

Statement Before the Committee on Armed Services
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“Views on Strategy for Iraq and Syria”

A testimony by

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Chairman Thornberry and members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today about the perilous situation in Syria, Iraq, and the broader Middle East – made so much more vivid by the Paris attacks of last week.

I always enjoyed appearing before this committee during my many years of active service at CIA. Also as a former US Army officer, a veteran of Vietnam, I have always had special regard for this committee and its mission. So it's very good to be with you again, speaking now as a private citizen based at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) here in Washington.

Needless to say, the views I express here are my own and not those of Johns Hopkins University. And I of course, I no longer speak for any part of the US government.

It has always been difficult to make sense out of events in the Middle East, even in the calmest of times. But with all the crosscurrents sweeping through Syria and Iraq, it is even more challenging. I'd like to approach this by covering *four things* today:

First, region-wide trends that have converged in Syria and Iraq, contributing to the complexity of those problems and the elusiveness of solutions.

Second, a closer look at ISIS in Syria, Iraq, and beyond -- which I believe should be at the very top of our concerns;

Third, the interests of the major powers who are engaged – especially the US, Russia, and Iran.

Fourth, some thoughts about strategies to deal with all of this.

Macro Trends in the Middle East Affecting Iraq and Syria

A look across the entire region teaches us again that ancient lesson: when empires collapse, it takes decades for the dust to settle. Lines drawn on a map by Britain and France when the Ottoman Empire collapsed in 1916 have now been redrawn on the ground in what we all say is the most violent sectarian sorting out that we've seen in our lifetimes.

Conflict now occurs in so many dimensions that the usual metaphors, such as "three dimensional chess" fail to capture the complexity of it all. Breaking it down, we see the Middle East – and most vividly Syria and Iraq -- torn by at least *six simultaneous conflicts*:

Persian versus Arab -- with Iran and Saudi Arabia in the lead on their respective sides, maneuvering diplomatically and feeding proxy fighters. We see this in Syria, where Iran has hundreds of direct and proxy fighters on the ground defending the Assad regime, while Saudi Arabia reportedly provides weapons and other support to rebels opposing the regime. And in Yemen, where Iran appears to back the Houthi rebellion, while Saudi Arabia and its allies seek to restore the Hadi government to power.

Sunni versus Shia – a conflict broader than that between Saudi Arabia and Iran, pulling sectarian fighters into Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Egypt, and elsewhere, battling over everything from religious primacy to political power.

Modernizers versus traditionalists -- as frustrated people in many parts of the region seek to reclaim or hold on to the rights they sought in the short-lived Arab Spring in 2011, a yearning that barely gained expression in Syria before being suppressed.

Terrorists versus regimes – as ISIL has rampaged across Iraq, established a headquarters in Syria and as remnants of Al Qaeda and other groups have flocked to the combat zone to join the battle.

Terrorist versus terrorist – as Al Qaeda seeks to reassert itself in the shadow of ISIL success and as these two Sunni groups fighting the coalition and the Assad regime come up against Shiite Hezbollah which seeks to defend Assad.

Great power versus great power – as Russia, Iran and the US seek to preserve and extend their interests in the region but especially in Syria.

The ISIL Threat

At the center of all of this is the scourge of ISIL. My last four years in government were largely focused on the post-9/11 battle against Al Qaeda. Dangerous and challenging as that was, the challenge presented by ISIS exceeds it. This is because for at least the last year it has been apparent that ISIL has six things Al Qaeda never had in anything like the measure ISIL possesses them. No one, therefore, should be surprised that ISIL has shown the capabilities it did in Paris – elaborate planning, stealthy access, deadly tactics.

First, ISIL has a more comprehensive strategy. As the Institute for the Study of War has smartly concluded, we are dealing with an enemy that has a strategy, one that the Institute concludes ISIL is executing in three concentric rings:

- An “Interior” Ring: Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine. Here their objective is to conquer, defend, and expand – and as the Paris attacks show, to plan and execute external operations;
- A “Near Abroad” Ring: The rest of the Middle East and North Africa, extending out to Pakistan and Afghanistan. Libya is for now the main external hub. The objective is establish affiliates here and increase disorder.
- A “Far Abroad” Ring: The US, Europe parts of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Here the goal is attack and polarize.

Second, unlike Al Qaeda, ISIL holds territory: by now as much as half of Iraq and Syria, with a capital in Raqqa, Syria and a secondary center in Iraq’s second largest city Mosul. Al Qaeda central never succeeded beyond essentially renting part of Afghanistan before 9/11. As long as ISIL has this territory, it has the “caliphate” it claims and therefore the basis for its appeal – a destination for recruits.

