

Testimony
Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on
From Iraq and Syria to Libya and Beyond: The Evolving ISIL Threat
Witness Statement of
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Introduction

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, esteemed members of the committee, thank you for providing me the opportunity to update you on the progress of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL over the last year. I last appeared before this Committee over a year ago in December 2014 as our international Coalition to defeat ISIL was just getting off the ground. I would like to update you today on how the pieces put in motion a year ago have positioned us now to apply significant pressure on ISIL simultaneously across Iraq and Syria, as well as globally.

I would also like to thank the leadership of this Committee in recognizing the grave threat posed by ISIL long before the fall of Mosul in June 2014. This committee had the foresight to hold a hearing on al-Qa'ida's resurgence in Iraq in November 2013, where I was honored to represent the State Department. We spoke then of the emerging threat of ISIL and the intentions of its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, long before either were household names. The support of this Committee has been essential to identifying the threat, and helping us to push back aggressively. I welcome the opportunity today to provide an update.

Diagnosing the ISIL Threat

The ISIL threat to our interests in the greater Middle East region, to our partners in the EU and around the world, and to our homeland – is significant. In Iraq and Syria, ISIL maintains a formidable force, including thousands of foreign fighters from more than 100 countries. Our ongoing campaign and diplomatic efforts have significantly reduced their ranks, and will continue to do so, but ISIL still controls territory, economic resources, and maintains networks that penetrate from Syria into Europe. Separate from the threat of ISIL, the organization continues to target civilians as a matter of policy, enslaves and forcibly marries thousands of young women, and pillages our ancient history and cultural heritage. This is an organization that must be destroyed, as a matter of our own national security, and as a matter of our common humanity and decency.

Destroying ISIL requires a comprehensive campaign across multiple lines of effort – military, economic, political, diplomatic. It also requires a careful analytical assessment of the organization. In general terms, we analyze ISIL in three component parts: First, the core in Iraq and Syria, its hub for projecting a “caliphate” and an operations center for terror around the world; Second, the networks of foreign fighters and its organization for external plotting and operations; and Third, its global affiliates, including eight emerging groups spread across the Middle East, Africa and Asia. These affiliates take direction from ISIL leadership in the core. My testimony will focus on our holistic strategy for addressing each component of the ISIL problem set.

Degrading ISIL's Core (Iraq and Syria)

ISIL is unlike al-Qa'ida or other terrorist groups in that its primary objective is to establish state-like structures in areas that it controls. This provides ISIL with vast resources, but also significant vulnerabilities – and opportunities for us to degrade its organization. Reducing the

territory ISIL controls is a necessary criterion for its defeat and essential to removing its primary recruiting pitch as a historical movement: the vanguard of a new “caliphate,” flush with inevitable victory and conquest. The truth, as we are now demonstrating in Iraq and Syria, is the precise opposite.

In Iraq and Syria, ISIL has not had a significant battlefield victory since May 2015. Over a dozen major cities have been liberated from ISIL since the start of the campaign, including the key Sunni cities of Tikrit and Ramadi, the key oil infrastructure hub of Bayji, and Sinjar, where ISIL burst onto the international stage after murdering hundreds of Yazidis and enslaving thousands more. In Syria, local forces have taken back al-Hawl, along the key route connecting the two strongholds of Raqqa and Mosul, Tishreen, which connects Raqqa to ISIL’s lifeline on the Turkish border, and Tel Abyad, which used to be ISIL’s primary point of access to the outside world. In total, more than 40 percent of ISIL-controlled territory has been recovered in Iraq, and as we liberate territory, we are working with the Iraqi government and the Coalition to stabilize populated areas, delegating authority to local officials, and returning the population to their homes. In Tikrit alone, a city that had been totally de-populated by ISIL, more than 95 percent of the population has now returned.

