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Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to speak with you about the situation in Iraq and our strategy to combat the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). I valued talking regularly with many of you in my role at the Department of Defense, and I appreciate being able to continue that candid dialogue in my personal capacity.

As you well know, the ISIL threat is complex and the situation is rapidly evolving. I will focus my remarks on three areas: First, let me outline how I view the current strategy to counter ISIL. Second, I will offer some reflections on what happened in Ramadi and what we can learn from it. And third, I will share a few thoughts on how we can adjust the current strategy, given the rapidly changing environment. The enemy is adapting and learning, and we must as well.

The Current Counter-ISIL Strategy

The events in Ramadi in the past weeks were significant. Ramadi is the capital of Iraq’s largest Sunni majority province, which shares borders with Jordan and Syria. The United States has lost roughly 1,300 troops in the effort to secure Anbar province since 2003.

We must learn from ISIL’s successes in Ramadi, and adapt to new conditions on the battlefield. But we also cannot view Ramadi as the sole referendum on a long-term strategy to combat ISIL. The causes of ISIL’s rise are deep and complex. ISIL is a tenacious and adaptive enemy. ISIL also operates in a joint battlefield between Iraq and Syria. Combatting ISIL, therefore, requires a joint strategy toward Iraq and Syria. Syria is enormously more difficult and complex than Iraq, but taking on ISIL in Iraq alone will not accomplish our objectives. That is why combatting ISIL requires a long-term campaign that will take several years. We are only in the first year of what was designed as a multi-year campaign.

Let me offer some context. Last June, ISIL moved across Iraq with unprecedented speed and stunned the world with its military victories. The underlying causes of ISIL’s success, however, were more than weapons and battlefield tactics. Asad’s brutality and the conflict in Syria created chaos that allowed ISIL to seize territory. The border

between Iraq and Syria became effectively meaningless. The Iraqi government alienated large segments of the Sunni population, was not governing effectively, and lacked the required senior professional military leaders to direct Iraqi security forces. These political conditions will not change overnight, and cannot be changed with military force alone.

A strategy to combat ISIL's battlefield power requires several elements: addressing the underlying political causes of the enemy's success; appropriately deploying unique U.S. military power and assets; and, importantly, focusing on the need to strengthen local forces that must do the front line fighting against ISIL. The United States must lead, but this cannot be America's fight alone. Lasting success requires a coalition that empowers Iraqis and Syrians to take the fight to ISIL themselves, and an inclusive Iraqi government that is worthy of our sacrifice.

The Administration's efforts have focused on fighting ISIL on multiple fronts. The United States has used sanctions to go after ISIL's sources of funding, social media to combat its recruitment efforts, intelligence and diplomatic efforts to stop the deadly flow of foreign fighters, and diplomacy to build a global coalition against a terrorist threat.

To be clear, recognizing that military force alone cannot effectively address the ISIL threat does not mean that military power does not have a significant role to play. It does. The Department of Defense's efforts have focused on denying ISIL territory, and building the capacity of local Iraqi and Syrian forces to fight ISIL directly.

To understand what these efforts have produced, and what adjustments may be needed, let me describe three key elements of the U.S. military effort.

The first part of the strategy is political. ISIL thrives on corruption, alienation, weak governance, and the ensuing political chaos. No amount of soldiers we could deploy – even the best-trained Americans and Iraqis – can fill the vacuum of poor governance. An inclusive and effective Iraqi government is needed to give Sunnis, Shias and Kurds a stake in their nation. The Iraqi government must take the lead in designing, executing, and maintaining military operations. America cannot be more committed to Iraq's success than Iraq is.

That is why America's military involvement in Iraq was contingent on the formation of an Iraqi government committed to inclusion and to leading the fight against ISIL in Iraq. Prime Minister Maliki was not that partner. We have a different situation with Prime Minister Abadi.

While the political situation in Iraq today is far from perfect, Prime Minister Abadi has taken steps toward political inclusion and building a more effective Iraqi state. He replaced ineffective political generals in the Iraqi Security Forces with professional military leaders. He filled the long vacant post of Defense Minister with a Sunni, who has shown needed leadership.

In the immediate aftermath of Ramadi, Prime Minister Abadi has responded in ways that the previous Iraqi government frankly did not. Abadi worked with his entire national security cabinet—Shias, Sunnis and Kurds—to identify what went wrong in Ramadi, how the Iraqi government could rapidly address the military gaps revealed in the fight, while also developing a new program to win back Anbar. The government released a seven-point plan that focused on mobilizing tribal fighters in Anbar and streamlining the weapons delivery process. This is a very different situation from Mosul one year ago, when the Iraqi government did not respond and address the failures, which allowed ISIL expand further and gain momentum.