Third, it has money. I have heard US Treasury officials publicly put this somewhere between \$500M and \$1B. Al Qaeda was always scraping for money and seeking loans from more successful terrorists. ISIL’s money comes from taking over about 80 bank branches in Iraq, from taxes, kidnapping, smuggling, and oil.

- I believe we have never fully grasped the importance of ISIL’s relative wealth. Much of this may be needed to administer its territory, but I’m convinced it still has more money than Al Qaeda ever had to buy expertise on things like information technology and weaponry, and to send its recruiters and trainers to places like Libya and operatives to places like France.

Fourth, ISIL has easier access to the West. As Paris vividly illustrates, the 4500 or so Western recruits among its 20-30,000 fighters allow ISIL to move among us in ways that are harder to detect than typical Al Qaeda operatives.

Fifth, ISIL has a powerful narrative. Its slick propaganda depicts for alienated youth in the West and elsewhere a better life of jobs, homes, fellowship, and power. We notice mainly the brutality, but in a single month this summer 52 percent of the nearly 900 propaganda messages ISIL sent out were focused on quality of life issues, while 37 percent hit military themes, and only 2 percent touched on brutality. Al Qaeda's narrative was and remains far less sophisticated and appealing – essentially: go attack the West and then enjoy a dangerous life on the run.

Sixth, ISIL now has rudimentary experience in governing. It's hard to get accurate data on this, but in many areas ISIL appears to be providing basic services at a tolerable level. They've incorporated existing bureaucracies where possible and forced workers at utilities and medical facilities to stay. With the exception of some of Al Qaeda's affiliates for limited periods, Al Qaeda never got to this point.

What to Do?

Any effort to formulate a counter-ISIL strategy has to begin with an appreciation of the realities that confront us. They are:

First, time matters. Our timetables keep slipping. We were to have mounted a counteroffensive to retake Mosul in April. We are nowhere on that. The offensive to retake Ramadi stalls repeatedly. We were able to train only a fraction of the 5000 fighters projected for Syria. Reports are that ISIL gains about 1000 new recruits/month, so the beast continues to grow while we ponder strategy. The longer they are in place the deeper their roots and the more resigned people become to their rule.

Every time a decision is put off because the downsides are too uninviting, the next decision only becomes harder. The long inconclusive debates over creating a "no-fly" safe zone, for example, became vastly more complicated after Russia deployed aircraft into Syria.

Second, the larger powers have conflicting interests that will have to be reconciled in any comprehensive settlement.

- *US interests* are multiple and important. At a general level, whether ISIL is defeated will be seen by countries in the region and by our allies as a measure of US leadership. More particularly, there can be little doubt that ISIL will try to mount attacks in the United States like the ones in Paris. We have crucial allies like Israel and Jordan who are directly exposed to ISIL's danger. And while the US is moving toward energy self-sufficiency, our closest Western allies are not and still depend on stability in the region to assure their energy needs.

- *Iranian interests* center on assuring preeminent influence for Iran and for Shia brethren in an arc running from Tehran to Damascus and encompassing Iraq. At the top of its list is making sure that Syria's future evolution permits Iran to support its proxy Hezbollah there and in neighboring Lebanon, as it has for decades.
- *Russian interests* are to assure the existence of some government in Damascus that permits its naval base at Tartus and its ground foothold at Latakia. More broadly, Russia apparently seeks to regain a broadly influential role in the region as part of President Putin's effort to reassert Russia as a great power globally. Russian diplomacy has been extraordinarily active in the Middle East in recent months, with nearly every major country in the region – ranging from Egypt and Saudi Arabia to Jordan, Israel, and Turkey -- sending senior representatives to Moscow for consultations.
- For their part, *Arab countries*, particularly Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf countries, have seemed less seized by the ISIL problem and more focused on their concerns about expanding Iranian influence and its impact in Yemen. An exception is strong US partner Jordan, which is probably most threatened by the ISIL push and most in need to assistance to cope with refugees and defense needs.
- *The one thing that all of these countries can probably agree on is the undesirability of having another completely collapsed state in the heart of the Middle East.* So with Syria heading in that direction, there is probably that narrow room for compromise -- something our diplomats can work with in the ongoing Vienna talks.

Third, progress will not be possible without arrangements that meet the grievances of the Sunni populations – about 70 percent of Syria and roughly 20-25 percent of Iraq. Their experience of exclusion and abuse is the basis of ISIL's appeal.

- In *Iraq*, the Shia-dominated government of Haider al-Abadi has put forth a reform program to meet some of these grievances, but it appears stalled and has met strong opposition. Unless, this is fixed, the government will never gain the support of Sunnis now living in ISIL-dominated territory, nor will it be able to field security forces committed to battling for a government that all can support. *In many ways this is the heart of the problem we face.*
- Similarly in *Syria*, some settlement must be devised that addresses the grievances of Sunnis, who have long been oppressed by Assad's minority-dominated Alawite regime. Their grievances are the most powerful magnet drawing ISIL adherents to the fight.

