

# **U.S. Strategy for Iraq, Syria and the Global Jihadist Threat**

Testimony by Michael G. Vickers  
Former Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence

House Armed Services Committee

January 12, 2016

Chairman Thornberry, Ranking Member Smith, it is a privilege and pleasure to be with the House Armed Services Committee this morning to provide an outside view on U.S. strategy for Iraq, Syria and the global jihadist threat. It is great to see you both.

The old order has collapsed in the Middle East, and several conflicts are intensifying in scale and scope across and beyond the region that threaten vital U.S. national security interests. There is a continuing assault on the international system by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, al-Qa'ida, and associated global jihadi groups and an expansion of the global jihadist threat; there is expanding internal and sectarian conflict across the region; and there is a bid for regional hegemony by Iran and a widening proxy war between Saudi Arabia and its allies, and Iran and its allies. Ungoverned space is growing substantially, large populations are being displaced and radicalized, and the prospect of a region-wide war is increasing. Several U.S. allies and partners in the region face growing threats to their stability, and they increasingly doubt our resolve. Outside powers have been drawn into the region, and our adversaries do not feel sufficiently deterred by American power.

Given these multiple negative trends and their impact on American interests, U.S. strategy in the region needs be intensified significantly across several lines of effort, in my judgment. I want to state at the outset that the conflicts ravaging the Middle East are broad and deep, and that there is no quick or easy strategic solution to all of them. The region is undergoing a generational conflict, and bringing it to an end across its several dimensions will require a series of integrated and sustained campaigns using all elements of national power. And, it is only one of three challenges to world order that we face.

I want to further emphasize that there are good Americans working very hard on our Iraq, Syria and counterterrorism strategy. That said, with the intensifications and accelerations of strategy I will propose below, I believe the wars in the Middle East can be fought by leveraging U.S. strengths while minimizing our vulnerabilities. In general terms, doing so requires that we seek to exploit our adversaries' vulnerabilities, making them play our game, or in some cases, beating them at their own game when they make themselves vulnerable, and getting the politics right. I believe strongly that these wars must be fought, albeit in large measure through others, and that they must be won.

The aims of U.S. strategy must be to prevent a major attack on the U.S. homeland and defeat the global jihadist threat; to reassure our allies and partners and contain Iran; and to restore a favorable balance of power and greater stability across the Middle East. I would now like to offer a few thoughts on ways U.S. strategy could be made more effective in Syria and Iraq, against ISIL, al-Qa'ida and other global jihadists, and in the region more broadly.

### **Intensifying Our Efforts in Syria and Iraq**

Syria is the center of gravity for Middle Eastern conflict. It has the largest concentration of global jihadists – both ISIL and al-Qa'ida – bent on attacking the West, and the Syrian Civil War and the continued existence of the Assad regime remain by far the largest draw for global jihadists; it is also a principal battleground in the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It is where the battle for the future of the Middle East is largely being waged. A coalition victory in Syria would reshape the Middle East. It will roll back Iranian power, and deal a significant blow to the global jihadist movement.

U.S. strategy, however, has treated Syria as the secondary theater in the Iraq-Syria War. Two-thirds of Coalition airstrikes to date have been in Iraq, as have the bulk of our capacity building efforts. We need to shift to a “Syria-first” strategy, and reinvigorate our efforts to remove Assad from power.

Second, drawing inspiration from our Afghanistan campaign in late 2001 that overthrew the Taliban/al-Qa'ida regime in two months, and from our defeat of the Red Army in the Afghanistan in the 1980s, we need to significantly intensify our operations in Syria. The difference between our success in Afghanistan in late 2001 and in the 1980s and our lack of success in Syria the past 16 months is principally a function of the quantity and quality of force we are bringing to bear, and the ways in which we are employing our forces. In Afghanistan in late 2001, we conducted a far more intense air campaign – executing 8-to-10 times the number of combat strikes in Afghanistan on a daily basis as we have in Syria, and brought far greater mass to bear, in terms of bomb tonnage dropped, without sacrificing precision. The effects of air power were also exploited by an indigenous ground force, led by CIA and Special Forces advisors, which resulted in the rapid defeat of the Taliban/al-Qa'ida regime.

Strike sorties and the weight of strikes need to be significantly increased, as does coalition support – both quantitative and qualitative – for the moderate Syrian opposition. In Afghanistan in the 1980s, we provided the Afghanistan resistance in one month what it has taken the coalition years to provide in Syria. It is not too late to decisively support the Syrian opposition – we did not develop a war-winning strategy until early in the sixth year of our covert war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Without substantially increasing pressure on the Assad regime, there will be no peace in Syria, and there will be no defeat of ISIL and al-Qa'ida in Syria.

