

**Testimony of
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U.S. Department of Defense**

**House Armed Services Committee
“The President’s Proposed Authorization for the Use of Military Force Against ISIL and
U.S. Policy, Strategy, and Posture in the Greater Middle East”
March 3, 2015**

Thank you, Chairman Thornberry, Ranking Member Smith, and Members of the Committee for inviting me to testify today on DoD’s strategy and posture in the greater Middle East. Secretary Carter recently returned from the region – his first official travel as Secretary – which was an opportunity to gain greater insight into the pressing issues that will be critical to the success of the counter ISIL campaign. The Secretary is also on the Hill today testifying before the Senate and will return for budget hearings over the coming weeks to discuss the full range of our Departmental priorities. Today, I’d like to focus on our defense policy objectives and discuss some of the specific challenges and opportunities in the USCENTCOM area of responsibility (AOR).

Our forces in the USCENTCOM AOR are confronting some of the most difficult global security challenges. Our nation has been engaged in conflict with al Qaeda and associated forces for over a decade in Afghanistan. In Iraq and Syria, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has not only destabilized those two countries, but presented a new dimension to the global violent extremist threat. Iran poses a host of security challenges, to include its nuclear ambitions and support for terrorist groups in the Middle East. All of these challenges are made more difficult by ongoing budget uncertainty and fiscal pressures here at home. Given these challenges, I appreciate the opportunity to review our defense policy objectives and priorities in the region. It is a pleasure, also, to be here with General Austin—we are lucky to have him serving as the CENTCOM Combatant Commander. He is also a terrific reminder of the quality of all the men and women we have serving in the region today.

Over the last four years, the Middle East has experienced significant change. The aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings will redefine the region as well as relationships among communities and between citizens and their governments. These realities have forced us to take a hard look at near- and long-term goals for U.S. engagement in the region. Although the Department will continue to face many important challenges in the Middle East, two critical issues are at the top of our agenda. The first is how to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL. The second is preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

In Iraq and Syria, the Department is working with our partners across nine lines of effort: 1) supporting effective governance in Iraq, 2) denying ISIL safe haven, 3) building partner capacity, 4) enhancing intelligence collection on ISIL, 5) disrupting ISIL’s finances, 6) exposing ISIL’s true nature, 7), disrupting the flow of foreign fighters, 8) protecting the homeland, and 9) providing humanitarian support. The Department of Defense has lead responsibility in denying ISIL safe haven and building partner capacity, so I would like to highlight how we are postured to counter ISIL and outline briefly the success we are having in that effort.

More than 60 countries are participating in the global coalition against ISIL. Over 2600 U.S. service men and women are currently in Iraq supporting the Government of Iraq along these lines of effort. We are conducting operations from a number of bases throughout the Middle East, with many of those partners also conducting combined air, “advise and assist,” and train and equip operations with us.

In terms of effects, to date the coalition has conducted over 2,450 airstrikes against ISIL targets, over 1350 in Iraq and nearly 1100 in Syria. We are taking out ISIL’s fighters, their commanders, over a thousand vehicles and tanks, over 200 oil and gas facilities, the infrastructure that funds their terror, as well as over 20 training camps and more than two thousand fighting positions, checkpoints, buildings, and barracks in Iraq and Syria. As a result of this effort, ISIL’s momentum has been blunted, its ability to mass and maneuver forces has been degraded, its leadership cells have been pressured or eliminated, its command-and-control and supply lines have been disrupted. In short, we have put ISIL on the defensive.

But countering ISIL would not be possible without local partners in the lead. To build partner capacity in Iraq, U.S. and Coalition partners are supporting the Government of Iraq (GOI) by assisting with training, equipping, and advising its Armed Forces. Last summer we stood up our “advise and assist” teams to partner with local forces and early in the year we began training these forces at 4 sites across Iraq: I was able to visit Taji recently and see firsthand the partnership that we have undertaken with the Iraqi forces. With the help of Congress, the Iraq Train and Equip Fund will help us train and equip three brigades of Peshmerga forces, and nine Iraq Army brigades, as well as Sunni tribal forces.

