

**SECRETARY OF DEFENSE ASH CARTER
OPENING STATEMENT BEFORE THE HOUSE ARMED SERVICES
COMMITTEE ON MIDDLE EAST STRATEGY AND COUNTER-ISIL
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 17, 2015**

Chairman Thornberry, Ranking Member Smith, Members of the Committee: thank you for inviting me here today. Thank you also for keeping a wide-ranging and long-term perspective on the challenges and opportunities for America and its leadership throughout the world. Just a couple of weeks ago, I was in Singapore, Vietnam, and India; next week I will be in Germany, Estonia, and Belgium. I understand that your focus in this hearing is current developments in the Middle East.

Broader Middle East Strategy

The Middle East is undergoing a period of great social and political turmoil with a number and variety of cross-cutting geopolitical developments. Our strategy in the region is grounded in America's core national interests, and it's tailored to address specific circumstances in various places like Iraq, Syria and Iran. And it leverages American leadership with efforts of coalition of allies and partners.

Our core interests, for example, drive our actions to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. Similarly, they dictate that we not let up until we have destroyed ISIL and al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorists throughout the region that pose dangers to the homeland, friends, and allies. The past few weeks serve as a reminder to terrorists bent on harming the United States and our interests, whether they are in Syria, Libya, or Yemen – we have the capability to reach out and strike them. Meanwhile, the security of Israel will always be one of my top priorities. And we will continue to hone important security relationships with our partners in the Gulf, bolster their security, and ensure freedom of navigation.

The pursuit of our nation's core interests in the region is a strategy based on tireless diplomacy backed by formidable military power and dedicated capacity building to buttress and leverage the contributions of others – and especially those in the region themselves.

That's why we have 35,000 forces postured throughout the region, enabling us to strike ISIL and al-Qaeda terrorists and check Iranian malign influence.

That's why we're assuring Israel's continued qualitative military edge, and why we're working with our Gulf partners to make them more capable of defending themselves against external aggression.

That's why we're supporting Saudi Arabia in protecting its territory and people from Houthi attacks, and supporting international efforts to prevent Iranian shipments of lethal equipment from reaching Houthi and Saleh-affiliated forces in Yemen.

And that's why the United States is supporting efforts to pursue political settlements to crises throughout the region, from Yemen to Libya to Syria.

Counter-ISIL

While I'm prepared for a range of questions related to DoD's role in the Middle East, I'd like to focus on the immediate issue that I understand the Committee is interested in – the U.S.-led coalition's strategy to defeat ISIL.

ISIL presents a grave threat to our friends and allies in the Middle East; elsewhere around the world from Africa and Europe to parts of Asia because of its steady metastasis; and to our

homeland because of its avowed intentions to strike and recruit in this country. ISIL must be – and will be – dealt a lasting defeat.

The strategy to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL constructed by President Obama draws upon all the national security agencies of the U.S. government: intelligence, law enforcement, diplomacy, and others. The strategy and its associated military campaign involve a global coalition, reflecting both the world-wide consensus on the need to counter this threat and the practical requirement for others to do their part. And the counter-ISIL strategy has nine so-called lines of effort, reflecting the breadth of this challenge and the tools needed to combat it.

The first and most critical line of effort is the political one, led by the State Department. In Iraq, this involves building more effective, inclusive, multi-sectarian governance. Each of the other lines of effort requires success in this line because it's the only way to create support among local forces – and local people – that is necessary to make progress against extremism stick.

The next two lines of effort are interconnected – to deny ISIL safe haven, and to build partner capacity in Iraq and Syria. Both are led by DoD, which, alongside coalition partners, is conducting a bombing campaign from the air, advising and assisting Iraqi security forces on the ground, and training and equipping trusted local forces.

I will address our military's current execution of these two lines of effort in a minute, but I want to underscore a crucial point about our campaign in Iraq and also Syria: it requires capable, motivated, legitimate, local ground forces to seize, clear, and hold terrain – this is the only way to ensure a truly lasting, enduring defeat of this movement.

The fourth line of effort is enhancing intelligence collection on ISIL, led by the National Counterterrorism Center. The fifth line of effort, disrupting ISIL's finances, is co-led by Treasury and State. Lines of effort six and seven, both co-led by State and the NCTC, are to counter ISIL's messaging and disrupt the flow of foreign fighters to and from ISIL, both of which are critical in today's connected and networked world. The eighth line of effort, providing humanitarian support to those displaced by or vulnerable to ISIL, is led by State. Finally, the Department of Homeland Security and FBI are working together to protect the homeland – the ninth line of effort – by disrupting terrorist threats. The effective execution of all nine of these lines of effort by the United States and its coalition partners is plainly necessary to ensure overall success.

Execution of DoD's Lines of Effort

Let me turn to the execution of DoD's two lines of effort, beginning with the U.S.-led campaign of air strikes against ISIL in Iraq and Syria. This effort has produced some clear results in limiting ISIL's freedom of movement, constraining its ability to reinforce its fighters, and impeding command and control. It's enabled key achievements for local forces – including the very recent success of anti-ISIL forces who took the key town of Tal Abyad. The airstrikes are also buying critical time and space required to carry out DoD's second line of effort – developing the capacity and capabilities of legitimate local ground forces.