Let me now briefly turn to Iraq and make four points. First, as the retaking of Ramadi shows, a more intense application of air power and more aggressive use of U.S. combat advisors is also a good strategy in Iraq.

Second, the key to a Sunni tribal uprising against ISIL is decisive U.S. engagement. The key to sustaining it is the devolution of political power in Iraq across sectarian lines.

Third, we are in a competition with Iran for influence in Iraq. How sectarian identity, politics, and a post-war settlement will shape the future of Iraq and Syria remains to be determined, but our competition for influence with Iran is one we should seek to win.

Fourth, raids by Special Operations Forces would contribute an important line of effort to our Syria and Iraq strategy, but to be effective, the tempo of operations must dramatically increase. For this to happen, however, the Iraqi Government must approve a significant increase in the number of U.S. Special Operations personnel on its territory.

### **Defeating the Global Jihadists**

The global jihad has metastasized, and ISIL and al-Qa'ida are in a competition for leadership of the global jihad. Time is not on our side. Global jihadists cannot be contained; they must be defeated, and continually disrupted while they are in the process of being defeated. Sanctuaries must be denied.

ISIL, as its name implies, is a de facto state. It holds territory, controls population, maintains a capital, and funds its operations from resources in exploits on territory it controls. All of this can and should be taken away – in months, not years. Our strategic error before 9/11 was in not moving more aggressively to eliminate al-Qa'ida's sanctuary in Afghanistan before the attacks occurred, and in not developing a robust Global Counterterrorism Network that would improve our odds of disrupting the attacks. Our principal error today lies in conducting a gradual campaign that allows ISIL to endure as a state.

Disrupting and defeating global jihadists beyond Syria and Iraq will require roughly the same ways – precision air strikes exploited by indigenous ground forces led by U.S. advisors – and sufficient means. Intelligence is our first line of defense, and the Global Counterterrorism Network that we lead is our principal means of applying counterforce.

Policy changes that have restricted the scale and scope of Predator strikes the past three years needed to be reconsidered. The Predator has been our most effective weapon in our campaign against the global jihadists, and the size of the Predator fleet will remain a critical limiting factor in the conduct of our campaigns.

Greater engagement in Libya, in both the air and on the ground, is urgently required. ISIL is expanding its presence there, and is a growing threat. Current force levels will also need to be sustained in Afghanistan into 2017 and likely beyond, not only to keep

Taliban gains to tolerable levels, but also to prevent al-Qa'ida from reestablishing its sanctuary there. Maintenance of key forward bases, support by U.S. enablers and combat advisors, and an aggressive counterterrorism strategy will be key to success.

Syria is the central battle for the future of the Middle East, but our campaign against the global jihadists will necessarily be a distributed one, spanning multiple countries and continents. The global jihadists will not be defeated until the ungoverned space in which they operate is eliminated, their ideology is discredited, and stability is returned to the Middle East. This will require a significant investment in capacity building of indigenous forces, irregular as well as regular, and sustained U.S. engagement.

### **Reassuring Our Allies and Containing Iran**

Although it is beyond the scope of this hearing, I would like to say a few words about U.S. strategy for Iran and the need to reassure our Arab allies. We have at present only a partial containment strategy toward Iran, focused on nuclear arms control. Iran remains on the offensive in its quest for regional hegemony.

To employ a 1980s analogy, our relationship with Iran is more like our relationship with the former Soviet Union than it is like our relationship with Deng Xiaoping's China. With the former Soviet Union, despite the ebbs and flows of détente, arms control, perestroika and glasnost, we did not abandon our strategies of containment until we had won the Cold War. Indeed, we sustained our Afghanistan strategy not only until the Red Army withdrew, but through the final phase of the conflict with the Soviet-backed, Communist Afghan government. China became a critical ally of ours during the 1980s, but it was only after they had abandoned being a revolutionary power, something Iran has yet to do.

Our Gulf Arab allies feel increasingly under siege as they confront a multi-front war with Sunni radicals and Iran, and are increasingly estranged from us. Further estrangement would pose a serious challenge to our campaign against the global jihadists, and will result in our allies becoming more vulnerable to Iranian and radical Islamic aggression. Reassuring our Gulf Arab allies, strengthening our fraying Arab-Turkish-Kurdish coalition, and containing Iranian expansion are thus critical to our broader efforts in the Middle East.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to your questions.

*Michael Vickers, a former Special Forces Officer and CIA Operations Officer, was Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, 2011-2015, and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations, Low-Intensity Conflict and Interdependent Capabilities, 2007-2011.*