

## **“The Growing Strategic Threat of ISIS”**

Testimony Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs

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Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, Members of the Committee, thank you for holding this hearing. The American people remain concerned about the threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and their government’s response. Today I’d like to touch briefly on the nature of the threat and then focus specifically on the diplomatic aspects of the strategy to combat it. How we deploy our non-military tools will be just as important as the use of force to degrade and to defeat ISIL, an organization that is part army, part vicious ideology, and part exploitative social movement.

### **Use of Force Against ISIL: An Evolved Threat**

A number of distinct characteristics of ISIL require the use of military force in a way that is tailored to the threat posed by the group to American interests. First, ISIL’s savage tactics are at the very core of its ideology. While al-Qaeda justifies individual suicide bombing attacks against civilians and civilian areas through fatwas explaining the conditional necessity, ISIL has adopted a new ideology, manipulating select stories from Islamic history and modern jihadi texts to redefine jihad and to generate a blanket justification for violence, including against women and children.<sup>1</sup> Second, the group has adopted a military doctrine that is not based on the typical terrorist logic of the weak fighting the powerful. ISIL aspires to fight states and their militaries as a peer. To defeat states, ISIL calculates that random acts of violence are insufficient. It believes in the necessity of full-blown military campaigns.<sup>2</sup> Finally, ISIL believes in the importance of escalatory, sensationalist acts of violence intended to shock and deter the public. The Jordanian people, and the world, were horrified by the images of the Jordanian pilot immolated by ISIL. Yet the group considers such public savagery core to its approach, rather than a risky act that is likely to alienate potential supporters in the Muslim world.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, ISIL leaders refuse to follow traditional chains of command. In early 2013, the group defied orders from al-Qaeda’s leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, to kill fewer civilians in Syria. These tensions led to an al-Qaeda communiqué issued in February 2014 disavowing any connection

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<sup>1</sup> Hassan Hassan, “ISIS has reached new depths of depravity. But there is a logic behind it,” *The Guardian*, February 8, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/08/isis-islamic-state-ideology-sharia-syria-iraq-jordan-pilot>.

<sup>2</sup> Terrence McCoy, “The Battle for Kobane and the Islamic State’s ‘Swarm’ War Strategy,” *The Washington Post*, October 8, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/10/08/the-battle-for-kobane-and-the-islamic-states-swarm-war-strategy/>.

<sup>3</sup> Michael W.S. Ryan, “From Theory to Action: The Rationale Behind the Re-Establishment of the Caliphate,” *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, 12 no 15, July 25, 2014, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=42670&cHash=d35aeb2c012e5fc38e5a06df2e2a4cc8#.VNtWVY6xWfg](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42670&cHash=d35aeb2c012e5fc38e5a06df2e2a4cc8#.VNtWVY6xWfg).

with ISIL because of the latter's excessive violence, including brutality towards its competitors within the armed Syrian opposition.<sup>4</sup>

These characteristics of ISIL suggest the need for a new strategy to defeat it. It is unlikely we will ever destroy the organization entirely. However, limited U.S. military force is a necessary, though certainly not sufficient, element of the larger strategy to limit ISIL's operational capacity. The use of American military force should be used: a) to prevent ISIL attacks against the United States; b) to protect the sovereignty of U.S. partners against ISIL; and c) and to degrade this organization's ability to control populated areas, from which it can recruit foreign fighters and generate global momentum.

The most important limitation on the use of military force against ISIL is a sunset clause that would require the renewal of authorization in a few years. This is a first order requirement because, to keep our strategy focused, over the next few years we will need to re-evaluate the geographical boundaries of the enemy's operations, the definition of the enemy, the duration of the fight, and the particular military operations that are successfully countering the threat. Because of the importance of oversight and the likelihood that facts on the ground will change, any authorization should include robust reporting requirements that ask for clear metrics of success, U.S. and allied progress in the military campaign against ISIL, and progress in our efforts to build the capacity of our partners. These reporting requirements should include information on civilian casualties and any indication of popular blowback and increasing anti-Americanism in the Arab and Muslim worlds as a direct result of our military efforts.

