

Secretary Kerry's Opening Statement HFAC Hearing on the ISIL Threat

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and Members of the Committee, thank you for holding this hearing on an issue where the stakes are so high and a full understanding of the ISIL threat and our strategy for defeating it is so important.

And before we begin, I'd like to congratulate you and your colleagues in the House of Representatives for the strong, bipartisan vote you took last night to authorize the President's request to train and equip the moderate Syrian opposition. This is an essential piece of our strategy against ISIL – one I'll get into a bit more in just a moment – and we are very grateful for your support.

During the years I had the privilege of serving in the U.S. Senate, working with different Administrations, it always struck me that American foreign policy works best when there's a genuine discussion, a dialogue, a vetting of ideas back and forth between Congress and the executive branch. So I want to make sure that by the time we're done here today, I've heard from you, you've shared your views and ideas, and that you also have a clear understanding of what we've done so far, what we're doing now, and where we go next – because your input and your support are absolutely critical to the success of this effort.

I want to underscore at the start – there are some debates of the past 20 years that could and probably will fill up books and documentaries for a long time. Iraq is one.

Iraq has caused some of the most heated debates and deepest divisions of the past decade – a series of difficult issues about which people can honestly disagree. But I didn't come here today to rehash those debates. The issue that confronts us today is one on which we should all agree: ISIL must be defeated. Period. End of story. And, collectively, we're all going to be measured by how we carry out this mission.

I'd also underscore – the same is true on an international level. And even in a region that is virtually defined by division, leaders who have viewed the last 11 years very differently – and who agree on very little in general – are more unified on this subject than just about any other.

So as President Obama described last week when he spoke directly to the American people, we have a clear strategy to degrade, defeat and destroy ISIL.

But the United States will not go it alone. That is why we are building a global coalition. And as I traveled around the world this week, the question foreign leaders were asking me was not whether they should join the coalition, but how they can help.

We are also not starting from scratch. This is an effort we have been building over time, both on our own and with the help of our international partners: Even before President Obama delivered his speech last week, nearly 40 countries had joined in contributing to the effort to strengthen the capacity of Iraq including military assistance, training and humanitarian assistance.

We have been focused on ISIL since its inception as the successor to AQI in 2013. Back in January we ramped up our assistance to the Iraqi Security Forces, increasing our intelligence surveillance reconnaissance, or ISR, flights to get a better picture of the battlefield and expediting weapons like Hellfire missiles for the Iraqis to bring to bear in this fight.

Early this summer, the ISIL threat accelerated when it effectively erased the Iraq-Syria border and the Mosul Dam fell. The President acted deliberately and decisively. We further surged our ISR missions over Iraq. We immediately set up joint operation centers in Baghdad and Erbil. And our special forces conducted a very detailed field assessment of Iraqi Security Forces and Kurdish forces.

By the time ISIL launched the offensive in the north, President Obama authorized limited air strikes against ISIL and humanitarian missions to protect American personnel, prevent major catastrophes and support Iraqi Security Forces and Kurdish forces that were fighting bravely to do the same. To date, we've launched more than 150 airstrikes. And it is because of the platforms we put in place back in June that those strikes have been highly precise and incredibly effective, including in the operations to break the siege of Sinjar Mountain, retake Mosul Dam, and resupply the town of Amerli.

These actions blunted ISIL's momentum and created time and space for us to put in place the two pillars of a comprehensive strategy against ISIL: an inclusive Iraq government, and a broad international coalition.

We redoubled our efforts to help move the Iraqi political process forward. We were clear-eyed about the fact that any strategy against ISIL would only succeed with a strong, inclusive government in Iraq, with an ambitious national agenda, prepared to unite the country against ISIL.

With our support, after several weeks of complex negotiations, President Masum nominated Haider al-Abadi to serve as Prime Minister. Shortly thereafter, Prime Minister al-Abadi – again with our support – was able to form his cabinet and present it to the parliament, and, last week, that government was approved.

This was a long and difficult process, led by the Iraqis, with our help as needed. The result was something Iraq had never before seen in its history: an election deemed credible by the United Nations, followed by peaceful transition of power, without any US troops on the ground.

I traveled to Baghdad last week, immediately after the new government was approved, to meet with Prime Minister al-Abadi and other leaders throughout the Iraqi government. And I was very encouraged to hear them discuss in detail the government's National Plan to unite the country against ISIL, and empower local communities – particularly in Sunni areas – to mobilize, defeat ISIL, and maintain security control in their area.

Throughout the entire process, we were in touch with regional leaders to ensure that a new and inclusive government would receive support from the region. Today, after years, even decades, of relative isolation from their neighbors, the Iraqis have begun to reintegrate with the broader Arab community. For example, last week, they were not just invited but warmly welcomed in Saudi Arabia, and the Saudis have now said they'll reopen an embassy in Baghdad.

