

**Opening Statement of the Honorable Ed Royce (R-CA), Chairman
House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing on
“Terrorist March in Iraq: The U.S. Response”
July 23, 2014**

(As Prepared for Delivery)

This hearing will come to order. This morning we consider the U.S. response to the terrorist take-over in Iraq.

Nearly six months ago, this Committee held a hearing “Al-Qaeda’s Resurgence in Iraq: A Threat to U.S. Interests.” Then, the Administration testified that ISIS had begun to shift resources from Syria to Iraq in early 2013, that it had tripled its suicide attacks that year, and that it planned to challenge the Iraqi government for control of western Iraq and Baghdad. The Administration testified that it had become aware that ISIS had established armed camps, staging areas and training grounds in Iraq’s western desert in the summer of 2013 and that ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had again threatened to attack the United States.

The Administration told us that ISIS must be “constantly pressured, and their safe havens destroyed” and that its objective was “to ensure that ISIS can never again gain safe haven in western Iraq.” However, what the Administration did not say was that the Iraqi government had been urgently requesting drone strikes against ISIS camps since August 2013. These repeated requests, unfortunately, were turned down. I added my voice for drone strikes as ISIS convoys raced across the desert.

Since that last hearing, ISIS has done precisely what the Administration predicted it would: it has taken over most of western Iraq, it has turned its sights on Baghdad, and it may be preparing to launch attacks against the U.S. Never has a terrorist organization itself controlled such a large, resource-rich safe haven as ISIS does today. Never has a terrorist organization possessed the heavy weaponry, cash and personnel that ISIS does today – which includes thousands of western passport holders.

The Iraqi population is terrorized; they have suffered mass executions and harsh sharia law. Last week, the remaining members of the ancient Christian community in Mosul fled on foot in face of ISIS demands that they convert or face death.

To be clear, ISIS's take-over has been aided by Prime Minister Maliki's malfeasance and incompetence. Maliki has disastrously failed to reconcile with key Sunni groups. Many – including myself and Ranking Member Engel – urged him to form a more inclusive government so that ISIS could not exploit legitimate Sunni grievances. Maliki has only proven himself to be a committed sectarian; certainly no statesman. It is time for Iraqis to move forward in forming a government that serves the interests of all Iraqis.

What started as a crisis in Syria has become a regional disaster with serious global implications – including credible threats of international terrorism, humanitarian disaster, and upward pressure on energy prices in a fragile global economy. Meanwhile, terrorist forces and the Iranian government are gaining power at the expense of regional security and friendly governments.

Of course, only Iraqis can control their future. And the performance on the battle field of certain Iraqi units was abysmal. Americans have spent enough blood and treasure in Iraq. And that is exactly why the Administration should have taken the opportunity to inflict decisive damage on ISIS from the air through drone strikes while its fighters were encamped in the desert months ago.

This morning we are joined by a senior State Department official who has been in Baghdad for several weeks and an official from the Department of Defense involved in the current assessment of Iraqi security forces to learn of the path forward in dealing with this national security emergency.

I'll now turn to the Ranking Member, Mr. Engel, for any opening comments.