It is important that we explicitly commit to the limitation on the use of extended ground forces in the operation. First, limiting the use of U.S. force underscores how our strategy prioritizes the role of the partners on the ground in ultimately defeating ISIL and filling in the vacuums left upon ISIL's retreat. Second, this limitation makes it clear to the war-weary American public and the Muslim world that we are not interested in another decade-long U.S. presence on the ground in the heart of the Middle East. Degrading ISIL and reducing the threat it poses simply do not require such an approach.

In Syria and Iraq, we may need to target groups associated but not self-identified as ISIL, but we must be careful not to broaden the aperture too widely, casting too wide a net in targeting all associated groups of ISIL operating globally. Our ability to degrade ISIL in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere and our capacity to mobilize the international community against this threat will be stronger if we limit the authorized global target to ISIL only.

### **The Centrality of Diplomacy**

As it should, this Congress will now focus on the proper use of American military force to counter ISIL. Nonetheless, kinetic operations are only one component of a larger political approach. Our success depends as much on mobilizing our partners to fight ISIL – and helping them to sustain their own efforts over time – as it does on immediate military strikes. First, we

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<sup>4</sup> Liz Sly, "Al-Qaeda disavows any ties with radical Islamist ISIS group in Syria, Iraq," *Washington Post*, February 3, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html).

need military partners on the ground in Iraq and Syria so that there are viable governing entities that can control territory in those areas where ISIL's grip has been weakened. Politically, we need partners in the Arab world who are willing to expend energy and political capital to counter ISIL's ideology. And, internationally, we need to leverage our role in regional and multilateral institutions to forge cooperation among states on issues such as border security and terrorism financing. It is important for Congress to support the role of diplomacy at the heart of the counter-ISIL strategy.

Indeed, the Administration's most significant success thus far has been in the realm of multilateral diplomacy: the U.S.-led Coalition of over 60 countries has enhanced regional and global U.S. leadership and advanced our concrete objectives in degrading ISIL. We have a diverse roster of Coalition partners and the Arab states' military contributions to the campaign is significant.<sup>5</sup> Four Arab nations are participating in airstrikes in Syria with us, for instance.<sup>6</sup> The degree of global cooperation forged by this Coalition on issues such as border security and terrorism finance is without parallel since September 11, 2001.

In Iraq, Syria, and in the global context, we should employ different diplomatic tools and levers, tied together through the consistency of U.S. leadership. We must degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL in all three places, but the ways to achieve this objective now differ among each of these theaters.

### **Degrading ISIL in Iraq**

The way forward to stop ISIL's advance in Iraq is the most straightforward. There is evidence that the Coalition air campaign, combined with cooperation with local forces on the ground, has significantly slowed ISIL's ability to seize new territory, allowing the Kurdish regions of Iraq to rebuild their defenses, including near Erbil, and giving the new Iraqi government and its security forces an opportunity to train and prepare for longer term counter-terrorism operations. ISIL in western Iraq is not going away in the short- to medium-term, but the grave threat ISIL posed to all of Iraq in 2014 has subsided. In Iraq, approximately 6,000 ISIL fighters have been killed,

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the Jordanian Air Force, which launched a number of sorties and helped to destroy ISIL logistics centers, has increased its military efforts in the aftermath of a Jordanian pilot being captured and burned alive. Saudi Arabia has launched airstrikes in Syria and it has provided \$500 million to the UN and humanitarian aid agencies. The United Arab Emirates has been referred to as the "Sparta on the Gulf" for its military role in airstrikes against ISIS. Bahrain has sent F16s to launch airstrikes in Syria as well.

