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**Testimony for the Hearing on
“ISIS: Defining the Enemy”**

Testimony Title:

“Identifying the Jihadi Ideology and Alternative Strategies to Defeat IS”

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Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade**

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Introduction: ISIS a strategic threat and a genocidal terror movement

In our assessment, based on thirty years of studying, monitoring, publishing and teaching about the global Jihadist movement, the so-called Islamic State, known as Daesh, ISIS or ISIL, which describes itself as a Caliphate and controls large swaths of land between Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria, this organization is simultaneously a strategic threat to the region and to the world and a genocidal terror movement. In this short testimony, I wish to share with the members of the panel and with the U.S. House in general, four major findings on this Jihadi menace:

1. The ideology displayed by the Islamic State (IS), its roots, its evolution and ultimately its final goals;
2. The current and future geopolitical consequences, of an unchecked IS;
3. The current geopolitical problems in fighting IS;
4. What the United States and its allies can and should do to defeat IS and the movement in general.

Back in 2005, ten years ago, I published a book titled *Future Jihad: Terrorist Strategies against America and the West* in which I projected the rise of a mutant and urban Jihadist movement which would take multiple forms, adopt different names, and survive the fall of organizations allowing the global movement to continue as long as it was fed by generations of recruits, themselves produced by an ideological factory. I had argued then, and continue to underline a decade later, that as long as the ideological factory is operational, there will be Jihadi movements, from al Qaeda to IS, as well as post-ISIS organizations, even if a ground offensive in Iraq and Syria dismantles the militia's strongholds.

In 2008, I published a book titled *The Confrontation: Winning the War against Future Jihad* in which I suggested two strategies to defeat these movements. One strategy was to engage in a war of ideas by identifying the terror ideology, and the second included forming the right coalitions, based on strategic partnerships with likeminded forces in the region and committed governments

around the world. Unfortunately, U.S. policy has since operated in the opposite direction. Instead of designating the ideology of the Jihadists, Washington abruptly withdrew from the war if ideas and asserted that the root cause of this particular terror movement is not embedded in an ideology, but in socioeconomic disparities. Over the years, such assertions were proven wrong, but U.S. policy continued to pull away from the ideological battlefield. In addition, the current administration decided to partner with what it described as “moderate Islamists,” such as the Muslim Brotherhood, to stem the tide of what it coined as “violent extremists.” But the so-called Arab Spring’s upheaval—particularly in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya—has revealed a reality in conflict with the administration’s assumptions. The silent majority of Arab societies and Iran opposes the Islamists as an alternative to both dictators and Jihadists. Regular people in these countries, who rarely express themselves and had it not been for the social media revolution may still have no voice, wish to move forward in their daily lives, catch up with the modernizing world, and are looking forward to obtaining a brighter future than the dark ages promised by both Jihadists and Islamists.

Last March, in 2014, I published my latest book *The Lost Spring: US Policy in the Middle East and Catastrophes to Avoid* in which I urged the U.S. administration to change course in its counterterrorism and Middle East policies in order to avoid forthcoming catastrophes, particularly in Iraq, where I urged a containment of Iran’s influence before the Jihadists could seize the Sunni resistance, and in Syria, where I urged identifying an alternative opposition before a wider Jihadist takeover of the anti-regime zones; in Libya, I recommended an early backing of anti-Jihadist forces led by General Khalifa Haftar; in Egypt, I suggested rebuilding bridges with the country nascent civil society forces which unleashed the 33 million people demonstration of 2013; and last but not least, I suggested a preemptive policy in Yemen to contain the pro-Iranian militias in the north while striking at al Qaeda in the south. Regrettably, these policies never emerged and the Middle East exploded in June of 2014, producing the most dangerous terror creature to date, the Islamic State, and as a result of the latter’s rise, Iran has been emboldened to stretch its influence across the region. Following are the four findings I wish to present in this testimony.

