iraqis who seek to curry favor with Iran at America's expense. Many Iraqis rightly view the travel ban as an insult to the sacrifices they and their country have made to fight IS with the help of the U.S. military. In short, Trump's early rhetoric and policy decisions jeopardize the hard fought gains made by Americans risking their lives on the ground.

Trump needs to reverse course quickly and reach out to Iraqis as partners. First and foremost, he should immediately rescind his executive order banning travel from Iraq and six other countries to the United States. He should then send a trusted emissary to Iraq to reassure Iraqi leaders that the United States will not abandon them. He should also designate a senior official to oversee Iraq policy, much as President Obama did with Vice President Joe Biden. Preferably, this individual would be someone whom the Iraqis already know and trust. Trump should also explicitly disavow his demand that America take Iraq's oil. It is vital to the security of U.S. servicemen and women inside Iraq that Trump sends a clear message to Iraqis that American troops are on their soil at the request of the Iraqi government to fight IS, not to take their national resources. The Trump team should also exercise extreme caution in pursuing any policy revisions that increase the risk of civilian casualties. Loosening precautions may offer expediency on the battlefield, but it risks far greater costs to the overall counterterrorism mission by alienating Sunni partners.

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## 2. Finalize plans for a follow-on military mission

After rectifying his early unforced errors, the single most pressing decision facing President Trump on Iraq is whether to keep U.S. soldiers in the country for a follow-on mission after the defeat of IS. The U.S. military presence in Iraq has expanded incrementally since mid-2014, and now includes more than 6,000 personnel at Al Asad and Taqaddam air bases in Anbar; Qayarah Air Base near Mosul; and Joint Operations Centers in Baghdad and Erbil.<sup>8</sup> The overall mission has also expanded to include close air support, fire support, logistical assistance, high-value targeting, and embedded U.S. forces behind the frontlines.

Even after IS is pushed out from Iraqi cities, much of this U.S. military support will still be needed to help provide enduring security. Two years ago, the Iraqi army suffered the most stunning collapse of any modern military force in recent memory.<sup>9</sup> With help from the American-led anti-IS coalition, the Iraqi military has since improved and made impressive gains against IS. But Iraqi security forces have yet to demonstrate their ability to protect these gains without assistance, and the battle for Mosul is taking a terrible toll on the units in which America has invested the most time and money.<sup>10</sup>

The U.S. has yet to secure Iraqi assent for a U.S. follow-on force after Mosul has been liberated.<sup>11</sup> The Trump administration will be entering negotiations at a time when American leverage in Iraq is already on the decline. Some Iraqi leaders have already come under pressure to reduce the U.S. military footprint. Prime Minister Al-Abadi has indicated that, “The number of trainers and advisers will be reduced immediately after the liberation of Mosul.”<sup>12</sup> The Trump administration should expect Shia hardliners and Iranian proxies to aggressively seek to derail a follow-on presence, and Iraqi backlash to hosting U.S. military will likely intensify due to the Trump administration’s restrictions on Iraqis coming to the United States.

The Trump administration should therefore quickly assemble options for a continued international military presence to advise and assist Iraqi forces. This presence should help the Iraqis secure major population centers and push IS out of any remaining safe havens. It should also continue to train and equip various Iraqi and Kurdish forces at training centers already up and running across the country. The United States should help encourage these forces to work together to form a lasting partnership to secure Iraq. A continued U.S. presence will also provide a key regional platform for coalition efforts to combat IS in Syria. The exact number and mission would need to be finely calibrated with the Iraqis. But 3,000 to 5,000 troops should be sufficient, while remaining small enough to avoid triggering Iraqi sensitivities.

Such arrangements should be made quickly, before Iraq’s 2018 election campaign begins and further politicizes the issue of a U.S. presence. Unfortunately, President Trump’s antagonizing words and actions have made the political task before Iraqis who wish to see a continued U.S. presence more difficult. The lesson of 2011 is that Iraqi leaders cannot be expected to push such an agreement through Iraq’s legislature. Instead, the

U.S. military could remain at the invitation of the Iraqi government, codified under the same exchange of letters that protects the current deployment. The Trump administration must prepare for the possibility that a less friendly prime minister could emerge from the 2018 elections and face pressure to turn away from Washington. At that point, U.S. leverage to protect its core interests in Iraq will be highest if the terms of its military partnership are already in place.

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### 3. Support reconciliation through decentralization and other measures that empower Sunni Arab communities

Support for reconciliation must be a top priority for the new administration's Iraq policy. One lesson of recent years is that U.S. military action alone cannot secure long-term stability if Iraqi leaders are unable to heal their divided politics and address the grievances of the Iraqi people.<sup>13</sup> To date, U.S. backing for reconciliation has included support for the devolution of authority and resources to local government; efforts to mobilize Sunni Arabs and integrate them into the security forces; and support for legislation like the amnesty law that passed last August.<sup>14</sup> But much more urgently needs to be done, as campaign politics in advance of Iraq's 2017 provincial and 2018 national elections could further divide the country.