Prime Minister Abadi must of course do more. Outreach to the Sunnis is far too slow. The National Guard must be formed more quickly. Sunnis must be given a stake to feel included in the government. As the U.S. government must continue to press the Iraqi government on these issues, we must also be realistic about our available partners. The United States has a stake in a unified and effective Iraqi government, not a splintered Iraqi state, and must deliver our support to Iraqi fighters with that long term goal in mind.

The second part of the strategy relies on using unique U.S. and Coalition military capabilities. We must use unique U.S. and Coalition military capabilities to gain advantage over ISIL. The combination of U.S. and Coalition partner air power, with Iraqi and Peshmerga ground operations, has pushed ISIL back and forced ISIL to change tactics. U.S. and Coalition partners are advising and assisting Iraqi security forces to plan and execute operations from brigade headquarters, while air strikes soften ISIL targets to buy time and space for Iraqi forces to wage a ground fight and reconstitute their ranks.

As of May 28, U.S. and Coalition forces have conducted a total of 4,225 airstrikes – 2,580 in Iraq, and 1,645 in Syria, damaging over 6,200 ISIL targets. That includes an estimated 36,321 sorties in support of operations in Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, Coalition forces from Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Jordan, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom have participated in air strikes. In Syria, coalition forces have included Bahrain, Canada, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and UAE.

This combination of U.S. air power supplementing the local ground campaign was effective in Kobani, for example, where Peshmerga forces retook the city from ISIL forces in January of this year. It has also started to have an impact in concert with Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). In Baiji, as the Chief of Staff of Operation Inherent Resolve pointed out recently, when ISF forces maneuver in and around the city, they force ISIL into more vulnerable positions and increases the number of ISIL fighters Coalition airstrikes are taking off the battlefield. From September 2014 to April of this year, the U.S. military estimated that ISIL has lost 25 to 30 percent of the populated territory it once held in Iraq.

Airstrikes alone cannot address the challenges in Iraq or Syria – success requires capable local partners fighting on the ground. Iraqis must fight for their own country.

That is why the third, and key, element of the strategy must focus on building the capabilities of the Iraqi Security Forces, Peshmerga ground Forces, as well as local fighters in Syria.

To support Iraqi government efforts to reconstitute and strengthen its security forces, the U.S. government has mobilized an international effort to train and equip Iraqi, Peshmerga, and Sunni forces. There are two lines of effort within this program. Under an advise and assist mission, U.S. and Coalition military advisors are partnering with Iraqi and Kurdish forces to help plan current and future operations. More broadly, U.S. and Coalition partners are supporting the Government of Iraq in its efforts to strengthen and reconstitute Iraqi Security Forces by training and equipping fighters from 12 brigades – 9 Iraqi Security Forces and 3 Peshmerga - so they are better equipped to launch offensive operations over the coming year.

Last June, in response to an emergency request from the Government of Iraq to provide Kurdish Peshmerga forces supplies they desperately needed, the United States mobilized a Coalition resupply effort to Kurdish fighters. Eleven countries have supported the ongoing effort. To bolster Kurdish defense capabilities, U.S. and Coalition partners have conducted more than 55 airlift missions to provide more than 3 million pounds of equipment to include over 35 million rounds of ammunition (bullets, grenades, mortars) and 22,000 weapons (AK-47s /RPGs/mortar tubes) to Peshmerga forces.

Given these principles, how should we view this strategy, in light of the events in Ramadi?

Events in Ramadi

Events in Ramadi are an undeniable setback. Beyond the immediate territory seized, Ramadi contributes to a perception that momentum is on ISIL's side. This is a powerful recruitment and propaganda tool for ISIL.

But Ramadi should be viewed in perspective. Ramadi had been under siege for 18 months, and ISIL has controlled some 50 percent of the city for nearly a year. Ramadi was a hotly contested part of Iraq. Iraqi units fought for over eight months with uneven resupply. Iraqi forces were also faced with ISIL's devastating battle tactic of massive suicide truck bombs. These are brutally effective, both psychologically and operationally, and even caused difficulty against brave American forces fighting in Iraq before 2009. There is no silver bullet solution to suicide truck bombs. That is why they are ISIL's battlefield tactic of choice.

What can we learn from Ramadi? Ramadi puts in sharp relief the need for more effective training, and more effective arming of Iraqi fighters. One U.S. defense official estimated the ISF had a 7 to 1 advantage over ISIL troops. Any military leader will tell you that that sort of numerical advantage should tilt the odds in favor of the larger force. Instead, we saw ISF forces leave Ramadi—whether they fled or not, they did not stay to fight. Why?