First: The Jihadi ideology of the Islamic State: Its roots and evolution

Is the ideology displayed and referred to by the Islamic State (IS) when it wages its blitzkriegs, commits its murders, and practices ethnic cleansing and sexual slavery a new ideology? In view of its own statements and references and in view of narratives previously expressed by al Qaeda, Boku Haram, Shabab, and Salafi Jihadi combat groups, the bulk of IS ideology, which portrays itself as Takfiri Salafi Jihadi, is the same ideology as that of its predecessors. The theological and historical references are identical to the modern era Jihadi groups’ thinking, which finds its roots in Salafi paradigms produced earlier by thinkers from the Muslim Brotherhood movement, particularly Sayid Qutb and before him Hassan Banna, and from Wahabi narratives such as the writings of Sheikh al Albani and Ibn Uthaimin. This entire chain of radical ideological thinking derives itself from the Salafism pioneered by 18th century ideologues such as Mohammad Abdul Wahab or even medieval commentators like Ibn Taymiya. Immediately preceding ISIS’s violent discourse, al Qaeda’s own narrative, exemplified with texts such as the one posted online a decade ago by Abu Masaab al Suri and the manifesto published by Abu Bakr Naji —*The Management of Savagery*—or the more coherent publication *Inspire Magazine*, influenced by

cleric al Awlaki in Yemen, all of this abundant Jihadi literature, seems to be more of a constant repetition of well-known Jihadi doctrines and the ideological uttering of a common core agenda. The question is what has really changed with ISIS? Was it the substance or the form?

In fact, the difference is neither the texts nor the style, but rather the geopolitical reality the Islamic State militia has been able to create on the ground. The overarching call for a new Caliphate has been uttered by ideologues in the 1920s, immediately after the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate. The Jihadi struggle during the Cold War was legitimized by the likes of Abdallah Azzam, and anti-apostate movements were active in the 1980s in Egypt with the Gamaa Islamiya. In the 1990s, ISIS-like savagery and extreme statements were witnessed in Algeria at the hands of the GIA and the GSPC. The naming of Jews and Christians as infidels and crusaders was an integral part of Osama bin Laden's two declarations of war in 1996 and 1998, and before him, the anti-American ranting of Sheikh Abdurrahman, known as "the blind Sheikh," led to the first New York bombing of 1993. From 9/11 on, calls to murder infidels, bleed economies, and establish Islamist emirates and eventually a Caliphate have been increasing, culminating in ISIS's self-declaration as the ultimate Jihadi project on the planet as of June-August 2014. In a historic sense, ISIS is not a new Jihadist movement, but the ultimate organization produced by the global Jihadist movement.

There are two mutations that distinguish the ideological product of ISIS from its predecessors. First is the fact that this terror group has achieved on the ground what has before been simply the the goals and dreams of past Jihadi groups. Its flags are flying over large cities in the Levant; its forces have withstood the power of multiple armies and of the greatest powers, at least so far; and its reach has gone farther than any previous group into many other countries. Second, and most importantly, because of the evolution of online capacities and technology, it can globally share more of its activities and thus recruit more elements. This also impresses our public even more because individuals around the world can see the atrocities, in graphic detail, as never before. Jihadists have perpetrated massacres, slaughters, ethnic cleansings and enslavement for years, particularly in south Sudan, Darfur, Nigeria and Afghanistan, to name a few, but Americans and the West did not have the access needed to personally witness these atrocities before the advent of social media, including YouTube, Facebook and others. What has really changed? We can witness the results of this ideology in detail.

Second: The geopolitical reality of an unchecked ISIS: Going global

If ISIS is not defeated strategically, both on the ground and ideologically, it will expand to much larger dimensions despite any setbacks and losses. The group had initially morphed from a hard core chapter of al Qaeda in Iraq, migrated to Syria to recruit from another al Qaeda linked group, al Ansar, and then conducted a massive blitzkrieg in Iraq last June to secure a vast adjacent territory stretching from Mosul in Iraq to Raqqa in Syria. The Islamic State forces are acquiring and losing territory in both countries but are maintaining a generally central zone across the space between Iraq and Syria. If that core area is not entirely liberated by the international coalition and transformed into a free zone for its inhabitants, ISIS will consolidate in the Levant, expand regionally and go global.