See: William Booth and Taylor Luck, "Jordan Says its Airstrikes are Targeting Islamic State Leadership," *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2015, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/jordan-says-its-airstrikes-are-targeting-islamic-state-leadership/2015/02/08/431cfc88-63f0-4acd-b005-94d6661aae3a\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/jordan-says-its-airstrikes-are-targeting-islamic-state-leadership/2015/02/08/431cfc88-63f0-4acd-b005-94d6661aae3a_story.html); Mohammed Daraghmeh, "Jordanians Say 56 Airstrikes Against ISIS are the Beginning," *Business Insider*, February 8, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/jordan-says-56-airstrikes-against-isis-are-the-beginning-2015-2>; Mohsin Ali and Yarno Ritzen, "Interactive: Countries Countering ISIL," *Al-Jazeera*, December 16, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2014/10/isis-us-syria-airstrike-coalition-uae-saudi-2014101142731382476.html>; Ian Black, "UAE's Leading Role Against ISIS Reveals its Wider Ambitions," *The Guardian*, October 30, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/30/uae-united-arab-emirates-leading-player-opposition-isis-middle-east>; Ashley Fantz, "Who's Doing What in the Coalition Battle Against ISIS," *CNN*, October 7, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/06/world/meast/isis-coalition-nations/>.

<sup>6</sup> Gen. John Allen, "A Global, Coordinated, and Enduring Response," (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, February 2, 2015), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/other/AllenStatement20150202.pdf>.

including half of the group's known leadership. The airstrikes have diminished ISIL's command and control structure and its supply and logistical lines.<sup>7</sup> ISIL today in Iraq is facing a manpower drain and a limitation in its ability to move fighters around the battlefield.<sup>8</sup>

Absent political progress these gains are reversible, however.

Even as General Allen and others continue to oversee Coalition efforts to combat ISIL in Iraq, the strategic focus should shift to the internal politics of the country. The Coalition is making progress retraining the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to fight ISIL, and many member nations are contributing trainers and hardware assistance. The central objective in this effort, however, should be a focus on retraining the ISF so that it eventually becomes a multiethnic, inclusive, professional force, which can protect all Iraqis, regardless of sect or regional origin. To do so, we need to consider how the ISF fractured in the first place, how it was susceptible to politicization, and why it remains so vulnerable to Iranian influence. The ISF's will and capabilities, and its integration with police and other security services across the country, will determine the endurance of the military gains against ISIL that the Coalition and its Iraqi partners are achieving.

Outreach to Sunni Iraqi leaders should be a second critical priority for U.S. and allied diplomatic efforts. It will be difficult to replicate the successes of the Sunni Awakening, but we nonetheless must encourage, support, and engage a new generation of "Sons of Iraq."<sup>9</sup> To do so, the United States must help the Iraqi government, as well as other Arab allies, to bring into the fold those Sunni leaders with credibility among their tribes who may have the local clout to disavow ISIL and other bad actors.

Implementing structural and institutional guarantees for Sunni communities will be a fundamental component of the political effort to build trust in the Sunni heartland. Key guarantees should involve at least three issues: ensuring that Sunni communities receive profits from national oil revenues; institutionalizing and codifying government programs and subsidies expected by the Sunni communities; and improving communal policing. Guarantees from Baghdad and from the international community can help to reassure the Sunni community that the human rights abuses of the Maliki era, which overwhelmingly victimized Sunnis, do not repeat themselves under the current al-Abadi and future governments in Baghdad.

Finally, U.S. diplomacy and leadership will be necessary to help the Iraqi economy rebound, particularly because the depressed global oil price is hurting the central Iraqi government's

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. The commander of the Royal Jordanian Air Force, Gen. Mansour Al-Jbour, estimates that 20 percent of ISIL's military capabilities have been destroyed and approximately 7,000 ISIL fighters have been killed since Coalition airstrikes began in September 2014. See: "Jordan: ISIS Lost 20% of Its Military Capabilities," Al-Arabiya, February 8, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/02/08/Jordan-ISIS-lost-20-of-its-military-capabilities.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Islamic State Pulls Forces and Hardware from Syria's Aleppo: Rebels," Reuters, February 9, 2015; Harvey Morris, "

