

How to Defeat ISIS

Prepared statement by

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Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, members of the subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting me here to testify about the most pressing national security threat that we face—the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq, a.k.a. ISIS or ISIL. The recent terrorist attack in Paris which killed 129 people, along with other attacks from Sharm al-Sheikh to Beirut to Tunis, demonstrate this group’s range and murderous effectiveness. ISIS is spawning “provinces” from Libya to Afghanistan to Nigeria. That ISIS is now threatening to attack the United States should cause us great concern. Mass-casualty attacks such as the one in Paris (or earlier in Mumbai) are easy to carry out and hard to stop. We are every bit as vulnerable as France.

And ISIS poses a threat not just with its terrorism but also with its impact on refugee flows from Syria. With hundreds of thousands of people fleeing the fighting in Syria, our Muslim and European allies are having trouble absorbing the inflow, and states such as Jordan risk being overwhelmed by this mass wave of migration.

There are many suggestions made for how to combat the spread of ISIS, particularly by concentrating on its finances and its use of the Internet to spread propaganda and draw in recruits. Counter-propaganda and counter-finance initiatives are worthwhile but they are unlikely to prove decisive. As long as ISIS continues

to control a “caliphate”—a state stretching across the borders of Syria and Iraq—it will be able to attract and train recruits. Inevitably some subset of those recruits will make their way out of Syria and Iraq and pose a threat to other countries especially the countries where they came from. In this regard it is particularly ominous to note that ISIS has hundreds of European recruits and dozens of Americans. And of course ISIS has the ability to inspire terrorists who never visit Syria at all but who simply come into contact with its online propaganda.

I am pessimistic that the US and allied governments will make much headway in isolating ISIS from the outside world—both the Internet and the physical borders of Syria and Iraq are too porous to make that a realistic possibility. This suggests that ISIS cannot be contained. It must be defeated.

But how?

As an immediate step I believe the U.S. must step up its bombing of Syria and Iraq. As former Undersecretary of Defense Michael Vickers has pointed out, the U.S. air campaign, which has been going on since August 2014, has dropped fewer bombs than we did in just two months in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001. Some three-quarters of U.S. aircraft are returning to base without having dropped their payloads because of overly restrictive rules of engagement that need to be relaxed. In order to call in effective air strikes, U.S. Joint Tactical Air Controllers must be allowed to operate on the battlefield as they did in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001. This will greatly increase the accuracy and effectiveness of U.S. air strikes.

But, important as air power is, it has never won a war by itself. Effective military action requires a combined-arms offensive. The U.S. can readily provide the air component. What about the ground component?

Obviously it would be ideal if someone else other than American soldiers could do the hard fighting on the ground needed to oust ISIS from Ramadi, Fallujah, Mosul, Tal Afar, Palmyra, Raqqa, and other strongholds. But we haven’t had much luck in mobilizing such a proxy force so far.

Our greatest success has come with Kurdish forces in northern Syria and Iraq. Backed by U.S. airpower, they have managed to liberate a few towns such as Kobani in Syria and Sinjar in Iraq from the black-clad fanatics of ISIS. But there is a limit beyond which Kurdish forces will not and should not advance. They can be effective only in areas with a Kurdish majority. Once they enter Arab areas, they risk enflaming the situation and exacerbating sectarian tensions in ways that will redound to ISIS’s advantage. Kurds cannot take and hold cities such as Raqqa and Ramadi.

Nor can the Shiite militias, the Popular Mobilization Forces (Hashd al-Shaabi) and others, that Iran has mobilized in Iraq. These militias can prevent ISIS from advancing into Baghdad or into the Shiite heartland but, like the Kurds, they have little interest or ability in taking Arab areas. Some units of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) that remain under nonsectarian, professional leadership can have greater credibility in fighting in Sunni areas, but at the moment they are far too weak to advance by themselves even with U.S. air support. Unfortunately much of the leadership of the ISF has now been compromised by Shiite sectarian influence. These sectarian forces have no more interest in advancing into Ramadi than the Kurdish YPG has in advancing into Raqqa.

So if the ground forces needed to defeat ISIS will not come from the Kurds or from the Shiites, where will they come? They must come from the Sunnis themselves. We somehow need to replicate the Anbar Awakening of 2006-2007 which flipped the Sunni population of Iraq against Al Qaeda in Iraq, the ISIS predecessor, and enabled the success of the “surge.” This will be no easy feat given that we do not have 150,000 troops in Iraq, as we did then, and, even more importantly, we do not have much credibility with the Sunnis, because we abandoned them when we pulled our troops out of Iraq in 2011.

For the past couple of years U.S. diplomatic representatives have been urging leaders in Baghdad to create a National Guard that would incorporate the Sunni tribes. Baghdad has refused to do so, for the simple reason that Shiite powerbrokers have no interest in arming Sunnis. They see Sunnis in general, not just ISIS, as the enemy. I believe it is worthwhile to try one last time to achieve a more inclusive policy in Baghdad by sending high-level representatives such as Ryan Crocker and David Petraeus to negotiate on Washington’s behalf and by threatening Baghdad with a cut-off of U.S. aid unless it does more to reach out to Sunnis. But given the level of Iranian influence in Baghdad—the Iranian-backed militias are far more important militarily to the regime than is American aid—I do not have much hope that such an initiative will succeed.