While the organization may lose some territory, as was the case in Tikrit, it is eyeing a multitude of other villages, towns and regions in three countries. In Iraq, ISIS is still pushing to capture Sunni districts or recapture liberated areas if the population does not feel safe with the new military occupiers. In Syria, ISIS has its designs on Sunni territories in the north, center and south, even if it would have to grab them from Jihadi competitors such as al Nusra. But the Islamic State is also determined to seize Kurdish and Christian areas in northeastern Syria and reach the Turkish borders in the north. Beyond Syria, ISIS has its designs on Tripoli in northern Lebanon and on other Sunni enclaves in the country. Once the Levantine possessions of ISIS are consolidated, efforts would head toward other emirates under construction as in Sinai, eastern Libya, several spots in the Sahel, and northern Nigeria. Somalia and Yemen, though their current Jihadi groups are allied to al Qaeda, may also start switching to ISIS. Last but not least, the open spaces of Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as central Asia, will witness a growing ISIS presence. In my view, the adhesion to this organization is not and will not be due to the attractiveness of its current leadership, but to the power of application its ideology has accumulated by simply winning the battle.

Another, just as perturbing, consequence of an ISIS survival and growth in the region would be the magnet effect it is and would be having on Western-based Jihadists, should they be lone wolves or groups of terrorists, whether aspirant or already engaged. There is nothing like success and the sight of an “operational Caliphate” that draws the formal adherence of individuals in the West who have already been indoctrinated. If no efforts are produced to stem the expansion of the ideology in the free world and ISIS continues to send its powerful messages from the ground, a rise in recruits should be expected to reach to unparalleled levels. The travel of apprentice Jihadists to the “lands of the Caliphate” will not be the most dangerous phenomenon, rather the multiplication of Jihadists within the West would become the strategic menace, as was demonstrated in the United States, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and particularly in France—with the Charlie Hebdo bloodshed.

Third: The geopolitical problems in fighting ISIS: Iran and the U.S.

If failing to stop ISIS becomes the launch pad for a much greater and aggressive threat, what are the impeding problems facing the international coalition as it is fighting the Jihadi power? We can identify two major obstructions to a strategic reversal of ISIS’s expansion. One is the absence of a counter ideological strategy. By refusing to identify the Jihadi ideology, we cannot develop any significant war of ideas that can dismantle and defeat the machine producing waves of militants. The current “counter extremism” efforts by the U.S. administration are barely a nuisance to ISIS as attested to by many experts and by most Arab governments in the region. If Washington refuses to acknowledge the mere existence of a comprehensive Jihadi ideology, it deprives itself of any strategy to stop the recruitment of the enemy. For by retreating from the ideological battlefield, the U.S. is disorienting its own defense and national security capabilities as well as those of potential allies. When we don’t state the doctrinal and geopolitical goals of the enemy, it becomes impossible to mobilize against the latter, neither within the region’s societies nor within the homelands in the West. The antidote necessary to win the war of ideas is currently unavailable until this policy changes its course.

The second challenge the coalition has in the fight against ISIS, stems from wrong partnerships, particularly with other Islamist movements and with the Islamic Republic of Iran. For when we partner with other Islamist groups to fight ISIS, we cannot control the ideological message of these groups. By backing them, we are indirectly providing ammunition to ISIS, which has demonstrated it can recruit from the ranks of its competitors, such as al Nusra and the Muslim Brotherhood.

More dangerous is to openly partner with Iranian backed governments and militias, as is the case in Iraq. Any advance by pro-Iranian forces into ISIS territory will further radicalize the Sunnis and fuel the next uprising against the Iraqi government, let alone the risks of ethnic cleansing and suppression conducted by Shia radicals against Sunni populations. Note that what opened the path for an ISIS success in Iraq were the suppressive policies of the Maliki regime and its Iranian allies. Repeating another Iranian-backed thrust into Sunni areas in Iraq, or anywhere else under the aegis of combating ISIS, will backfire and prepare the ground for a neo-ISIS movement, one that is even more brutal than the current manifestation. Thus we recommend reshaping the struggle against the Jihadi network away from partnerships with Sunni Islamists and Shia radicals backed by Iran.