<sup>9</sup> The Sons of Iraq were Iraqi Sunni tribal militias, located in western Iraq's Anbar governorate, that were part of a local response against the excesses of ISIL's predecessor, the al-Qaeda affiliate the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). U.S. military forces cooperated with the "Sons of Iraq" (SOI) to drastically reduce ISI's power in western Iraq. See: Myriam Benraad, "Iraq's Tribal 'Sahwa': Its Rise and Fall," Middle East Policy Council, 18 no.1 (November 2011).

revenue. The United States should leverage the Coalition as a source of reconstruction and assistance funds for the more than 2,047,000 refugees and internally displaced persons in Iraq, including the approximately 300,000 Syrian refugees, and to help the Iraqi government pay for its security and other needs.<sup>10</sup> Here, Iraq's Gulf neighbors should consider the recuperation of the Iraqi economy as a direct interest and investment.

### **Reducing ISIL's Power in Syria**

On one hand, the United States and its allies have, since last fall, degraded ISIL's strength in Syria. By providing airstrike cover to Kurdish and Arab fighters at Kobani, they thwarted a massive ISIL assault there and killed nearly 1,000 ISIL fighters. North of Aleppo, Coalition efforts against ISIL have allowed the Syrian opposition to hold their ground and have forced ISIL to stage tactical withdrawals from some of the territory it controls in the Aleppo governorate.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, efforts to reduce more definitively ISIL's influence and extricate it from the Syrian territory it now rules will ultimately depend on the chances of de-escalating the four year-old conflict between the opposition and the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad.<sup>12</sup> ISIL and its ideological peers will never be defeated in Syria until there is a diminution in the civil conflict that has persisted since 2011. The best case scenario is a reduction in the fighting based on the promise of a political horizon that shepherds a fair transition process toward a post-Assad future. A transition process will require the opposition and the Assad regime to compromise on transitional justice mechanisms and on a plan to recognize the local governance systems in place across Syria, where the regime now holds no more than 30 percent of the territory containing 40 percent of the population. Any agreement must be based on a power-sharing system in Damascus that may have to include parts of the Assad regime, including Alawis, with opposition representatives, as well as decentralization mechanisms in the North and the South of Syria.

Therefore, reducing ISIL's power in Syria will require international diplomacy in the near term, including working toward a Geneva III international negotiation. Such negotiations could commence if there are signs that Tehran and Moscow recognize the danger of the status quo. Both of these key patrons of Syria must realize that the stalemate between the moderate oppositionists and the regime is advantaging ISIL – to the detriment of their own security interests.

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<sup>10</sup> Antonio Ponce, "Refugees in Iraqi Camps Face Harrowing Winter," Huffington Post, January 24, 2015; "UNHCR 2015 Country Operations Profile: Iraq," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, January 2015, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486426.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Islamic State Pulls Forces and Hardware from Syria's Aleppo: Rebels," Reuters, February 9, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> In Syria, the United States will need to establish a procedure for identifying the potential threat to the U.S. homeland from ISIL's competitors in the militant Salafist movement, such as the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. For this reason, the authorization for military force should be broader than ISIL alone in Syria. U.S. military planners and civilians will have to carefully navigate between lumping together all dangerous terrorist groups affiliated with ISIL as appropriate targets in Iraq and Syria and clearly identifying those posing a direct and immediate threat to the United States and its partners. See Tom Coghlan and Hannah Lucinda Smith, "Al-Qa'ida Branch in Syria Carves Out Mini-State of its Own," The Australian, February 7, 2015; Liz Sly, "U.S.-Backed Syrian Rebels Routed by Fighters Linked to Al-Qaeda," The Washington Post, November 2, 2014.

Second, defeating ISIL is a top priority for U.S. interests, but the United States must continue to prosecute its efforts against the group in a way that bolsters the more moderate opposition to Assad, as opposed to the regime. We must counter any regime perception that the international focus on ISIL has given it the upper hand. The United States government must continue its public rhetoric to clearly articulate how our efforts against ISIL do not supersede or somehow obviate the enduring U.S. policy goal of a transition from the Assad regime.

