

**Joint Statement for the Record: HASC Hearing – 11 DEC 19**

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Thornberry, and distinguished members of the House Armed Services Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the security situation in Syria and the broader Middle East, and to discuss the Department of Defense's (DoD) strategy in the region.

Before we turn to the topic of today's hearing, I would like to congratulate the Committee on reaching an agreement on the National Defense Authorization Act for the 58<sup>th</sup> consecutive year. This conference report supports the Department's implementation of the National Defense Strategy and includes key priorities like paid parental leave for our civilian workforce and the establishment of the Space Force as the sixth branch of the military. We look forward to Congress sending this legislation to the President for his signature.

As reflected in the National Defense Strategy, the DoD prioritizes China and Russia as our Nation's top national security challenges. As we transition our focus towards great power competition, we must also remain vigilant in countering threats from rogue states like Iran and violent extremist organizations like ISIS. The United States' strategy in the Middle East seeks to ensure the region is not a safe haven for terrorists, is not dominated by any power hostile to the United States, and contributes to a stable global energy market.

For the Department of Defense, this translates to the following six objectives:

- (1) Utilize a dynamic U.S. military presence with strategic depth to deter and, if necessary, respond to aggression;
- (2) Strengthen and enhance the defensive capabilities of regional partners;
- (3) Advance partnerships and burden-sharing with global allies and partners to address shared security concerns;
- (4) Protect freedom of navigation;
- (5) Deny safe haven to terrorists that threaten the homeland; and
- (6) Maintain a comprehensive counter-proliferation approach to mitigate WMD threats.

Although there are a multitude of security issues to discuss in the Middle East, today we will focus on two of the most destabilizing influences in the region – ISIS and Iran.

Beginning with ISIS, the United States has achieved great success working alongside our partner forces in Syria and Iraq to destroy the physical caliphate and to liberate 7.7 million people living under its brutal rule. This included the successful operations that resulted in the death of ISIS's founder and leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as well as one of his top deputies. The Department of Defense remains committed to working closely with our partners on the ground in Syria and Iraq to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS.

Today, U.S. forces remain active in Syria, working in close coordination with the Syrian Democratic Forces. We maintain a reduced presence in Syria following the partial withdrawal of our forces from the former security mechanism area along the Syria-Turkey border. U.S. forces are currently located at the At Tanf Garrison, as well as in outposts in northeast Syria near the oil fields which served as ISIS' primary source of revenue used to fund its terror. Syrian Democratic

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Forces are now in control of those oil fields, and continue to benefit from those resources to fund local governance, stabilization, and security operations in northeast Syria.

Although the recent Turkish incursion has complicated this battlespace, the Department of Defense remains confident that we can continue the mission the President has given us in Syria, which is to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS. We maintain our leadership role in the Defeat-ISIS campaign, which brings together 76 nations and 5 international organizations to provide funding, military capabilities, and political support.

In Iraq, we continue to work by, with, and through the Iraqi Security Forces to enable a strong and independent Iraqi state. The cohesiveness of the Iraqi Government is currently being tested as rival factions compete for power, including some fueled by Iranian funds and weapons. We remain in close coordination with our Iraqi partners to mitigate the impact of these current events on the long-term stability of the country.

Moving to Iran, over the past 18 months, DoD has supported the United States' economic and diplomatic maximum pressure campaign. These efforts seek to bring the Iranian regime back to the negotiating table for a new and better deal that addresses the full range of threats emanating from Iran.

Iran's efforts to destabilize the region have increased in recent months as it attacked targets in Saudi Arabia, disrupted commercial shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, shot down a U.S. unmanned aircraft in international airspace, and provided support to proxies including the Houthis, Hezbollah, and Shia militia groups in Iraq.

To address these threats, the DoD is taking a deliberate approach to strengthen our defenses, enable our partners to better defend themselves, and refine our response options. Since May of this year, approximately 14,000 additional U.S. military personnel have been ordered to the region to serve as a tangible demonstration of our commitment to our allies and partners. These additional forces are not intended to signal an escalation, but rather to reassure our friends and buttress our efforts at deterrence.

We are also focused on internationalizing the response to Iran's provocative activities by encouraging increased burden-sharing and cooperation with allies and partners from around the world to address our shared security concerns. The International Maritime Security Construct, which promotes freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman, has reached full operational capability and includes contributions from the United Kingdom, Australia, Albania, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. The more nascent international Integrated Air and Missile Defense effort led by Saudi Arabia also contributes to increased security by protecting critical infrastructure throughout the region.

Through these actions, we are sending a clear message to Iran that the international community will not tolerate its malign activities. Along with our allies and partners, we remain united in our commitment to regional stability and to upholding long-standing international rules and norms. Importantly, Iran should not mistake the United States' restraint for an unwillingness to respond with decisive military force should our forces or interests be attacked. Furthermore, as the President has stated, we will not allow Iran to develop nuclear weapons.

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In conclusion, as the Department of Defense continues to implement the National Defense Strategy, the stability of the Middle East remains important to our nation's security. As such, we will continue to calibrate all of our actions to deter conflict, avoid unintended escalation, and enable our partners to defend themselves against regional threats. In doing so, we will preserve the hard won gains of the past and ensure the security of the United States and our vital interests.

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