

**HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
HEARING ON THE ADMINISTRATION’S STRATEGY FOR ISIL
WASHINGTON, DC
THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2014**

Chairman McKeon, Ranking Member Smith, Members of the Committee: I appreciate the opportunity this morning to discuss the President’s strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

As you all know, yesterday I joined President Obama at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, where he received a briefing from the Commander of U.S. Central Command, General Austin, on operational plans to implement our ISIL strategy, and met with representatives from more than 40 partner nations.

I am joined here today by the Joint Staff’s Director for Operations, Lieutenant General Bill Mayville. As our “J-3,” Lieutenant General Mayville helps oversee military operations in Iraq and works closely with CENTCOM to develop our military plans.

As many of you know, Chairman Dempsey is in Europe on a long-scheduled trip to meet with our key allies. He is consulting with our closest allies in the fight against ISIL, and tomorrow he will attend a NATO Chiefs of Defense conference in Lithuania – where they will discuss the ISIL threat as well as Russia’s aggression in Ukraine.

The Defense Department’s civilian and military leaders are in complete agreement with every component of the President’s strategy, and we strongly believe it offers the best opportunity to degrade and destroy ISIL. The President, Chairman Dempsey, General Austin and I are in full alignment on our objectives, and the military strategy necessary to achieve them.

However, as President Obama has repeatedly made clear, American military power alone cannot eradicate the threats posed by ISIL to the United States, our allies, and our friends and partners in the region. Iraq’s continued political progress toward a more inclusive and representative government will be critical. We believe that Iraq’s new Prime Minister is committed to bringing all Iraqis together against ISIL. To support him and the Iraqi people in their fight, the coalition will need to use all its instruments of power – military, law enforcement, economic, diplomatic, and intelligence – in coordination with countries in the region.

To succeed, this strategy will also require a strong partnership between the Executive Branch and Congress. The President has made it a priority to consult with Congressional leadership on the ISIL challenge, as have Vice President Biden, Secretary Kerry, and many senior members of the administration. I appreciate the opportunities I’ve had to discuss our strategy with members of this committee and other members of the Senate and the House over the last couple of weeks. We will continue these consultations.

The ISIL Threat to the United States

ISIL poses a real threat to all countries in the Middle East, our European allies, and to America.

In the last few months, the world has seen ISIL’s barbarity up close as its fighters advanced across western and northern Iraq and slaughtered thousands of innocent civilians – including Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish Iraqis, and religious minorities. ISIL’s murder of two U.S. journalists outraged the American people and exposed the depravity of ISIL’s ideology and tactics to the world. Over the weekend, we saw ISIL’s murder of a British citizen. ISIL now

controls a vast swath of eastern Syria and western and northern Iraq, including towns and cities in these areas.

ISIL has gained strength by exploiting the civil war in Syria and sectarian strife in Iraq. As it has seized territory across both countries and acquired significant resources and advanced weapons, ISIL has employed a violent combination of terrorist, insurgent, and conventional military tactics.

Its goal is to become the new vanguard of the global extremist movement and establish an extremist Islamic Caliphate across the Middle East. It considers itself the rightful inheritor of Osama bin Laden's legacy.

While ISIL clearly poses an immediate threat to American citizens in Iraq and our interests in the Middle East, we also know that thousands of foreign fighters – including Europeans and more than 100 Americans – have traveled to Syria. With passports that give them relative freedom of movement, these fighters can exploit ISIL's safe haven to plan, coordinate, and carry out attacks against the United States and Europe.

Although the intelligence community has not yet detected specific plotting against the U.S. homeland, ISIL has global aspirations and, as President Obama has made clear, ISIL's leaders have threatened America and our allies. If left unchecked, ISIL will directly threaten our homeland and our allies.

Building a Coalition Is Key to President Obama's Strategy

In his address to the nation last week, President Obama announced that the United States will lead a broad multinational coalition to roll back the ISIL threat.

More than 40 nations have already expressed their willingness to participate in this effort, and more than 30 nations have indicated their readiness to offer military support. President Obama, Vice President Biden, Secretary Kerry and I and others are working to unite and expand this coalition. At the NATO Summit in Wales, Secretary Kerry and I convened a meeting of key partners in the coalition. I then went to Georgia and Turkey. The Georgians made clear that they want to help. Turkey, by virtue of its geography and its common interest in destroying ISIL, which is holding nearly 50 Turkish diplomats hostage, will also play an important role in this effort.