Recent Visit to Syria and Iraq

Last week, I traveled to Syria and Iraq to assess the situation with my own eyes. I travel to Iraq often, but this was my first visit to Syria where we met with a diverse array of local forces now united against ISIL under the banner of the “Syrian Democratic Forces.” My visit included a stop in the city of Kobani, a town that history may prove was the decisive turning point against ISIL. It was in Kobani that ISIL launched a massive assault, seeking to lock down the entire Turkish border east of the Euphrates River. By November 2014, only a few blocks in Kobani remained out of ISIL’s control. Conventional wisdom held that the city would fall imminently. President Obama decided to give the defenders a chance, and ordered an airdrop of munitions and supplies. I later traveled to Ankara to coordinate with our Turkish allies and then with Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga the opening of a supply corridor into Kobani. These two events allowed the defenders to hold off an ISIL advance, and then gradually claw back ground. The battle lasted six months, cost 1,000 friendly dead, and 6,000 ISIL dead.

Walking the streets of Kobani, I witnessed first-hand the devastation from the battle, and also the resiliency of the community working to rebuild. Bodies – mostly of ISIL fighters, though also of innocent civilians – are still being found in rubble. But life is returning – schools are reopening, commercial activity has begun, and everywhere we went, the population stopped to express thanks to the United States and the international Coalition in helping to save their town from ISIL. The people of Kobani, like the people of Tikrit, Ramadi, and Sinjar, need international support to rebuild their communities, and the Coalition is helping with increased levels of humanitarian assistance. In Iraq, we have established a specialized funding facility – called the Funding Facility for Immediate Stabilization – which is focused on immediate needs to return people to their homes. As citizens return to their homes, local forces continue to fight and reverse ISIL’s early gains. From Kobani, for example, the SDF

has now cleared ISIL entirely from the border with Turkey east of the Euphrates, and cut off access routes into Raqqa.

From Syria, I traveled to Iraq to see Prime Minister Abadi, Anbar Governor al-Rawi, and Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Barzani, among other leaders. The mood in Baghdad had changed dramatically from my last trip only six weeks ago. This was due largely to the liberation of Ramadi from ISIL. Ramadi represented the greatest test – and success – for newly trained Iraqi Security Forces and their local tribal partners. This was a testament to the Coalition training effort, as well as our political strategy to delegate as much authority as possible to legitimate local leaders, such as the provincial governors.

Next Steps in Iraq and Syria

When I last addressed this committee nearly one year ago, we were developing a plan to apply simultaneous pressure at ISIL choke-points across Iraq and Syria. This plan required us to coordinate with a diverse array of forces on the ground and within the Coalition, as well as synchronized programs across our multiple lines of effort. We are now at a phase, I am pleased to report, where simultaneous pressure is being applied and beginning to choke ISIL in its heartland. While not divulging every aspect of our program in this forum, I can relay some of the key elements to demonstrate how the many pieces are coming together.

1. Turkey Border (last 98 kilometers controlled by ISIL)

As the map that accompanies this statement demonstrates, ISIL's only remaining outlet to the world remains a 98-kilometer strip of the Syrian border with Turkey. Our NATO ally Turkey has made clear that it considers ISIL on their border a national security threat, and the government, in part due to U.S. and international pressure, has taken aggressive measures in recent weeks to impede the flow of ISIL resources and fighters through that segment of the border. The importance of this effort cannot be overstated: loss of access to the border will deprive ISIL entirely of its only route for material and foreign fighters, including disrupting ISIL's ability to exfiltrate fighters back into Europe to conduct external operations. We know that many of the Paris attackers, for example, re-entered Turkey from this strip of border, and later flowed northward back to Europe. The town of Manbij, in particular, is a hub of foreign fighters, and connects roadways north to Turkey and southeast to Raqqa. This is why we are taking aggressive actions on both sides of the border to combat ISIL, make it more difficult for foreign fighters to enter Syria, and, should they enter, leave them no way to get out.

During the G-20 summit in Antalya, President Obama held a constructive meeting with President Erdogan about this situation and how we could work together to protect Turkey's southern border and limit the flow of ISIL fighters and material. Turkey has since undertaken a \$100 million project to improve physical infrastructure along the border, erecting walls and defensive berms, installing lighting systems, and increasing patrols. We are helping with these initiatives, including through a January interagency visit to Turkey to discuss border security and related issues, as well as visits to Turkey by experts from our Department of Homeland Security (DHS), including Secretary Johnson

later this month. I recently accompanied Vice President Biden to Istanbul, where we held detailed meetings with President Erdogan and Prime Minister Davutoglu, and worked out a common vision on closing the border and ensuring the ISIL threat is contained as much as possible within Iraq and inside Syria.

