“Can Iraq Be Saved?” – A Discussion with Dr. Joseph R. Núñez

On November 19, 2014, Dr. Joseph R. Núñez, a retired US Army Colonel with extensive experience in Iraq, spoke at the Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University. He discussed the current crisis in Iraq and offered several solutions to rebuild the capacity of the Iraqi government to defeat ISIL and maintain security in the country.

Dr. Núñez began the discussion by stating his “10 Realities About Iraq.” The first of these was his belief that attacking Iraq in 2003 was a huge strategic blunder on the part of the United States. With resources tied down in Afghanistan, too much was going on all at the same time and the United States did not have the capacity to operate effectively in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

His second reality was that the 2007-2008 surge, while being an operational success, failed strategically.

Third, Dr. Núñez pointed out that Iraq has failed to function as a democracy, regardless of the fact that it has held elections.

Fourth, he argued that pulling U.S. troops out of Iraq in late 2011 was a bad idea. Adding to that, his fifth point was that the United States did not make a strong effort to achieve a status of forces agreement with the Iraqi government. President Barack Obama was not strongly engaged in discussions, and the military failed to prepare for the sudden withdraw of troops.

Sixth, he stated, “Taking down the Iraqi Army will go down in history as one of the dumbest ideas and actions ever made.” The United States should not have assumed that all officers in Saddam’s Army were “die hard Ba’athists,” when the reality was that most were nationalists and professionals who had done what they needed to do to survive.

Seventh, he noted that Iran and China have been the chief beneficiaries of U.S. efforts in Iraq. Iran, having a strategic interest in Iraq to maintain its access to the Mediterranean Sea, and China, whose main goal is to ensure access to oil and gas, benefited under the government of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Eighth, while he agreed that Nouri al-Maliki did politicize the Iraqi security forces, Dr. Núñez add that the United States must take some of the blame for failing to train a competent, professional military force in Iraq.

Ninth, he recognized that a great portion of the surge success was due to the Awakening Movement, or the Sons of Iraq, who were ultimately betrayed by the United States as it stood idly by and allowed Nouri al-Maliki to treat them like “red-headed stepchildren.”

Finally, as a reference point, Dr. Núñez argued that the flawed parliamentary elections of 2010 set Iraq on a course for disaster as Nouri al-Maliki’s State of Law Coalition continued to lead the government despite having won two less seats than Ayad Allawi’s Iraqiyya Party. The United States failed to speak out publicly against the flawed elections and al-Maliki subsequently held onto power.

Fast forward to the summer of 2014 and the advance of ISIL across swathes of northern and
western Iraq. Taking most of the major cities en route to Baghdad, the ISIL advance was held off just outside of the capital city and the area controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government, which now extended to Kirkuk.

Dr. Núñez offered his solutions to the major problems facing Iraq, and summed up his argument with a quote from Pericles: “Freedom is the sure possession of those alone who have the courage to defend it.” In Iraq’s case, there are three groups who ultimately need to secure freedom for Iraqis. Putting United States’ troops back into Iraq is “the wrong thing to do.” Instead, the United States needs to offer heavy support to (1) the Kurdish Peshmerga, (2) the Awakening Movement, or the Sons of Iraq, and (3) the Iraqi military and police forces.

In regard to the Peshmerga, Dr. Núñez emphasized the need for training in force-on-force, conventional operations. Traditionally, they have been trained to fight guerilla, mountain warfare. The fight against ISIL requires different tactics and the United States should provide direct training, in addition to military equipment. Dr. Núñez discredited the argument that if the Peshmerga become stronger they would stop assisting Iraqi government forces. He suggested that the history between the Shia and the Kurds, who both faced persecution in Saddam’s Iraq, would mean continued cooperation between the Kurdish Regional Government and the government in Baghdad.

With respect to the Awakening Movement, or the Sons of Iraq, despite feelings of resentment toward the United States for abandoning the militias and allowing Nouri al-Maliki to exclude them from participation in the maintenance of Iraqi security, using a similar counterinsurgency strategy to that used by the American military during the occupation could potentially lead to successful reintegration of Sunnis into the Iraqi security forces.

And insofar as the Iraqi security forces are concerned, despite needing better training and more assistance than President Obama has offered, there also needs to be a strong commitment to a multiethnic, multi-religious, and overall more inclusive force.

Ultimately, Dr. Núñez believes that by supporting the Peshmerga, the Awakening Movement, or the Sons of Iraq, and the Iraqi security forces and then maintaining that support, the United States can make a difference in Iraq. The United States needs to abandon its naïve assumptions, recognize the long-term struggles that the country faces, and commit itself to creating order, and then progress in Iraq.

*Alec Lynde, an undergraduate at Boston University studying International Relations and Middle East & North Africa Studies, prepared the report for this event.*