Fourth Part: Alternative strategies for the U.S. and the coalition

Based on the previous sections of this testimony, I hereby offer the following suggestions for alternative U.S. and international strategies regarding the campaign against ISIS.

1. A new war of ideas directed at Jihadism

The United States Congress can and should restructure the war with ISIS by reorganizing U.S. resources in the war of ideas. The goals of such an effort include officially identifying the ideology animating ISIS and its Jihadi allies around the world:

- (a) enabling the American public and, with the assistance of other legislatures worldwide, the wider Western public, to be aware of such ideology;
- (b) sending a message to the communities where ISIS is currently active and those where it is planning on penetrating, particularly in the Arab and Muslim world, that the U.S. and the international community have been able to isolate this ideology from civil societies' natural drive towards freedom and moderation; and
- (c) creating an international intellectual consensus against Jihadism.

In order to wage such a campaign, we strongly recommend that Congress organizes a bipartisan entity with the sole mission to build on the 9/11 Commission's recommendations and add new, more strategic and more specific material and guidelines based on the past decade of ideological evolution and from fresh input from around the world.

For this endeavor we urge Congress to hold a series of hearings on Jihadism, both the ideology and its strategies, and invite a wide array of national and international experts, but also public figures, from many countries targeted by ISIS and its Jihadi allies. For this purpose it would be important, particularly in order to dismiss the false charges of political Islamophobia, to invite the highest authority of Sunni Islam, Grand Imam of al Azhar Sheikh Ahmad al Tayyeb, to

address Congress, along with a number of Muslim clerics who have publically testified against the very indoctrination machine producing the terrorists. Let Congress uncover the truth of this machine in front of the eyes of the U.S. public and international community. Moreover, we suggest Congress invite leaders from the Middle East who have been and are ideologically confronting ISIS forces, such as President Sisi of Egypt, President Sebti of Tunisia, King Abdallah of Jordan, Iraqi Kurdistan President Barazani, General Haftar of Libya, members of legislatures in the region as well as experts on Jihadism from Russia, India, China, NATO, and the African Union, in addition to members of democracy NGOs and democracy opposition movements in Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and other countries.

If Congress designates the Jihadi ideology as the chief responsible factor behind ISIS and other Jihadi terror groups, it could trigger the formation of the largest international consensus on the ideological threat and thus help this and the next U.S. administration concentrate its efforts in the right direction.

2. A new strategic coalition against ISIS

Based on the above suggestion, Congress should develop guidelines for the administration regarding a new strategic coalition against ISIS with the purpose of countering the ideology, seizing territory from ISIS, while denying the takeover of these territories by other Islamist militants or by the Iranian regime. The new strategy of the United States must insure the inclusion of several partners, each at their levels by:

- (a) Consolidating a US/Western alliance with the emerging Arab Military Force and extending support to the latter's campaign in Yemen while extending a similar support to that regional force should it move to Libya, Syria and Iraq to contain and reverse the control of ISIS.
- (b) Developing a new doctrine on liberating territories from ISIS by insuring that Sunni zones in Iraq and Syria be liberated by an Arab Sunni moderate force and minorities areas in both countries are put under international protection.
- (c) Announcing a new vision for a post ISIS era in the Levant and around the world in order to renew the U.S. promise from WWI and WWII that no communities should again fall under sectarian, regional or ideological oppression.

Conclusion

The battle against ISIS is not simply a confrontation against that organization per se and a return to the status quo ante, but the battle must include an American, Western, and international effort to free the populations now occupied and threatened by Jihadist domination and enabling these populations and countries to remain free and to develop their own national destiny, away from all radical ambitions.