In addition to our efforts in Iraq, we are working with our coalition partners to build the capabilities of the moderate Syrian opposition—with training of the first class of vetted opposition elements set to begin later this month. The goal is to train moderate Syrian recruits to defend the Syrian people; stabilize areas under opposition control; empower trainees to go on the offensive against ISIL; and promote the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria. Our partners in the region, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and others have offered strong support to host and quickly stand up the program. U.S. forces in the region strengthen our partners’ ability to fight terrorism locally, but it will be Iraqi forces and Syrian fighters who will secure the gains against ISIL and inflict a lasting defeat.

As you know, the President has developed and transmitted to Congress an Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) that would demonstrate whole-of-government support for him to successfully prosecute the armed conflict against ISIL within reasonable limitations. We believe that we have the legal authorities necessary to continue to conduct the current campaign against ISIL. However, the President has been clear that he wants to work with Congress to pass a bipartisan AUMF specifically tailored to address the threat posed by ISIL. Enacting a bipartisan ISIL-specific AUMF would provide a clear and powerful signal to the American people, to our allies, and to our enemies that the United States stands united to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL. I would like to briefly highlight some important aspects for the Department of the proposed AUMF.

First, the President's authorization does not include a geographic limitation. Although we are not currently planning operations in countries other than Iraq or Syria, we believe it would be a mistake to advertise to ISIL that there are safe havens for them outside of Iraq and Syria, by limiting the authorization to specific countries.

Second, the President's AUMF includes a three-year sunset. The sunset provision is not based on a determination that the campaign against ISIL will be over in three years. Rather, the President believes that three years is an appropriate period of time before the two branches of government assess the progress we have made against ISIL and review these authorities again.

Finally, the President's AUMF does not authorize "enduring offensive ground combat operations." It does authorize the full range of activities we anticipate needing in the fight against ISIL. It provides DoD with the authority and flexibility to conduct ground combat operations in more limited circumstances, such as rescue operations involving U.S. or coalition personnel or Special Forces operations to take military action against ISIL leadership.

In all, enacting this AUMF is an important way to demonstrate to the Armed Forces who are fighting that the President and the U.S. Congress are solidly behind them and that our country is united in its resolve to defeat ISIL.

Defeating ISIL is a major focus and challenge, but so is Iran. As the President has made clear, his top priority is preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. Iran's nuclear ambitions remain a consistent area of concern for the Department. We remain hopeful that the P5+1 negotiations will result in a comprehensive and verifiable deal. The combination of international pressure, sanctions, and diplomacy *have* been effective in convincing Iranian leadership to come to the negotiating table, and there *have* been developments that signal a willingness to abide by the terms of a peaceful nuclear program. And as President Obama has said more than once, we are not going to make a bad deal.

DoD helps underwrite negotiations with our robust posture and capabilities in the region. We maintain significant capabilities in our ground, air, and naval presence in the region. This includes our most advanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets; significant ballistic missile defense capabilities; fighter aircraft; and ships. As the President has said publicly, we will do whatever is necessary to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, including using military force if necessary, and the Department is postured to do it.

Looking beyond the nuclear program, we have significant concerns regarding Iran's other destabilizing activities in the Middle East. Iran's ongoing support for terrorist groups and support to the Asad regime does not bode well for a long-term political solution in Iraq or Syria and continues to pose a threat to our regional allies and partners. We have an enduring commitment to regional stability and our presence reflects the Department's vigilance regarding a number of Iran's malign activities. Even if we are successful in neutralizing the nuclear threat through hard-nosed diplomacy, we will continue to support U.S. government efforts to counter Iran and the full range of threats it poses.