2. Raqqa and Eastern Syria

Raqqa continues to serve as ISIL's administrative capital. It is the headquarters for most external plotting operations, and the location – we believe – of most of ISIL's leaders. It is no longer, however, a safe haven for ISIL. To the contrary, we are putting pressure on Raqqa from multiple angles and this pressure should continue to grow over the coming weeks and months. In eastern Syria, with the help of Coalition air support, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are now in the process of isolating Raqqa. In November, the SDF took back al-Hawl, a key road junction on Highway 47 between Raqqa and Mosul. Following al-Hawl, Kurdish and Arab forces in the SDF retook the Tishreen Dam, a crossing on the route between Raqqa and the Manbij pocket, ISIL's preferred route to the Turkish border. These operations, all of which require political and military coordination, have begun for the first time to restrict the supply and access points into ISIL's heartland. Much of my visit to northern Syria last week was focused on coordinating the various strands of these operations, and ensuring their political and military coherence.

Simultaneously in eastern Syria, we have fused information gathered across multiple lines of effort to uproot ISIL's economic infrastructure. Beginning four months ago, the Coalition stepped up attacks against oil targets as part of Operation Tidal Wave II; destroying roughly four hundred oil trucks and disrupting ISIL fuel supply lines that terrorists use across Syria and into Iraq. Since November, again relying on information gleaned by State, Treasury, and the Intelligence Community, Coalition airstrikes reduced ISIL oil output by thirty percent. U.K. aircraft have played a particularly important role in targeting ISIL's economic infrastructure in this area alongside our own. Denying ISIL economic revenue and constricting its ability to transfer cash is having an impact. ISIL is now slashing its fighter salaries and increasing taxes on local populations.

3. Preparing for Mosul

We will not put a timeline on when Mosul will be liberated, but shaping operations to lay the groundwork for isolating ISIL inside the city have now begun. Kurdish Peshmerga forces two months ago liberated Sinjar, cutting off a highway that feeds Mosul from Syria. This operation was launched simultaneously to the SDF taking al Hawl, and began the bifurcation of northern Iraq from Syria – making it harder for ISIL to move material and supplies. These constricting operations will continue, and set the stage for political efforts to organize and coordinate liberation operations. My visit to Baghdad last week focused on ensuring close cooperation between political leaders, as well as Iraqi Security Force and Peshmerga commanders. Thanks to the great efforts of our Department of Defense colleagues, and our Ambassador in Baghdad, Stu Jones, there is now a joint

command center established east of Mosul to synchronize all of these efforts going forward.

Mosul will not be a D-Day like assault. Nor will we announce when key events are to take place. But ISIL will feel increasing pressure inside this city -- day-to-day and week-to-week. This slow and steady suffocation is now underway. We are killing ISIL members inside Mosul every week. We are also uprooting their sustainment network and have destroyed the cash storage sites used to pay, recruit, and train their fighters. The next phase will require close political coordination among Iraqi and Kurdish officials, security commanders, as well as local notables from Mosul and Ninewa province, and Sunni tribal leaders ready to join the offensive.

4. Ramadi and Anbar Province

Ramadi was the first major complex operation to be completed entirely by retrained Iraqi security forces and local tribal partners. Their success was attributable to a Coalition training program in place since late 2014, and critical decisions made by President Obama and Prime Minister Abadi in the immediate wake of Ramadi's fall to ISIL. In consultation with the Iraqi government, the President quickly ordered the deployment of U.S. military advisors to Taqaddum airbase – just east of Ramadi – to help strengthen the spine of Iraqi forces and plan for a counterattack. Prime Minister Abadi at the same time coordinated with local Anbari officials to re-organize the police force and replace ineffective commanders. Abadi pushed an aggressive agenda to empower local leaders, recruit tribal volunteers, boost police training, and then coordinate military operations and plan for post-ISIL stabilization, working closely their Anbar Governor Rawi. Their personal leadership was essential to the fight.

