

Testimony for the Record

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Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the Committee,

It is an honor to appear before you today to discuss the ideology of the Islamic State and how our understanding of that ideology should affect our strategy against this brutal organization.

I spent five years in Iraq, mostly at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, and the American effort against the Islamic State's predecessor organizations, al-Qaida in Iraq and later the Islamic State in Iraq, was a major issue for me and my colleagues. Later I served at the U.S. Embassy in Damascus when we saw the Islamic State in Iraq dispatch its elements into Syria as the unrest there became violent in the second half of 2011.

Without going now into all of the details of the Islamic State's ideology, I would like to highlight several key points:

1. The organization's establishment back in Iraq started as part of the Iraqi Sunni Arab grievances against the Iraqi Shia, and to a somewhat smaller extent the Americans, and that aggrieved Iraqi Sunni Arab community now extends to include Sunni Arab communities in Syria and Lebanon, with many sympathizers in North Africa, the Gulf and other Sunni Muslim communities.
2. The Islamic State's ideology falls within a broader category of conservative Sunni Muslim belief called "Salafi-jihadism" but it is the most extreme, and it regularly labels as heretical even Sunni Muslims who do not accept its interpretations.

In short, in its interpretations, if it makes compromises or tolerates different points of view, it is not defending God's word and hence its followers are themselves guilty of sin.

3. This inability to accept pluralism or tolerate other points of view also means, for example, that it will not accept other political institutions or borders. Its ideology

requires that the Islamic State fight enemies on all sides and prevail; long-term of acceptance of borders, for example, would be a sin in its followers' eyes.

4. The Islamic State's interpretation of Quranic text and prophetic sayings leads it to look forward to a final clash with the Western world, but the declaration made when it declared the Caliphate in 2014 highlights more the need to fight Shia whom it views as apostates.

5. The declaration by the Islamic State's leadership of a caliphate caused huge discussion and uproar among the Salafi-jihadi community, and there were many questions about whether the Islamic State -- the Caliphate -- is a legitimate effort. Criteria include whether or not the caliphate has any political capabilities to govern, whether the caliphate accentuates divisions among those fighting against the Shia and the Americans and whether the timing was proper.

6. Finally, the Islamic State's ideology demands establishment of a political entity that governs, and administers justice very much along the lines of the Muslim community immediately after the Prophet Mohammed's death. It applies very literalist interpretations and these often harken back to pre-modern forms of governance, punishment and treatment of subjugated populations.

Because the Islamic State accepts no state borders, and it believes its precepts apply universally to all people on the planet, it expects to fight us sooner or later. Right now its biggest target is the Iraqi government since that is led by Shia whom it considers apostates. And on its western front its biggest enemies are the other Syrian armed opposition groups whom it judges are apostates as well as competitors, and the Assad regime whom it perceives is just another Shia-linked apostate regime.

The administration is right to understand that we have to confront the Islamic State, and this is an organization wholly different from al-Qaida. However, if we properly understand the ideology that drives the Islamic State, we would understand that

1. It will never stop fighting in Syria and Iraq, or in other countries where it has a foothold; it might eventually seek temporary truces, but its absolutist interpretations means that eventually the Islamic State will choose to fight all other communities that do not recognize its authority.

2. Its severe, literalist interpretations of governance and justice alienate a great many of the inhabitants of territories it controls since many of those inhabitants enjoy aspects of 20th and 21st century living. We have seen this in places like Raqqa and Deir Zour in

Syria and in Mosul in Iraq (we also saw with Iraqi Anbar during the time of the Islamic State's predecessor organizations).

3. Likewise, it won't work well with other opposition groups in Iraq and Syria. It has killed Salafi fighters by the scores in Syria, including even fighters from al-Qaida. Were the Assad regime to fall -- something that is highly unlikely at present -- it is also extremely unlikely that other Syrian opposition groups would accept domination or rule by the Islamic State, and they have and have used arms to fight the Islamic State.

We therefore have an opening to find indigenous fighters who will combat the Islamic State, although nearly all Syrians opposition figures think Assad is the number one enemy.

4. Among jurists in Salafi circles, the Islamic State has vulnerability about its declaration of its being a caliphate and the long-hoped for new caliphate. If it loses territory so that it cannot govern, and its judges cannot administer its brand of justice, it loses some of the legitimacy of its claim to loyalty and allegiance.

The ground gains in Iraq are important, therefore. Air strikes, however, will not wrest control of territory - physical space - back from the Islamic State in Syria. There has to be a ground force - and I would argue strongly that it should be an indigenous ground force.

5. Perhaps oddly, the Islamic State has attracted many younger ideologues within the Salafi-jihad sphere. We shouldn't place huge hopes on establishment Muslim establishments like Egypt's Azhar as being influential with these younger writers and thinkers. Rather, younger thinkers and imams who have both scholarly credentials and street credibility will best be able to undermine Islamic State standing among some of its followers.

6. Finally, as we and friends fight against the Islamic State, it is extremely important to remember the original context - aggrieved Sunni Muslim communities in places like Lebanon, Syria and Iraq who are angry at and afraid of Iran and the Arab Shia. If we ally with Iran against the Islamic State, directly or indirectly, we play into the Islamic State's narrative and will help its recruitment.

Thank you again for your invitation to testify before the subcommittee and I look forward to any further comments or questions you might have.