With this new, inclusive Iraqi government in place, it's time for the defensive strategy we and our international partners have pursued thus far to transition to an offensive strategy – one that harnesses the capabilities of the entire world to eliminate the ISIL threat, once and for all.

President Obama outlined this strategy in detail, so – while I am happy to answer any questions you may have – I will be brief in walking through it again now.

At its core, our strategy is centered on a global coalition that will collaborate closely across a number of specific areas – including, certainly, on direct and indirect military support.

To be clear, military assistance comes in a range of forms, from training and equipping, to logistics and airlift. And countries from inside and outside of the region are already providing support in these veins. So I have no doubt whatsoever

we will have the capabilities and the resources we need to succeed militarily. And President Obama made clear we will be expanding the military campaign to take on ISIL in Iraq, in Syria – wherever it is found.

But this is not the Gulf War in 1991, and it is not the Iraq War in 2003 – for a couple of reasons. Number one, U.S. ground troops will not be sent into combat in this conflict. From the last decade we know that a sustainable strategy is not U.S. ground forces – it is enabling local forces to do what they must for themselves and their country. I want to be clear: the U.S. troops that have been deployed to Iraq do not and will not have a combat mission. Instead, they will support Iraqi forces on the ground as they fight for their own country against these terrorists.

And in Syria, the on-the-ground combat will be done by the moderate opposition – which serves as the best counter-weight in Syria to extremists like ISIL. We know that as ISIL gets weaker, this moderate opposition will get stronger, which will be critical in our efforts to bring about the political solution necessary to address the crisis in Syria once and for all. That’s one of the reasons why we’re so grateful that the House of Representatives yesterday authorized the opposition train-and-equip mission, and why it’s so critical that the Senate do the same. But it’s also critical that the opposition makes the most of this additional support – the kind of support they’ve been requesting for years – and take this opportunity to prove to the world that they can be a viable alternative to Assad.

Number two, this is more than just a military coalition because the objective requires more than a military victory. This mission isn’t just about taking out an enemy on the battlefield. It’s about taking out an entire network – decimating and discrediting a militant cult masquerading as a religious movement.

It’s similar to what we have been doing to Al Qaeda these last years.

The bottom line is we will not be successful with a military campaign alone. Nor are we asking every country to play a military role – we don’t need every country to play a military role and we don’t want every country to play a military role.

Only a holistic campaign can accomplish our objectives. That is why we are focused on multiple lines of effort.

In addition to the military campaign, it will be equally important for the global coalition to dry up ISIL’s illicit funding, to stop the foreign fighters who carry passports from countries around the world including the United States, to continue

to deliver urgently needed humanitarian assistance, and finally, to repudiate the gross distortion of Islam that ISIL is spreading, and put an end to the sermons by extremists that brainwash young men to join these movements and commit mass atrocities in the name of God. I was very encouraged to hear that Saudi Arabia's top clerics came out and declared terrorism a "heinous crime" under Sharia law – and that perpetrators should be made an example of. Preventing an individual from joining ISIL for example, or from getting to the battle field in the first place, is the most effective measure we can take.

I want to emphasize – when we say "global coalition," we mean it. This is not a threat that a single country or region can take on alone. And there is a critical role for nearly every country to play.

So we are committed to working with countries in every corner of the globe to match the campaign's requirements with the capabilities they are willing to bring to bear. I spent the past week in the Middle East and in Europe, meeting with dozens of leaders whose partnership will be essential to our success.

And I can tell you today: every single person I spoke to over the course of my trip expressed strong support for our mission and a willingness to help in some way. We had excellent meetings, beginning at the NATO Summit in Wales, and then in Jeddah. The Jeddah Communique represents a strong, comprehensive and unified statement of all the ways in which the region is committed to supporting this fight. Our meetings in Baghdad, in Cairo, and in Ankara also advanced the process. And at the conference earlier this week in Paris, we took another step along the road to the UNGA and the UNSC sessions next week.

We have a plan and we know the players. Our focus now is determining what role each country will play.

Later this week we will have more to say about our partners and contributions, and we fully expect the coalition to grow, evolve and coalesce well beyond UNGA. That's why we've asked one of our most respected and experienced military leaders – General John Allen – to come to the State Department and oversee this effort. And he's already hitting the ground running – he was at work last Friday at 7:00 am, less than 24 hours after we sealed the deal for him to do this job, and he and I had a long meeting yesterday, just a few hours after I landed in DC. General Allen will be working with one of our foremost Iraq experts, Ambassador Brett McGurk, as well as Assistant Secretary Anne Patterson, who was so much a part of the effort against Al Qaeda when she was our Ambassador in Pakistan.

The fact is that, if we do this right, then this effort could become a global model for isolating and undermining other extremist threats around the world. But now we must be laser focused on ISIL. And I'm confident that, with our strategy in place and our international partners by our side, we will have all that we need to succeed in degrading and ultimately destroying this monstrous organization – wherever it exists.

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