Supporting Maliki Could Make Iraq Crisis Worse

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Islamists' capture of Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, this week and their march on the capital, Baghdad, has prompted national security hawks to call for immediate American intervention, whether in the form of sending military equipment or providing air support for the Iraqi army's defense.

Paul R. Pillar, a former CIA analyst and nonresident senior fellow at both Georgetown University's Center for Security Studies and the Brookings Institution, cautions against such kneejerk interventionism in *The National Interest* on Thursday, pointing out that militants' territorial gains in Iraq do not necessary pose a threat to the United States.

"Having part of Nineveh Province" — of which Mosul is the capital — "in addition to part of Anbar does not increase the chance that US citizens will die at the hands of ISIS," he argues, referring to the Sunni extremist outfit that earlier seized the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi. "To believe otherwise is to subscribe to the fallacy that real estate is what defines terrorist threats."

Pillar also recognizes that the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, which also operates in neighboring Syria, was made possible by the exclusionary practices and increasingly authoritarian tendencies of Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki's government in Baghdad. "Maliki's regime is a narrowly based Shiite regime and most Sunni Arabs do not see a future for themselves in an Iraq led by Maliki. In such a situation, the extremist message has appeal."

Former secretary of state Hillary Clinton therefore conditioned potential American support for the government in Baghdad on reform. "I agree with the White House's rejection and reluctance to do the kind of military activities that the Maliki government is requesting, namely fighter aircraft to provide close support for the army," she told the BBC in an interview on Thursday. "That is not a role for the United States. There needs to be a number of steps that Maliki and his government must take to demonstrate he's committed to an inclusive Iraq, something he's not done up to date."

Rather, Maliki has systematically sidelined Sunni politicians and moved closer to Shia Iran since the American forces left Iraq at the end of 2011, raising sectarian tensions in his country. He ignored previous outbursts of violence from Sunni militants, failed to take lessons from standoffs with the Kurds in the north of Iraq, who are moving ever closer to independence, and would no longer listen to the Americans. Were the United States to back him now, they would effectively takes sides in what can hardly be described as anything but a civil war anymore.

Or, as Benjamin H. Friedman, who is a research fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, puts it in *The National Interest* on Friday, "The reality is that we're talking about protecting a Shiite regime against Sunni rebels, not restoring a multiethnic state."

"And the sectarian conflict is not confined to Iraq," he warns. ISIS also fights Bashar al-Assad's Shia regime in Syria — which the United States and its Sunni allies in the Middle East oppose. Iran has sent army units into Iraq to stop ISIS from taking Baghdad. "So what the president is really considering is joining those three regimes in their fights against Sunni rebellions. Why should we do that?" Friedman wonders.

Pillar knows that the sort of military support President Barack Obama is reportedly contemplating "would at best furnish a temporary respite from the processes that we see playing out." America might help Maliki fight off ISIS for now but would do little to improve the circumstances that enabled its rise.

To the contrary: If America helped Maliki prevail in his war against the Islamists, it would almost certainly deepen sectarian divisions in Iraq and prompt Sunnis to rally behind whichever group looks the most capable of dislodging his Shia regime.