The Iraqis then proved a will to fight. Iraqi forces suffered over 1,200 casualties in the counter-attack, moving block-by-block to clear the outskirts and then the center of this iconic city. One unit defused over 2,500 IEDs during operations in Ramadi. Today in Ramadi the U.S. and Coalition have pre-positioned \$7.3 million for immediate stabilization needs. The Governor of Anbar in coordination with UNDP developed a plan to use these funds to place three electricity substations in Ramadi until voltage lines can be repaired. Thirty-six generators arrived this week with more on the way. Our initial funds will also support the establishment of health clinics, provide ambulances, and repair multiple municipal water tanks and water stations. Coalition stabilization funds will make repairs to local hospitals and water treatment plants as well as provide cash grants to businesses to allow them to re-stock shelves. I spoke to UNDP Iraq Coordinator Lise Grande last week who told me Governor Rawi's advanced stage of planning for Ramadi stabilization was making a significant difference in helping to bring that city back to life.

Still, the needs are enormous. The UNDP projects that \$15 million will be needed in the first phase, and \$25 million in the second phase, for immediate stabilization to help bring displaced families back home. Governor Rawi stressed to me the most urgent needs were counter-IED support (without properly trained C-IED units, de-mining in Ramadi is

expected to take 9 months to a year); restoration of the city's five main bridges; medical clinics, electricity generators; and mobile housing units for displaced families.

This geographic breakdown summarizes key elements of our strategy to pressure ISIL at key points across Iraq and Syria. Over the next six months we will accelerate and enhance this strategy across all lines of effort. In Syria we will work with Coalition and Syrian partners to seal the last remaining stretch of ISIL-controlled border with Turkey, and further isolate ISIL's de-facto capital of Raqqa. In Iraq, we will help Iraqi forces clear and stabilize the Euphrates River Valley; suffocate ISIL inside Mosul; grow the size of local forces in the fight; and work to stabilize newly liberated areas. This is extremely difficult, but now doable.

Our progress will not always be linear, and we should expect setbacks and surprises. This is among the most complex endeavors imaginable, relying on a diverse array of local forces, many with competing interests or priorities, together with a broad international Coalition from around the world. For the first time, however, our strategic aspirations meet growing capacity on the ground – and we look forward to working closely with this Committee as we work to further strangle and suffocate ISIL in its core areas of Iraq and Syria.

Degrading the Networks

As we degrade ISIL's core we must also attack ISIL's wider networks – including the foreign fighter networks, propaganda and recruitment networks, and financial networks. The foreign fighter network in particular remains an acute concern to the United States and our partners.

Foreign Terrorist Fighter Networks

Our engagement with Middle Eastern and European partners is achieving results through increased information-sharing, better border security, improved counterterrorism legislation, and effective counter-messaging. Foreign terrorist fighters have been broken up and would-be or returning foreign fighters have been arrested or prosecuted in Belgium, Egypt, France, Germany, Indonesia, Kuwait, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey, and Qatar, just to name a few.

We want this progress to accelerate. The U.S. now has agreements with 50 governments to share information on terrorist identities to better identify, track, and deter travel. Over 45 countries have passed or updated existing laws to more effectively identify and prosecute FTFs.

The threat, however, remains acute – and more must be done. We are working with our interagency partners to send Foreign Terrorist Fighter Surge Teams in the first quarter of this year to certain European countries to support them in countering FTF travel. We continue to monitor networks and travel patterns through with information sharing within the Coalition. This program, fusing experts from across the Coalition, had developed a sophisticated understanding of the foreign fighter networks and how to combat them. I had the privilege of meeting with our team of experts and was impressed by the

dedication of those engaged in the constant monitoring of networks from around the globe. Their findings have led to more than 30 FBI investigations and connected dots across borders.

One such example led to a strike on an ISIL terrorist named Sifal Sujan in Raqqa. Sujan was responsible for recruiting foreign terrorist fighters. In December, Coalition airstrikes killed 10 ISIL leaders, including Charaffe al-Mouadan, an external plotter with direct links to Abdelhamid Abaoud, the mastermind behind the Paris attacks.

The external plotting network remains a further core priority for our information gathering and targeting. The death of so-called Jihadi John helped degrade ISIL's external plotting efforts, and we are working to uproot these external plotting cells before threats can materialize.