Secretary Kerry convened a meeting in Jeddah last week with the Foreign Ministers from the six Gulf Cooperation Council nations, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. And all 22 nations of the Arab League adopted a resolution at their summit in Cairo calling for comprehensive measures to combat ISIL. Earlier this week in Paris, President Hollande of France – who traveled to Iraq last weekend – hosted a conference attended by the UN Security Council permanent members, European and Arab leaders, and representatives of the EU, Arab League and United Nations. They all pledged to help Iraq in the fight against ISIL, including through military assistance.

Key allies such as Canada, the United Kingdom, France, and Australia are already contributing military support and other partners have begun to make specific offers. At next week's UN General Assembly, we expect that additional nations will begin making commitments across the spectrum of capabilities, building on the strong Chapter VII UN Security Council Resolution adopted last month calling on all member states to take measures to counter ISIL and suppress the flow of foreign fighters to ISIL. Also, next week President Obama will chair a meeting of the UN Security Council to further mobilize the international community.

As you all know, former International Security Assistance Force Commander and Acting CENTCOM Commander General John Allen, has been designated to serve as Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. General Allen will work in a civilian, diplomatic capacity to coordinate, build, and sustain the coalition, drawing on his extensive experience in the region. He will work closely with General Austin to ensure that coalition efforts are aligned across all elements of our strategy.

Implementing President Obama’s Strategy

In his address to the nation, the President outlined the four elements of this strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. Let me now describe how we are implementing this whole of government approach.

1. Broader Air Campaign

First, in close coordination with the new Iraqi government, we are broadening our air campaign against ISIL targets.

To protect Americans threatened by ISIL’s advances and to prevent humanitarian catastrophe, the U.S. military has already conducted more than 170 successful airstrikes.

These strikes have disrupted ISIL tactically, and helped buy time for the Iraqi government to form an inclusive and broad-based governing coalition led by the new Prime Minister. That was one of President Obama’s essential preconditions for taking further action against ISIL, because the Iraqi people must be united in their opposition to ISIL in order to defeat them. This is ultimately *their* fight.

The new, broader air campaign against ISIL targets will enable the Iraqi security forces – including Kurdish forces – to continue to stay on the offensive and recapture territory from ISIL and hold it.

The President of the United States has the constitutional and statutory authority to use military force against ISIL in Syria as well as Iraq. Because ISIL operates freely across the Iraqi-Syrian border, and maintains a safe haven in Syria, our actions will not be restrained by a border that exists in name only.

CENTCOM’s plan includes targeted actions against ISIL safe havens in Syria – including its command and control, logistics capabilities, and infrastructure. General Dempsey and I have both approved the CENTCOM plan, which General Austin briefed to the President in Tampa yesterday.

2. Increased Support for Iraqi Security Forces & the Syrian Moderate Opposition

The second element of the strategy is to increase our support for forces fighting ISIL on the ground.

To support Iraqi and Kurdish forces, the President announced last week that we would deploy an additional 475 American troops to Iraq.

Part of that number includes approximately 150 advisors and support personnel to supplement forces already in Iraq conducting assessments of the Iraqi Security Forces. This assessment mission is now transitioning to an advise-and-assist mission, with more than 15 teams embedding with Iraqi Security Forces at the headquarters level to provide strategic and operational advice and assistance.

By the time all these forces arrive, there will be approximately 1,600 U.S. personnel in Iraq responding to the ISIL threat. But, as the President reaffirmed yesterday in Tampa, American forces will not have a combat mission on the ground.

Instead, these advisors will continue to support Iraqi and Kurdish forces, including the government's plans to stand up Iraqi National Guard units to help Sunni communities defeat ISIL.

The best counterweights to ISIL are local forces and local citizens. As you know, in June, the President asked Congress for the necessary authority for DoD to train and equip moderate Syrian opposition forces, and \$500 million to fund this program. I appreciate yesterday's House vote to amend the Continuing Resolution with language authorizing this train and equip program.