Third, to put pressure on the regime, and to ensure that the areas where ISIL is defeated do not fall into the hands of regime proxies, we must quickly and effectively train and assist moderate opposition units. The train and equip program newly authorized in the Fiscal Year 2015 National Defense Authorization Act should be implemented with a consideration for how and where these units will be re-inserted into Syria.<sup>13</sup> They will be trained to fight ISIL, but their presence and their partnership with the United States and its allies, including Saudi Arabia and Turkey, should also deter the regime and its proxies. Despite previous challenges to this end, the Department of State should complement the Department of Defense's new program with a renewed effort to help the Syrian opposition develop a credible and realistic political program envisioning a multi-sectarian, pluralistic post-transition governance plan with clear guarantees to Syrian minorities.<sup>14</sup>

### **Fighting ISIL in the Global Commons**

Finally, we must combat ISIL in a global context. Here, U.S. military power should be used only sparingly, and only in situations where there is evidence of imminent plots by ISIL itself targeting the U.S. homeland. In the global theater, U.S. leadership will be critically important, particularly in support of four objectives:

First, the United States has significantly improved homeland security efforts and targeted them to the particular threat of foreign fighters with Western passports training and fighting with ISIL. Working with state and local authorities to counter sources of potential radicalization at home is a critical part of this effort.<sup>15</sup> In September, the United States introduced a Security Council resolution calling on all member states to stem the flow of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq.<sup>16</sup> In part due to U.S. pressure and diplomatic support, members of the anti-ISIL Coalition are increasingly criminalizing foreign fighter-related activities and breaking up foreign fighter networks. Saudi Arabia has now issued formal decrees criminalizing ISIL and has broken up ISIL cells with links to Syria.

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<sup>13</sup> Managing the degree to which Syrian rebel groups that are trained and equipped by the United States and its allies cooperate with organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra that want to see Syria ruled as a sharia state in post-Assad order, will be a particular challenge to U.S. strategy in Syria.

<sup>14</sup> Dafna H. Rand and Nicholas A. Heras, "How This Ends: A Blueprint for De-Escalation in Syria," (Center for a New American Security, November 2014), 5.

<sup>15</sup> "A New Approach to Countering Violent Extremism: Sharing Expertise and Empowering Local Communities," FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, October 7, 2014, <http://leb.fbi.gov/2014/october/a-new-approach-to-countering-violent-extremism-sharing-expertise-and-empowering-local-communities>; Anthony Vassalo and Dafna H. Rand, "Brining the Fight Back Home: Western Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria," Center for a New American Security, August 25, 2014, 8.

<sup>16</sup> "Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution Condemning Violent Extremism, Underscoring Need to Prevent Travel, Support for Foreign Terrorist Fighters," United Nations, September 24, 2014, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11580.doc.htm>.

Second, counter-financing efforts remain a critical way to limit ISIL's capacity. The Coalition has made limited progress in destroying ISIL's refining capacity, denying ISIL its main source of revenue from the oil trade. Such efforts must be continued and expanded.

Third, while much has been done, far more is needed to address the toll of the region's conflicts on its civilians. The United States provided over \$208 million for the humanitarian response in Iraq in Fiscal Year 2014, and has provided \$3 billion for Syria in support of the UN-led humanitarian response since the start of the conflict in 2011. To date, the United States remains the largest single donor country helping to alleviate the Syrian humanitarian crisis; Coalition allies must match our humanitarian commitments.

Finally, ongoing U.S. and allied counter-messaging efforts seek to rebut ISIL's messages aggressively and in real time. It is promising that top religious leaders in Egypt and Saudi Arabia have issued fatwas declaring ISIL a direct threat to Islam. The United States should continue offering technical assistance to partners involved in implementing counter-messaging efforts, including by helping them to combat ISIL's social media presence.

## **Conclusion**

In all three theaters, creative diplomacy, including efforts that sustain and lock-in the efforts of our partners, will be required to defeat ISIL over the medium term. Even as it deliberates the proper limitation on the authorization for military force against ISIL, Congress must also support and encourage these diplomatic efforts, including by ensuring that the U.S. government has sufficient resources to focus on the above priorities.