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The Next Decade: Aligning Strategy Against the Islamic State

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Chairman Wilson and Ranking Member Langevin, Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here today for a discussion of ISIS.

The Islamic State's Goals and Operational Vectors

The Islamic State is a hybrid organization that aims to establish an extremely harsh form of Islamic law across much of the world. It has five basic operational vectors to advance that goal:

- Establishing a proto-state, including the bureaucratic framework for governance;
- Waging military campaigns in Iraq and Syria, including the use of terrorist tactics to suppress dissent and intimidate enemies;
- Encouraging followers to independently attack hostile governments, including in the West;
- Building a network of affiliates working to establish jihadi-styled governance around the world, notably in North Africa, Yemen, and Afghanistan;
- Inspiring jihadis around the world to either join the organization or at least endorse its vision of a future Caliphate.

Critically, the Islamic State's fundamental goal and its basic operational vectors—with the exception of building an affiliate network and expanding core operations to Syria—have been relatively consistent since October 2006. That is when the Islamic State of Iraq was founded out of the institutional framework of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

We do not often recognize our long history fighting ISIS, but we have effectively been fighting the group—under slightly different names—for nearly a decade. And, I am sorry to say, it is likely going to require at least another decade of sustained national effort to defeat this organization.

The Last Decade of War Against ISIS and its Predecessors

From 2006 to 2008, we fought ISIS effectively, but failed to destroy it. The “surge” of 150,000 American troops into Iraq, including crucial special operators, and a concerted effort to inspire the Awakening of Sunni tribes against the Islamic State of Iraq eliminated its ability to control territory and forced it to abandon large-scale conventional military operations.

Nonetheless, the group was never defeated. The Islamic State of Iraq remained one of the deadliest terrorist groups in the world; was continually viewed by jihadis globally as the kernel of a future Caliphate; maintained a strong presence near Mosul, Iraq and in Syrian border areas; established the bureaucratic structure for future ‘governance’; and sustained the ability to play spoiler in Iraqi politics by assassinating hostile Sunnis and using terrorist attacks to encourage the Shia-dominated Maliki government into embracing its sectarian tendencies.

There are some key lessons from this era that we should remember today:

1. ISIS is vulnerable to military pressure; despite its growth, the group’s conventional military power is limited.
2. ISIS is extremely resilient and can shift its geographic base of operations and mode of organization relatively quickly.
3. Operational setbacks impact ISIS’ global appeal, but the group will remain a viable Caliphate to its supporters so long as it controls territory and continues to fight.
4. Even a diminished ISIS can operate as a political spoiler in both Iraq and Syria.

The Islamic State of Iraq survived by shifting its geographic focus and mode of operation—and then waiting for Iraqi political conditions to shift and U.S. focus on the group to wane. The most important lesson here for U.S. policymakers is that our future strategy must be sustainable. A scramble for short-term operational wins is insufficient.

The Next Decade of War Against ISIS

ISIS will not be defeated so long as the Syrian civil war continues and Sunnis in Iraq live in mortal fear of their own government. Military action can contain ISIS and limit its ability to control territory and people, but such gains will be inadequate—and fleeting—without political resolutions in Syria and Iraq.

The ugly reality is that the United States does not have policy levers to defeat the Islamic State in the near term without massive and politically untenable intervention in both Iraq and Syria. This is going to be a long fight and our strategy must be calibrated such that it is sustainable.

Rather than scope an entire strategy, which would include many of the basic operations we are undertaking today, I will address some of the key questions we face currently and lay out the conditions under which our approach should change dramatically:

- Should the United States support Syrian rebels focused on deposing Assad in addition to those focused on destroying ISIS?
 - Yes. Although this approach carries significant risks, such as increased Iranian troublemaking and weapons falling into jihadi hands, it will bolster relations with Turkey and increase pressure on the Assad regime to accept political compromise. The United States should not under any circumstances legitimize al-Qaeda-linked jihadi groups like Jabhat al-Nusrah, as some of our Arab allies seem to want.
- Should the United States continue to funnel weapons through Baghdad to Kurdish and Sunni factions fighting ISIS?
 - Yes, for now. ISIS will not be destroyed unless Sunnis in Iraq feel secure from their own government, but Baghdad remains the most important force for stability in Iraq. We should circumvent the government only if fundamentally redefining political authority in Iraq is the end-state we seek. That may become necessary, and it should remain an option on the table, but it should be a last resort.
- Should the United States increase the number of U.S. troops on the ground in Iraq?
 - Moderately increasing the number of troops in Iraq may improve our operational outcomes, but it will not lead to the destruction of ISIS. If 150,000 American troops could not destroy the Islamic State of Iraq seven years ago, why would 1/10th that number have lasting success against what is today a much stronger foe? A mini-surge can push ISIS into a box, but that box will remain large enough to pose a major strategic threat.
 - Moreover, a significant increase in U.S. troops on the ground will provide ISIS a meaningful propaganda boost globally and increases the risk of lone-wolf attacks in the west. It also increases the risk of strikes on U.S. troops by Iranian-backed militias.

Our decade of war against ISIS has not produced a decisive outcome, in large measure because our strategy and commitment has been inconsistent. To be successful in the next decade, we must have a clear, consistent, and sustainable strategy. Fortunately, Jihadi organizations have a long track record of self-destruction—and ISIS is laying the seeds of its own defeat by creating more enemies than even it can kill. But unless we resolve the basic political challenges in Iraq and Syria, ISIS will persist.