Saudi Arabia will host the training program for this mission, and the Saudis have offered funding and assistance with recruiting and vetting.

The \$500 million request the President made in June for this train and equip program reflects CENTCOM's estimate of the cost to train, equip, and resupply more than 5,000 opposition forces over one year. This is the beginning of a multi-year, scalable, effort designed to eventually produce an even larger opposition force.

The package of assistance that we initially provide would consist of small arms, vehicles, and basic equipment like communications, as well as tactical and more advanced training. As these forces prove their effectiveness on the battlefield, we would be prepared to provide increasingly sophisticated types of assistance to the most trusted commanders and capable forces. The goal is not to achieve numerical parity with ISIL, but to ensure that moderate Syrian forces are superior fighters. Our goal is to undercut ISIL's recruitment ... and to enable the Syrian opposition to add to the pressure ISIL is already facing from the Iraqi Security Forces and Kurdish Forces. We want to force ISIL into a three-front battle against more capable local forces.

A rigorous vetting process will be critical to the success of this program. DoD will work closely with the State Department, the intelligence community, and our partners in the region to screen and vet the forces we train and equip. We will monitor them closely to ensure that weapons do not fall into the hands of radical elements of the opposition, ISIL, the Syrian regime, or other extremist groups. There will always be risk in a program like this, but we believe that risk is justified given the threat ISIL poses – and the necessity of having capable partners on the ground in Syria.

As we pursue this program, the United States will continue to press for a political resolution to the Syrian conflict resulting in the end of the Assad regime. Assad has lost all legitimacy to govern. He has created the conditions that allowed ISIL and other terrorist groups to gain ground and terrorize and slaughter the Syrian population. The United States will not coordinate or cooperate with the Assad regime.

3. Preventing Homeland Attacks

The third element of the President's strategy is an all-inclusive approach to preventing attacks from ISIL against the homelands of the United States and our allies. In concert with our international partners, the United States will draw on intelligence, law enforcement, diplomatic, and economic tools to cut off ISIL's funding, improve our intelligence, strengthen homeland defense, and stem the flow of foreign fighters.

The United States and our allies have been stepping up efforts to identify and counter threats emanating from Syria against our homelands. This includes increased intelligence sharing. Working with DoD’s partners at the National Counterterrorism Center, the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, and across the Intelligence Community, our terrorist screening and analytic databases now have special threat cases linking together known actors and potential foreign fighters, making it easier and faster to update them regularly with new information. DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson has directed enhanced screening at 25 overseas airports with direct flights to the U.S. – a step that the United Kingdom and other countries have also taken.

The Departments of Justice and Homeland Security have launched an initiative to partner with local communities to counter extremist recruiting, and the Department of Treasury’s Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence is working with coalition partners to disrupt ISIL’s financing and expose their activities.

4. Continued Humanitarian Assistance

The final element of the President’s strategy is to continue providing humanitarian assistance to innocent civilians displaced or threatened by ISIL.

Alongside the Government of Iraq, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and France, U.S. troops have already delivered lifesaving aid to thousands of threatened Iraqi civilians on Mt. Sinjar and the Iraqi town of Amirli.

Our total humanitarian assistance to displaced Iraqis is now more than \$186 million in fiscal year 2014.

The United States is also the single largest donor of humanitarian assistance for the millions of Syrians affected by the civil war. Since the start of the Syrian conflict, the United States has committed almost \$3 billion in humanitarian assistance to those affected by the civil war.

Conclusion

All four elements of this strategy require a significant commitment of resources on the part of the United States and our coalition partners.

This effort will not be easy or brief. We are at war with ISIL, as we are with al Qaeda. But destroying ISIL will require more than military efforts alone . . . it will require political progress in the region, and effective partners on the ground in Iraq and Syria. As President Obama said yesterday in Tampa, “we cannot do for the Iraqis what they must do for themselves. . . we can’t do it for them, but this is an effort that calls on America’s unique abilities – and responsibilities – to lead.”

As the Congress and the Administration work together, we know this effort will take time. The President has outlined a clear, comprehensive, and workable strategy to achieve our goals and protect our interests. Thank you for your continued support and partnership.

Thank you.

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