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Opening Statement – Chairman Ed Royce

The Administration's Strategy to Confront ISIS

March 26, 2015

This hearing will come to order. This morning, the Committee continues its examination of the ISIS threat – hoping to inform the Administration's strategy to destroy this brutal terrorist organization, and assess the proposed authorization of military force it sent Congress.

The goals of ISIS are clear: wreck every person and thing in its path; establish a caliphate; and then fight to expand it. ISIS affiliates are growing in power and presence throughout the region. In the last few weeks, we have seen attacks in Yemen, Tunisia, and Libya.

But less clear is the Administration's approach and determination to tackle this threat. As the ISIS threat was building in the desert, it wasn't bombed as it should have been. And despite nearly 3,000 sorties to date, this air campaign isn't pummeling the enemy as it should. U.S. Special Forces should be forward positioned, and authorized to call in airstrikes. Most Americans would be puzzled to learn that Canadian Special Forces are doing this, but we are not. With just "piecemeal attacks, the Obama administration has been systematically squandering our...airpower advantage," according to one observer.

Adding to the problem, the regional forces on the ground these airstrikes are supposed to be supporting are badly undersupplied. After seven months of fighting, the Committee is still receiving troubling reports that the Kurdish *peshmerga* are outgunned on the front-lines. This morning, Ranking Member Engel and I are re-introducing legislation to allow U.S. arms to be sent directly to the Kurds. These brave fighters need the better equipment to defeat ISIS.

And the Sunni tribal fighters, who will be central to this fight, are yet to trust Baghdad. Strong local police and provincial national guard forces are desperately needed to protect Sunnis in Anbar Province and elsewhere.

Into the void on the ground in Iraq have stepped Iranian-backed Shiite fighters, the leading force behind the recent Tikrit offensive. Senior U.S. officials have put this development in positive terms. And reports indicate that U.S. intelligence and airpower will now support this Iranian-backed mission. The *Washington Post* wisely cautioned in an editorial this week, "The growing power of the militias, with their brutal tactics, sectarian ideology and allegiance to Iran's most militant faction, has become as large an impediment to the goal of stabilizing Iraq" as ISIS.

Shiite militias taking on ISIS may serve the *immediate* interest of killing jihadis, but it is hard to see how empowering Iran's proxies is in the short, medium, or long term interests of an inclusive Iraq or a stable Middle East. The fear that many of us have is that Sunni Iraqis, who have been tortured by ISIS, will get the same brutal treatment by their Shiite militia "liberators." That would fuel endless conflict.

Political reconciliation in Baghdad must be central to U.S. policy. The Committee will be interested to learn what the Administration is doing to press Prime Minister Abadi to ensure he doesn't become former Prime Minister Maliki, a disastrous sectarian.

As we'll hear today, our U.S. strategy is focused on "Iraq first." But until the meltdown of Syria – what General Petraeus termed a "geopolitical Chernobyl" - is capped, "it is going to continue to spew radioactive instability and extremist ideology over the entire region."

Last fall, Congress voted to authorize training and equipping the Syrian opposition forces. But to our great frustration, that's still not up and running. And when pressed on the path forward in Syria, most Administration officials seem to suggest we can "figure it out later." Our slow action is creating a crisis of confidence among our allies.

Our witnesses are here to explain the President's strategy, and when the Committee returns in April, we plan to hear more from the Secretary of State and Defense about the President's AUMF request.

I'll now turn to the ranking member for his opening comments.