If Baghdad persists in refusing to reach out to Sunnis, I believe we must go around Baghdad and train and arm the Sunnis ourselves. There are already many thousands of Sunni refugees, including former Iraqi army officers, in the Kurdish Regional Government. This would be a safe area for the U.S. to train them into a force that, working with reconstituted Iraqi army divisions, could retake Mosul and then Ramadi.

To give the Sunnis confidence in rising up, we need to offer them more military support than is possible for 3,000 advisers—the current U.S. strength in Iraq—to do. I believe we will need a force of 20,000 to 30,000 personnel organized into five Assist and Advise Brigades and including a substantial Special Operations task force in order to galvanize and support a Sunni uprising in Iraq and Syria. If we make such a commitment, allies such as France, Britain, and Egypt are likely to step forward as well. As important as sending more troops is the need to loosen the overly restrictive rules of engagement which currently apply to our forces.

Our Special Operators need to directly target ISIS networks with regular raids as they once targeted AQL. This will yield valuable intelligence that will make the overall campaign much more effective. And our Special Operations, army and marine personnel need to work directly as combat advisers with Kurds, Sunni tribes, Yazidis, and elements of the Iraqi Security Forces to give them the confidence and capability to smash ISIS strongholds. Once that happens our forces could pull back and local allies, especially among the Sunnis, could provide the “hold” force needed to stabilize the post-ISIS environment.

I want to stress that to be successful this strategy needs a political as well as a military component. It is not enough to pledge more military aid to the Sunnis. We also need to give them some assurance of a political end-state that is attractive enough that they will be willing to fight for it. At the moment, when Sunnis on both sides of the border are being asked to substitute the tyranny of Iran and its sectarian proxies for the tyranny of ISIS, Sunnis see no particularly compelling reason to fight. We need to give them an objective worth fighting for.

John Bolton has proposed creating a new “Sunni-stan” out of both Syria and Iraq. I would not go quite that far because I think that Syrian and Iraqi Sunnis do not regard themselves as members of a single state and there are too many problems in trying to create a new country.

But I do think it is important to offer Iraqi Sunnis, if not independence, then autonomy within Iraq. We need to create a Sunni Regional Government, akin to the KRG, which would be protected by its own militia, the Sons of Iraq, and whose security ultimately would be guaranteed by the United States. To assure Sunnis that we will not again abandon them, we should pledge to maintain a U.S. garrison for the long haul in at least the KRG and possibly in Anbar and in Iraq proper as well. Obviously it would be ideal to get Baghdad’s acquiescence to this new arrangement, but it can be implemented even over Baghdad’s opposition. The SRG would be a viable political entity even if Baghdad refuses to share oil revenues from the southern oil fields, because geological surveys have shown that Anbar has considerable oil and gas deposits of its own which could be exploited once peace comes.

For the Sunnis of Syria, we need to offer a different deal. We need to assure them that we will act to remove Bashar Assad, who has killed far more people than ISIS. Until now we have been asking Syrian rebels to pledge to fight only ISIS and not Assad, and we are mystified that so few are willing to sign up under those terms. If we establish safe zones and no-fly zones, this would encourage Syrian Sunnis to see that the West is serious about toppling the homicidal Assad regime, and many more young men will be willing to sign up for military training under those circumstances. The initial protection of the safe zones would require some deployment of U.S. troops—one Assist and Advise brigade in the north along the Turkish border, another in the south along the Jordanian border. If we make such a commitment, European and Muslim allies are likely to join in. Eventually the protection of these safe zones could be turned over to moderate rebel forces that will be trained there.

No-fly zones and safe zones would have important benefits: They would allow Syrians to stay in their own country instead of becoming refugees; they would allow Syrian opposition leaders to exercise sovereignty over Syrian territory, preparing for the task of ruling the entire country once Assad is deposed; and they would allow moderate rebel fighters to be trained and armed in the territory of Syria itself. The northern safe zone is particularly important: It could be a launching pad for an offensive to take Raqqa, the ISIS capital, whose loss would split ISIS’s line of communications between Iraq and Syria and deal it an important symbolic and substantive blow.

Against these benefits must be weighed the potential risk of confrontation with Russia, whose air force is already bombing U.S.-supported rebels in Syria. This is a very real concern, but we must not let fear of Putin paralyze us from acting. Make it clear to Russia that, while we do not seek confrontation, its forces will challenge ours at their own peril. Vladimir Putin is a classic bully who has shown that he advances when he meets no resistance but falls back when he knows that he will be confronting powerful adversaries. (This is why he has invaded Georgia and Ukraine, which are not NATO members, rather than Poland and the Baltic States, which are.) The Turkish shoot-down of a Russian jet has exposed Putin’s bluster and is likely to make him think twice about confronting NATO forces in Syria.

The strategy I have laid out here today—call it “Afghanistan Plus” because it is modeled after the strategy used to take down the Taliban in the fall of 2001—is not easy to implement. It involves greater U.S. resources

and runs the risk of greater U.S. casualties. Those are not risks that can be taken lightly. But this plan also has a reasonable chance of success.

The same cannot be said for today's Operation Inherent Resolve, which seems to be premised on doing as little as possible. While we have been bombing ISIS since August 2014, its fundamentalist empire has shrunk slightly but it has become more dangerous than ever. We cannot afford to live with this extremist "caliphate." We cannot afford to ignore it or "contain" it. The existence of the Islamic State is a clear and pressing danger to the security of the United States and that of our allies. This threat must be confronted and destroyed before ISIS operatives attack us right here in Washington and in other American cities.

Thank you. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.