Financing Networks

Countering terrorist financing is a two-part effort. First, we work to cut terrorists off from their sources of revenue to limit their ability to make money. Second, we focus on isolating them from the international financial system so they cannot spend their money.

We are now making progress degrading ISIL's ability to benefit from energy resources. ISIL still controls over 80 percent of Syria's energy resources, infrastructure and assets and the sector has accounted for 50 percent of ISIL's revenue – or some \$500 million per year since 2014. These numbers are now being reduced. ISIL oil revenues are down by about 30 percent. ISIL has since cut its fighter salaries in half, and is burdening the populations under its control with extortionist taxes to alleviate economic shortfalls.

Working closely with the Government of Iraq, we also have focused on decreasing liquidity in ISIL-controlled territory by preventing ISIL from acquiring cash. One of the most important steps to separate ISIL from its revenue was the Government of Iraq's August 2015 decision to ban and hold in escrow the distribution of government salaries into ISIL-held areas, thereby curtailing ISIL's ability to tax these funds. Recent Coalition strikes have also reduced the levels of cash in ISIL-controlled territory. Targeting of bulk cash sites in Mosul has incinerated millions of dollars under ISIL's control.

Much of this success was due to the successful raid last spring on an ISIL terrorist named Abu Sayyaf – Baghdadi's deputy and overall ISIL financial head. U.S. Special Operators recovered over seven terabytes of data in this raid: digital media, flash drives, CDs, and papers. These documents gave us tremendous insight into ISIL's financial situation and its vulnerabilities, which we are now exploiting. ISIL maintains a highly centralized management of its energy program overseen by nearly 100 members. It also carefully vets some 1,600 energy-related personnel (many of them foreign terrorist fighters) to tightly control revenue and distribution streams. Needless to say, many of these individuals are now dead – and the network is no longer able to operate in the open.

Propaganda and Recruiting Networks

Finally, we are now greatly degrading ISIL's ability to operate in cyberspace due to better knowledge of its propaganda and recruiting networks, cooperation from the Coalition, and participation from the private sector. For example, Twitter announced last week that it has eliminated nearly 125,000 ISI- related or ISIL-affiliated sites. Facebook and YouTube are similarly exercising vigilance to remove ISIL-related content from their platforms.

The State Department is now standing up a new Global Engagement Center to integrate and synchronize our communications against violent extremist groups, including ISIL and al-Qa'ida. This new center will shift our paradigm for countering violent extremist messaging. We will move away from a focus on direct messaging and toward an emphasis on empowering and enabling partners, governmental and non-governmental, across the globe. We will also plan social media campaigns to provide fact-based content and information (such as testimony from defectors) that undermines ISIL propaganda.

The Coalition is also enhancing this front in our global campaign. The counter-messaging against ISIL – which spews a false but effective religious-based message – cannot be done primarily from the United States or the United Kingdom. Muslim partners must take the lead. The UAE, for example, has now stood up the Sawab Center, a 24/7 counter-messaging platform. I visited the Sawab Center last year, and was impressed with the dedication of the young Emirati citizens engaged in this campaign. Malaysia is working to set up a similar platform to address the particular audience in Asia, which will be part of a global and networked alliance to counter ISIL on the Internet.

Any messaging campaign is enhanced by success. When ISIL was overtaking major cities, it had a successful messaging campaign – and our counter-campaign struggled. That is no longer the case. ISIL is increasingly on the defense. Its spokesman, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, is no longer touting great victories but rather seeking to explain away defeats. There will be more defeats to come – on the ground, and in cyberspace.

Degrading the Global Affiliates

As ISIL loses ground in Iraq and Syria it has sought to compensate by establishing new affiliates around the world. Most of these affiliates represent pre-existing terrorist groups (such as Boko Haram) exploiting the ISIL brand. Nonetheless, where we see clear coordination between the ISIL core in Syria and Iraq and Libya – we must focus on the threat and eliminate the connections that provide it oxygen.

Eight groups have become official ISIL affiliates over the past year, though, as noted, most existed previously as local terrorist groups and have pre-existing human and material networks. The branches in Libya, the Sinai, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen have evolved to pose threats to regional partners. The remaining four branches are in Afghanistan and Pakistan, West Africa – where it is also known as Boko Haram, and the Caucasus.