The key to success is the quality, not just the quantity, of the Iraqi forces. Building an effective Iraqi Security Force depends on developing effective leadership, at both the unit and organization level. Weak leadership creates confusion, low morale, and a lack of will to fight. That is what we saw last June in Mosul, and that is some of what we saw in Ramadi a few weeks ago. Ramadi revealed a failure of unit leadership, as well as ineffective MEDEVAC and resupply. Iraqi forces have fought bravely in the past. They need strong leadership, and resupply to succeed.

Improving the morale and the capacity of senior leadership within ISF units has been a core focus of the Coalition training mission. This must intensify.

That said, leadership training is hard and takes time. Several of the Iraqi units in Ramadi have not fully completed the Coalition training. In the past two weeks, the lack of training led to confusion on the ground and loss of command and control. Some Iraqi units were ordered to retreat. Others thought the entire force was withdrawing, and therefore left the city. Command and control is central to effective military operations, and must be a central part of training Iraqi forces.

Adjustments to the Strategy

In the coming months and years, we should expect ISIL to continue to adapt, learn, and develop new ways to confront Iraqi and coalition forces on the battlefield. America's strategy must evolve as well.

In evaluating specific options, we should keep several principles in mind. First, our efforts should be built around sustainability. Will additional U.S. support create the incentives for the Iraqi forces to own the fight? What is the scope and duration anticipated for additional U.S. commitments?

Second, we must balance any support the U.S. provides against the risks to American service members. American military forces are the best in the world. We owe it to our men and women in uniform to carefully consider the second and third order effects of any of our actions. What are we committing American forces to, and are there sufficient resources to sustain their efforts? Congress must commit to funding and authorizing these efforts with sufficient flexibility.

Third, we cannot view the fight against ISIL in isolation in Iraq. Syria and Iraq are a unified battlefield. Coalition forces cannot fight ISIL in Iraq, only to allow them sanctuary in Syria. We must continue to lead and support the long and difficult efforts to train moderate Syrian forces. In addition, we must focus on the role that Iran plays in this conflict, fully appreciating the scope of Iran's nefarious influence and ambitions in Iraq, Syria, and beyond.

Fourth, the United States must support and maintain the international coalition against ISIL. The fight cannot become the United States against ISIL. Any efforts must occur within the context of the international community acting together and coalition

contributing in material and meaningful ways. For example, the United States must continue to work with Turkey to stem the flow of foreign fighters and weapons into Syria.

Given the events in Ramadi and these principles, we should consider several additional steps.

First, forward deploy U.S. Special Forces advisors with Iraqi units. Such forces have been deployed in Al-Asad airbase in Western Anbar. U.S. Special Forces can be deployed in Eastern Anbar as a platform for working with Sunni tribes in the East. Embedding U.S. forces can help inject energy into leadership development of new and weaker Iraqi commanders, and help them stand up units more quickly.

Second, given the inherent pace of training effective Iraqi fighters, greater U.S. and Coalition military assets will need to help fill gaps in capabilities on the battlefield. ISIL has shown itself to be a formidable fighting force in conventional battle. We should expand target sets for U.S. and Coalition aircraft. This must be done carefully to minimize civilian casualties, which are not only tragedies but provide propaganda victories to ISIL. To improve targeting, we should consider deploying forward American and Coalition air controllers to improve targeting, and expedite air strikes. In addition, we must surge in better weapons, given the weapons that ISIL is using – such as anti-tank weapons against the VBIED threat.

Third, the U.S. and Coalition forces should press the Iraqi government to more actively enlist Sunnis in the fight against ISIL. A key element of this is expediting the formation of the National Guard. Engaging the Sunni tribes in the fight will take time, but the Iraqi government must move faster here.

We must view these efforts as part of a long game to provide needed resources to fight ISIL, while strengthening a central government structure in Iraq. The United States does not have an interest in undermining the Iraqi government. We need the Abadi government as a partner, and there is not a better alternative now. At the same time, if the Iraqi government cannot or will not get needed equipment into the hands of Iraqi fighters more quickly, we must look for other options to do so.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the campaign against ISIL occurs in an incredibly difficult and complex environment: deep Sunni and Shia rivalries, instability in Syria, imperfect local partners, and an aggressive and strong enemy in ISIL. To be sustainable, a strategy must enlist local partners. And working through partners is imperfect. Working through and training others produces results less quickly than if we were fighting ourselves. But we must balance the risk to our service members and the view of what happens when U.S. forces were to withdraw.

That is why combatting ISIL requires a long-term campaign to achieve lasting and sustainable results. But the fact that this effort will take years does not mean that we must not adjust and evaluate our efforts along the way. We should continue to question and challenge our assumptions, and not hesitate to consider new and bold actions as changing facts on the ground require.