

Testimony

United States House of Representatives

**House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade**

By

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on

U.S. Counterterrorism Efforts in Syria: A Winning Strategy?

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Rayburn House Office Building

Room 2172

Thank you Chairman Poe, ranking member Keating, distinguished members of the committee for inviting me today to discuss U.S. strategy in Syria. Am honored to be with my distinguished colleagues Thomas Joscelyn and Daniel Benjamin.

The Middle East is experiencing one of the most tumultuous periods in its history with the old order challenged by the aspirational goals of the Arab Spring, radicalized Islamic terrorists taking advantage of the political and social upheaval and the Islamic state of Iran using proxies to achieve regional influence and control.

ISIS, an off-shoot from Al Qaeda in Iraq, has become the most successful terrorist organization in modern history by dominating a large swath of Syrian and Iraq territory while expanding its affiliations into 7 other countries and developing a worldwide following.

Approximately a year ago, the President announced the U.S. public policy that in conjunction with our coalition partners, the U.S. would degrade and ultimately destroy ISIS, weeks later he changed destroy ISIS to defeat ISIS, a more appropriate term.

A strategy was crafted to accomplish this objective which consisted of humanitarian assistance, undermining the ISIS religious ideology, countering the ISIS finances, providing military assistance to our Iraqi and Syrian partners to include airstrikes, assisting the Iraq government politically to move to a more representative government and continuing the policy supporting the removal of Assad.

While there has been some progress and some success, looking at this strategy today we, now, know:

- the conceptual plan is fundamentally flawed.
- the resources provided to support Iraq and Syria are far from adequate.
- the timing and urgency to provide arms, equipment and training is insufficient.
- the indigenous ground forces in Syria and Iraq are not capable of defeating ISIS.
- the air campaign rules of engagement are too restrictive.

As such, we are not only failing, we are losing this war, moreover I can say with certainty this strategy will not defeat ISIS.

ISIS who is headquartered in Syria, recruits, trains and resupplies in Syria. It is from Syria that ISIS has so successfully expanded and it is from Syria that ISIS reaches out to 20K social media sites per day. They control large swaths of territory in Syria to include the Euphrates River Valley, which connects to the Euphrates in Anbar Province, Iraq, which they also now control. This controlled territory is currently expanding to the west as far as Damascus and includes, Palmyra city and Palmyra airbase in central Syria, aligning the central East/West corridor from the Iraq border to Homs in western Syria. ISIS control of territory is what differentiates it from other terrorist organizations, but it is its greatest vulnerability. To defeat ISIS, we

must take its territory away. Yet, we have no strategy to defeat ISIS in Syria, we have no effective ground force, which is the defeat mechanism. Yes, we have air power and yes we have degraded the command and control, logistics, and killed many ISIS fighters and despite the success at Kobani, air power will not defeat ISIS, it has not even been able to deny ISIS freedom of maneuver and the ability to attack at will. Syria is an ISIS sanctuary, without which ISIS would be a much smaller, yet violent, terrorist organization operating in the shadows in Iraq. ISIS grew to a terrorist army only because of the sanctuary in Syria. We cannot succeed in Iraq if ISIS is allowed to exist in Syria.

The U.S. finds itself at a critical juncture, with its ISIS strategy failing, in Syria and in Iraq, the Syrian civil war is in its fourth year and while the Bashar al Assad regime this last year has been losing ground to the rebels with some erosion of Alawite support, Vladimir Putin, is executing a military buildup in Syria to insure the survival of the Assad regime. Putin is also working to create an alternative anti-ISIS coalition that includes Russia, Iran and the Syrian regime in a direct challenge to the U.S. led coalition currently active against ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

In view of these very real challenges what can we do?

-Strategy:

Sun Tzu said: “. . . tactics without a strategy is the noise before defeat.” Once and for all, 22 years after the first World Trade Center bombing and 14 years after 9/11, develop in conjunction with our allies a

comprehensive strategy to defeat radical Islam. Otherwise we will continue to react to individual movements, e.g. AQ, ISIS, AAS etc, with no end in sight.

-Syria:

Recognize that an effective ground force is the key to defeating ISIS with a much less restrictive use of air power to support the ground force. The ground force in the near term should consist of the Syrian Kurds (the only force who has enjoyed success against ISIS in Syria.) This force should be armed as required and provided special forces advisers to assist with the use of air power. Despite the dismal failure of the train and equip mission of the moderate Sunni Arab force, it is still essential to put together this vital capability. The parameters for this force must change. We cannot restrict the Sunni Arabs to exclusively fighting ISIS when their priority is the Assad regime who is destroying their communities and killing their families. They want to fight the Assad regime and ISIS, let them. Also, the force and their communities must be protected as should the Syrian Kurds. Begin by establishing free zones (FZ) in the north and south near the Turkish and Jordanian borders. Use coalition air power to include the Turks to enforce it and permit the people to use the FZ as a sanctuary. Advise Assad, if he challenges the FZ, then the U.S. led coalition will shut down his air power.

We must step up the use of special operations forces (SOF) to conduct routine ground and drone raids on ISIS leadership which was so successful in Iraq and Afghanistan. These raids at times should be expanded to a 2 or 3 day operation using Army Rangers to destroy key nodes and capabilities.

The harsh reality is that the Syrian Kurds and Sunni Arabs may not be sufficient to dislodge ISIS and defeat them in Syria and the task may require an outside Arab coalition assisted by the U.S. ground and air components.

-Assad:

While the U.S. and the coalition desires a political solution to the Syrian civil war, recognize that Assad will never depart unless the military momentum shifts against him. Despite Russia's military pressure this should still be U.S. policy.

-Russia:

Once again Putin is out maneuvering the U.S. and once again he will out bluff us. The U.S. should not coordinate any military operations with Russia. To do so means we are de facto in collusion with the Syrian regime, Iran, the Quds force and the Hezbollah. Putin knows full well his military is no match for the U.S. and NATO. He is counting on President Obama's fear of escalation to force U.S. capitulation to Russia's ambition in Syria and the Middle East at large.

There are no easy answers in Syria, there have been plenty of mistakes and lost opportunities to be sure, but U.S. interests and U.S. credibility is at stake. What is most needed now is U.S. determined leadership and resolve to commit to defeating ISIS, along with a revised effective strategy.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.