The ground campaign is a work in progress. The Iraqi Security Forces were severely degraded after Mosul fell last June, when four divisions dissolved. The combination of disunity, deserters, and so-called ghost soldiers – who are paid on the books but don't show up or don't exist – has greatly diminished their capacity.

However, understanding these challenges does not change reality – ISIL's lasting defeat still requires local forces to fight and prevail on the ground. We can and will continue to develop

and enable local forces, because we know from experience that putting U.S. combat troops on the ground as a substitute for local forces will not produce enduring results. That's why DoD seeks to bolster Iraq's security forces to be capable of winning back – and then defending and holding – the ISIL-controlled portions of the Iraqi state.

Strengthening Execution

What we saw in Ramadi last month was deeply disappointing – and illustrated the importance of a capable and motivated Iraqi ground force. In the days that followed, all of us on the President's national security team, at his direction, took another hard look at our campaign across all the lines of effort. At DoD, I convened my team before, during, and after my trip to the Asia-Pacific to examine our execution of DoD's lines of effort, and to prepare options for the President if his approval was required for any enhancements we identified.

In our meetings at both the Pentagon and the White House, we determined that while we have the right strategic framework, execution of the campaign can and should be strengthened...especially on the ground.

We determined that our training efforts could be enhanced and thus are now focusing on increasing participation in and throughput of our training efforts, working closely with the Iraqi government and stressing the focus on drawing in Sunni forces, which are underrepresented in the Iraqi Security Forces.

We also determined that our equipping of the Iraqi Security Forces had proceeded too slowly. This process was earlier sometimes delayed by bureaucracy in Baghdad, but occasionally also in Washington. That is why we are now expediting delivery of essential equipment and materiel, like anti-tank capabilities and counter-IED equipment, to the Iraqi security forces – including Kurdish and Sunni tribal forces.

We also determined that we could enable Iraqi Security Forces with more tailored advice and assistance, including with critical outreach to local Sunni communities.

That is why on advice from Chairman Dempsey and General Austin, and at my recommendation, last week President Obama authorized the deployment of 450 personnel to Iraq's Taqqadum military base in Anbar Province to establish an additional site where we could advise and assist the Iraqi security forces. Situated between Ramadi and Fallujah, Taqqadum is a key location for engaging Sunni tribes, and Prime Minister Abadi, Iraqi military officials, and Sunni leaders have all committed to using Taqqadum to reinvigorate and expedite the recruitment of Sunni fighters.

Our forces will also provide much-needed operational advice and planning support to the Iraqi Security Forces' Anbar Operations Center located there. We expect that this move will open a new dimension in our and Iraq's efforts to recruit Sunnis into the fight and to help the Iraqis coordinate and plan the critical effort to roll back ISIL in Anbar province.

And Secretary Kerry and I have agreed to begin a process to continually assess execution of our campaign – starting with improving coordination across our respective lines of effort.

Observations

Execution, however, is a two-way street, and our training efforts in Iraq have thus far been slowed by a lack of trainees – we simply haven't received enough recruits. Of the 24,000 Iraqi Security Forces we had originally envisioned training at our four sites by this fall, we've only received enough recruits to be able to train about 7,000, in addition to about 2,000 Counterterrorism Service personnel. As I've told Iraqi leaders, while the United States is open to

supporting Iraq more than we already are, we must see a greater commitment from all parts of the Iraqi government.

There are positive signs. I've met with Prime Minister Abadi, Iraqi Kurdistan Regional President Barzani, and just last week with Speaker Jabouri of Iraq's parliament. They all fully understand the need to empower more localized, multi-sectarian Iraqi security forces and address persistent organizational and leadership failures.

And because a sovereign, multi-sectarian Iraq is more likely to ensure a lasting defeat of ISIL, the United States must continue working with and through the Iraqi government in all our actions – including our support for Kurdish and Sunni tribal forces. Our efforts need to reinforce inclusivity and multi-sectarianism, not fuel a reversal to sectarianism which would make the lasting defeat of ISIL harder, not easier.

The situation in Syria is even more complex, because of the lack of a legitimate government partner and the many competing forces there. Regardless, we will continue striking ISIL in Syria with the long reach of our airstrikes and operators. And we will continue working with Syria's neighbors to impede the flow of foreign fighters into and out of Syria and Iraq. Our train-and-equip mission in Syria has been challenging, but the requirement for a capable and motivated counter-ISIL ground force there also means we must persist in our efforts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that success in this campaign can and must be assured. It will take time, and require consistent effort on everyone's part – the entire U.S. government, our entire international coalition, and, most important, the Iraqi and Syrian peoples. Together, and with your support – including your support for America's troops and their families, for which I, and they, are ever grateful – we will achieve ISIL's lasting defeat.

I would be happy to address your questions.

Thank you.

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