Fourth, progress requires that substantial territory be recaptured from ISIL – particularly major cities such as Mosul, Ramadi, Fallujah, and Raqqa. Until that happens, ISIL will

appear invulnerable, powerful, and attractive to alienated youth seeking membership in a “caliphate”.

Fifth, air power is important but will not be enough. It has killed a fair number of ISIS fighters, has probably disrupted operations and logistics, and may have degraded morale. But they seem to replace fighters at the same rate they lose them. ISIL combines terrorist and conventional tactics and will have to be confronted on the ground by a more substantial ground force than has been in play up to now.

So what does all this imply about policy? First it’s important to say that anything the US settles on will take time – there is no quick fix. And second, everything I’m going to mention is easy to say but would be complex and difficult to carry out – and we will have to be agile enough to adjust quickly within an overall strategy when things go wrong, as they inevitably do in any war scenario.

A strategy requires knowing the goal you want to achieve and how you are going to get there.

In this case the strategic goal might be phrased as: *preserving the state system in the Middle East, even if in a different configuration, rolling back ISIL’s territorial gains, and destroying it as an organization.*

It is often said that there is no military solution to the problem, but as important as is the political dimension, it is impossible to imagine a solution to the ISIL problem without a *military component.*

This has been endlessly debated and there are few new ideas. It is now mostly a task of figuring out how to implement them – with what means, in what measure, and in what sequence.

The following steps are worthy of consideration:

First, establish clear priorities. Throughout the history of this problem, we have tried to do many things at once, for example degrading ISIL while also weakening the Assad regime. The catch 22 is that weakening one strengthens the other.

It is time to say destroying ISIL comes first and that we will do whatever is necessary to achieve that. This may require moving the Assad issue even further to the back burner – we’ve already signaled he does not have to go anytime soon.

It may also require working more directly with the Russians – if they can be persuaded – who have perhaps even more reasons than the US for concern about ISIL. Russian intelligence has said publicly that there are over 2000 Russian citizens in ISIL’s ranks, and Putin has to worry about these returning, particularly to the restive Caucasus region. Moreover, Putin has to take into account that ISIL or an affiliate probably brought down the airliner that blew up over Egypt on October 31.

Second, we can more robustly arm those forces, such as the Kurds in Syria and in Iraq who have demonstrated the will and capability to defeat ISIL, as the Iraqi Kurds recently did in the town of Singar; they severed the logistically important link between the key ISIL strongholds in Syria and Iraq.

Third, increase the intensity of the air campaign and increase the number of US Special Operators in the theater well beyond the 50 already designated by the President, empowering them to go forward with trusted forces for the purpose of advising and helping to designate targets for the air campaign.

Fourth, establish safe enclaves within Syria for fighters and refugees as General Petraeus has suggested, defended by US and coalition aircraft, possibly manned partly by US advisors, and accompanied by a warning to Assad that violating the space would risk us destroying his air force.

Fifth, and perhaps most important and most challenging, lead in the formation of a substantial multinational force capable of destroying ISIL up close. I do not underestimate the leadership challenge here, nor the difficulties of command and control in such a coalition; there will be numerous obstacles and in many quarters little enthusiasm, but it is hard to see a way to deny ISIL its safehaven, from which it can plan operations like the Paris attacks, without this component.

This need not be an exclusively American force. Options could include:

- A coalition of US, Kurdish, and Arab forces;
- A NATO operation under Article 5, the collective defense provision of the treaty. NATO could have a major planning and operational role -- as suggested by former SACEUR Adm (ret.) Jim Stavridis -- spanning everything from training to augmenting air assets, contributing Special Operations forces, and constructing an "open coalition" that could include Russia and some Arab partners. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has emphasized "out-of-area" missions. This certainly seems to qualify.

Regarding the political component of a strategy, the US has the foundation in the diplomatic talks underway in Vienna among 19 countries, including Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey. The early communiqués signal broad, but probably fragile, agreement on a few ambitious aims, such as a six month target for establishing a "non-sectarian transitional" government and beginning work on a new constitution as the basis for elections in 18 months. It's a beginning.

At the same time, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of continued vigorous US engagement with the Iraqi government to urge progress toward a government that is more inclusive of Sunnis and all Iraqi elements. Otherwise, Iraq can neither survive as a unitary state nor field an effective counter-ISIL fighting force.

In sum, the bottom line is that eliminating the evil that is ISIL requires two major things:

- Political changes in Iraq and Syria that respond to the grievances of their alienated and abused Sunni populations;
- And a military strategy that rolls back ISIL gains and denies them their claimed “caliphate”.

Achieving these goals will require gargantuan effort. But the truth is nothing else will work.