A key priority will be to demonstrate tangibly to Sunni Arab communities that they have a stake in the future of the Iraq. The Trump administration should consider additional resources to support government decentralization, including through USAID's Taqadam program.<sup>15</sup> It should also accelerate efforts to recruit Sunni Arabs into the security forces through the U.S. Department of Defense's Iraq Train and Equip Fund. As the fighting winds down, the United States should push international coalition partners to strengthen their civilian assistance to Iraq, including support for displaced populations and stabilization in liberated communities. Finally, the administration may need to condition continued U.S. assistance on Iraqi progress on implementing the Iraqi government's formal reconciliation agenda. To facilitate these efforts, the U.S. Department of State should bolster its presence in Iraq, including through multiple diplomats of ambassadorial rank.

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### 4. Press for reforms to the Iraqi military that minimize Iranian influence

One of the biggest threats to reconciliation in Iraq comes from the rise of the Shia militias backed by Iran. While thousands of Sunni Arabs have joined the fight against IS, Shia recruits, mostly under the Popular Mobilization Force, or PMF, structure dominated by Iranian-backed militias, have grown significantly faster. Leaders of the PMF are pushing to formalize their power and structure for the long term.<sup>16</sup>

This would expand Iranian influence within Iraq and risk turning the PMF into an Iranian proxy along the lines of Hezbollah, threatening both Iraqi sovereignty and U.S. interests inside Iraq. It would also undercut attempts to craft a lasting balance of power between Iraq's sectarian and ethnic communities—an essential element of long-term stability. The Iraqi government must bring the PMF under the chain of command of Iraq's military, not under militia leaders who answer to Iran. It should restrict the PMF from engaging in military operations outside of Iraq and enhance transparency and accountability inside the PMF.

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## 5. Expand role for the anti-IS coalition and NATO

The 68 members of the global coalition against IS are all watching closely to see if the coalition will hold together. President Trump should publicly affirm his commitment to the global coalition and assure its members that they will be treated as full partners.

On the campaign trail, Trump said he wanted to work with NATO to fight terrorism.<sup>17</sup> Iraq is the perfect theater to test that commitment. On February 5, NATO announced that it has launched a new “new training programme in Iraq ... teaching Iraqi security forces to counter Improvised Explosive Devices (IED).”<sup>18</sup> The new administration should push NATO to build on this commitment. Trump has said that he would destroy IS by expanding international cooperation to cut off its funding, increasing intelligence sharing, and conducting cyberwarfare to disrupt IS' propaganda and recruiting capabilities.<sup>19</sup> These are all necessary areas for renewed cooperation; such tasks should not be America's burden to bear alone.

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## 6. Manage challenges in post-IS Mosul and across Iraq

IS has left much of Iraq in ruins. Iraqis returning home have found their communities destroyed, and the Iraqi government is overwhelmed by the task of rebuilding in areas already liberated from ISIS. But as the battle for Mosul enters its final stages, the biggest challenge may lie ahead. Stabilization and reconstruction in Mosul and the surrounding, religiously and ethnically diverse Ninewa plain will be complex. Helping locals stand up a government, provide essential services, and resolve disputes—let alone grappling with the unthinkable psychological and social damage of IS' genocide and systematic sexual abuse—will be a formidable challenge.<sup>20</sup> So far, more than 130,000 civilians have been displaced from Mosul. But an estimated 700,000 civilians remain trapped in areas of Mosul still controlled by IS.<sup>21</sup> The new administration should push donors to fund the United Nation's humanitarian appeal for Mosul, and coalition partners on the ground in northern Iraq should be mobilized to assist.

To fill the governance gap, a transitional period lasting up to 18 months should be declared once combat operations have ceased. A high-level Iraqi committee should be established to help oversee the administration of Mosul and surrounding areas during the transitional period. That committee could include representatives from Baghdad and Erbil. A senior U.S. official should support the committee on the ground and be prepared to serve as a broker between the parties.

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## Conclusion

The Trump administration has inherited a counter IS campaign and international coalition that are in a commanding military position in Iraq. But the lesson of previous wars in Iraq is that such gains can prove short-lived if unaccompanied by political progress and governance. President Trump's words and actions have already made the U.S. military's job—and his own—in Iraq harder.

After criticizing President Obama for failing to preserve gains made during the last war in Iraq, President Trump is now responsible for turning progress on the battlefield into the lasting defeat of ISIS. How his administration navigates the fall of Mosul and its aftermath, Iraq's ongoing security challenges, and the vexing political questions ahead will be important factors in Iraq's success or failure in the years to come. Trump should abandon his campaign rhetoric, repair his early mistakes, and take decisive steps to reassure Iraqis and to protect the accomplishments of the last two and a half years and the sacrifices of America's servicemen and women.

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