We know that ISIL has provided financial support from its base in Iraq and Syria to its branches in Libya, Sinai, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. We also know that the ISIL networks previously discussed facilitating expansion by dispatching capable individuals and funds, and promoting a dangerous transnational narrative. This makes it imperative to work as a global Coalition to identify and shut down networks running from the core to the affiliates.

The ISIL branch in Libya is the greatest cause for concern given its attacks to date in Libya and the threat it poses to our regional partners, such as Tunisia and Egypt. The President last month convened his National Security Council and directed them to continue our efforts to strengthen governance and to support ongoing counterterrorism efforts in Libya. Currently, we are supporting the Libyan Political Agreement and formation of the Government of National Accord (GNA). These steps will be important for providing a strong foundation on which the Libyans are able to fight and destroy the emerging ISIL threat to their country. Meanwhile, we are working with our colleagues at DOD and within the intelligence community to develop options for assisting the GNA as soon as it is stood up.

We also continue to monitor ISIL's attempts to establish additional affiliates, such as in Bangladesh and Somalia, and are engaging partners and host nations. There is a strong international consensus on the imperative to rid the world of this terrorist group – and while we focus on the core in Iraq and Syria we are also working to enhance the capacity of local partners to identify and eliminate emerging threats before they can materialize.

The Role of the Global Coalition

ISIL has reacted to these losses in Iraq and Syria by lashing out overseas – conducting the kinds of terrorist attacks that Beirut and Paris witnessed in November and Istanbul and Jakarta witnessed in January. These attacks have only strengthened international resolve.

Since November, the UK has extended its strikes into Syria and the Netherlands committed to doing the same last month. Canada just announced yesterday it will triple the size of its train, advise, and assist missions to help Iraqi Security Forces plan and conduct military operations. France, the UK, and Germany have deployed warships to the eastern Mediterranean. Italy, Australia, and Sweden will send more personnel to Iraq as trainers and advisers, and Germany has raised its deployment ceiling. Other Coalition partners have committed further material support to Syrian forces fighting ISIL, and training provided by the Coalition was instrumental in the December liberation of Ramadi.

Coalition members have also committed over \$80 million to stabilization programs in Iraq for areas liberated from ISIL, with millions more pledged. At a recent humanitarian conference in London over \$10 billion was pledged in aid for Syria. And just this month the Netherlands committed 75 million euros for immediate humanitarian relief, Japan committed \$105 million for Iraq and Syria IDPs and refugees, and Norway pledged an additional \$230 million in its 2016 budget for humanitarian assistance.

The barbaric attacks in Paris strengthened Coalition resolve. I was in Paris two days after those attacks with Secretary Kerry, where we met with President Hollande and the French

national security team. We agreed then to accelerate our efforts across the board, and we did – striking ISIL oil tankers, leaders, headquarters, and taking back territory. Last week, in Rome, 23 core members of the Coalition met to plan the next phases in the campaign and contributed substantial new resources from stabilization funds to police trainers. In Brussels later this week, Secretary Carter will hold a similar meeting with defense ministers to discuss the specific needs on the military side from strike aircraft to Special Forces.

Each member of the 66-strong counter-ISIL Coalition spanning every continent has found unique and meaningful ways to impact this fight. Our partners in the Islamic world, such as the UAE and Malaysia are taking the lead in counter ISIL’s messaging. Elite Canadian and Australian Special Forces are playing pivotal roles in Iraq, forward deployed with local ground partners helping them to take back and defend key cities like Ramadi and Kirkuk. Italy leveraged its professional Carabinieri to provide top of the line police training to Iraqi police, enabling a local hold force to restore law and order to liberated cities. Jordan and Turkey have taken in millions of refugees, and strained their budgets to the limit in providing top of the line humanitarian assistance. Each partner has a role to play and many have made a difference in this fight.

Conclusion

These are our primary approaches in the fight to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL: suffocate the core, constrict and shut off the networks, and contain and degrade the affiliates. Thanks again to the support of this Committee; we are now making progress against this barbaric terrorist organization.

We have a long ways to go given the enormous complexity of this challenge. I look forward to working with you over the coming year, and answering your questions.