

**Opening Statement of the Honorable Ed Royce (R-CA), Chairman
House Foreign Affairs Committee
“Countering ISIS: Are We Making Progress?”
December 10, 2014**

(As Prepared for Delivery)

This hearing will come to order. This morning we welcome back Ambassador McGurk for an update on the critical effort to counter ISIS. Ambassador, you were one of the few in the Administration sounding the ISIS alarm early on, as you did with this Committee last February.

After four months of the U.S.-led air campaign in Iraq and Syria, ISIS *still* controls essentially the same amount of territory as it did in the summer. One reason for this is the limited nature of the effort. We have conducted only about 1,000 airstrikes to date – or 250 per month - the vast majority being inside Iraq, leaving ISIS’ vast haven in Syria relatively unchallenged.

This is a very slow pace. Consider that Desert Storm averaged 1,000 combat sorties *per day*. Moreover, the Committee is concerned by reports that targeting has been micromanaged from the White House. But even with this flawed air campaign, Kurdish and Iraqi Security Forces have pushed ISIS out of specific, key infrastructure areas such as the Mosul and Haditha dams. More coalition air attacks would mean more ISIS defeats.

Another pillar of the Administration effort is to provide training and weapons to U.S. partners on the ground in Iraq and Syria. Yet, in Syria, U.S.-backed groups have seen no increase in support in the past several months. In fact, these Syrian groups have suffered from dire ammunition shortages in the past several weeks, in addition to not being supplied with the heavy weapons they need to fight ISIS, Hezbollah, al-Qaeda affiliates and the Assad regime.

In Iraq, the Kurdish Peshmerga remain the most effective fighting force against ISIS, but the Administration and Baghdad have refused, thus far, to supply them with anything more than light weapons as they go up against ISIS’ artillery, tanks, Humvees, and other heavy weapons, U.S. equipment captured from the Iraqis. I’m hopeful that the recent accord announced between Baghdad and Erbil, which I appreciate the Administration has helped engineer, will speed support for the Kurds. If not, the Ranking Member and I have legislation to do just that.

Although the Administration notes that 60 plus countries having joined the anti-ISIS campaign, some key partners continue to perceive the Administration’s strategy as misguided. Turkey, for one, has withheld use of its airbase, involvement of its ground forces, and other resources. The Saudis and other Arabs don’t see how allowing Assad to pummel those on the ground the coalition is backing makes any sense; instead pushing for a no-fly area along the Turkish border.

Meanwhile, there are grave security consequences to allowing ISIS to control a territory the size of Maryland. As of September, there were already over 15,000 foreign fighters within ISIS. Reportedly, ISIS has been recruiting about 1,000 new fighters per month. Of course, these fighters, particularly with Western passports, have the potential to attack us at home.

As Members may remember, when Secretary Kerry testified here in September, he said, “It’s time for the *defensive* strategy we and our international partners have pursued thus far to transition to an *offensive* strategy...” Ambassador McGurk - with a lackluster air campaign, severely undersupplied partners on the ground, and key allies with deep concerns about the President’s strategy – I just don’t see this as a credible offense.

Of course, next Congress this Committee expects to consider a new authorization for use of military force to support this effort. That is something we will do under a timeframe that is befitting of the gravity of the issues. And the Committee also expects that the Commander-in-Chief will come to Congress with his request and work in a bipartisan way to garner maximum support.

Before turning to the Ranking Member, I’d like to note that this is the last full Committee hearing of the 113th Congress. We have accomplished a lot in the last two years, for which I would like to recognize all Members for their contribution. And for those Members who will not be returning, we wish you well.

I now turn to Mr. Engel, whose long held observations on Syria have proven prophetic.