As we work to degrade and defeat ISIL, and to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, we remain committed to moving to a smaller force in Afghanistan and consolidating the gains made over the past decade of international support to the Afghan government. The U.S. mission in Afghanistan has helped support the Afghan people, and has protected U.S. national interests by working with local partners to build the capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces so that they can serve as a legitimate line of defense against terrorists seeking to exploit Afghanistan's territory. It is clear that much work still needs to be done, but we have made positive strides. President Ghani sees the U.S. and NATO presence as a very important component for his security strategy for Afghanistan. Our posture in Afghanistan aims to preserve the security gains that our efforts have made, and contribute to a robust security relationship in times ahead.

We also will continue to work with Pakistan and the Central Asian states to address existing and emerging threats in the region. Like Afghanistan, Pakistan also faces a potent threat from extremists. We are committed to continuing to improve our relationship with Pakistan by collaborating where our strategic interests converge and engaging diplomatically where they do not. Pakistan is an important partner in our fight against al Qaeda, and plays a role in Afghanistan's security. Sustained U.S. support that recognizes positive developments in these initiatives will help to promote long-term regional stability.

Mindful of our fiscal constraints, the Department needs to maintain a flexible and dynamic presence across the entire USCENTCOM AOR to deter against state or non-state aggression, maintain the fight against violent extremist organizations (VEO), and continue to be the security partner of choice for our partners and allies.

Meeting these challenges will require significant resources and effort. The President's Budget request for FY 2016 supports the Department's efforts to project power globally, deter and, if necessary, defeat aggression in multiple regions, and disrupt and destroy terrorist networks. The Budget also enables the Services to continue addressing their most severe training and maintenance deficiencies while simultaneously reconstituting the force to become smaller and more capable over the next several years.

Secretary Carter is in front of the Senate today to discuss the Department's budgetary requirements, but I'd like to highlight a few items specific to CENTCOM's AOR that will ensure General Austin and his team can succeed in achieving our defense policy objectives:

First is funding to combat diverse terrorist groups, such as ISIL, and provide training, assistance, and equipment to Iraqi security forces and properly vetted members of the moderate Syrian opposition.

Second is reinforcing Afghanistan's security by training, advising, and assisting the Afghan National Security Forces as well as by maintaining a limited counterterrorism capability to target the remnants of al Qaeda and preserve the gains of the last decade.

More broadly, the President's budget makes critical investments in innovation to ensure that the U.S. military remains a technologically superior force. It also makes significant investments in our nuclear enterprise and in our ability to stay ahead of emerging threats - including new space

control capabilities; advanced sensors, communications, and munitions for power projection; missile defense; and cyber capabilities. The budget supports investments in promising new technologies and capabilities including assured position, navigation, and timing; high speed strike weapons; aerospace innovation; rail gun technology; and high energy lasers.

Again, these unique capabilities contribute to our strong posture in the USCENTCOM AOR and help underwrite our policies in the region. We will maintain our commitment to the region in the interest of enduring U.S. interests in the region and to combat those threats we collectively face. Maintaining a strong posture in the region remains a priority for the Department of Defense, a priority that is weighed against and balanced with other global requirements and commitments.

I would like to reiterate that this is truly a dynamic time for our policy in the region and the Secretary has signaled his commitment in working with our U.S. government and international partners to shape a more secure region over the coming years. The high tempo of operations, coupled with constrained resources and unpredictable budget levels, has challenged the Department in its efforts to reconstitute full-spectrum readiness. If sequestration returns in FY 2016 and beyond, the Department's readiness would deteriorate markedly, harming our ability to respond promptly and efficiently when called upon. As a consequence, we would have fewer forces available to support operations in such vital regions as the USCENTOM AOR.

Again, I'm clear-eyed about our fiscal constraints, but believe it necessary to maintain a strong, effective force posture in the region - one that continues to build trust, strengthen partnerships, and enhance capabilities. Moving forward, we will continue to maintain forces in the region to counter external aggression, assure regional allies, and defend U.S. and allied security interests.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.