

**Testimony**

**United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Homeland Security**

**By**

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**on**

**ISIS – Post Caliphate: Threat Implications for America and the West**

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**210 House Visitors Center**

Chairman McCaul, ranking member Thompson, distinguished members of the Committee thank you for inviting me to testify today. Am honored to be here with my esteemed colleagues, particularly Ambassador Crocker, America's most accomplished Middle East envoy, who I had the pleasure of visiting on many occasions when he was Ambassador to Iraq and Afghanistan during the 9/11 wars, while I was conducting assessments for General Petraeus.

In the summer of 2012 the Islamic State of Iraq, an Al Qaeda affiliate organization, under the command of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was operating in the shadows and territory in the belt around Baghdad when al-Baghdadi made the most important strategic decision in his reign as a jihadist leader; he seized the opportunity to take advantage of the stalemated Syrian civil war, after Iran and Russia significantly assisted the Assad regime in halting the momentum of the Syrian opposition forces. As such, al-Baghdadi correctly assumed that the civil war participants, largely fighting in western Syria, would be so preoccupied that al-Baghdadi could occupy Sunni Arab lands in northeastern Syria with little to no resistance and establish a bona fide safe haven with several hundred Iraqi fighters.

### The Caliphate in Iraq and Syria

Unprecedented in the history of terrorist organizations, al-Baghdadi grew the organization to 30 thousand fighters in 18 months, invading Iraq in January 2014 and seizing Fallujah. By June they were 40 thousand strong and captured Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, which gained worldwide attention by forcing the collapse of an Iraqi Army whose previous competent leaders were purged by PM Maliki as he pocketed the funds intended to train the Army for the past 3 years. The exponential growth of ISIS in less than 2 years using the internet almost exclusively to recruit with sophisticated cinematography and messaging was an outstanding achievement and quite unprecedented. Many of the fighters came from throughout the region, also Afghanistan, with

approximately 5 thousand alone from western Europe and about 250 from the United States. In June 2014, al-Baghdadi, announced from the Grand Mosque in Mosul the establishment of the Islamic State, the so called ISIS caliphate.

Regrettably, it took the US 9 months to respond to PM Maliki's emergency request in January for air power support when it was finally delivered 2 months after the fall of Mosul in August 2014.

With the final defeat of ISIS in Mosul and Raqqa in 2017, the ISIS caliphate was decimated. ISIS has been badly damaged but not defeated in its insurgency capacity and its ability to inspire others to engage in terrorist attacks elsewhere. Indeed ISIS is a thriving global terrorist organization. At its peak ISIS governed 7.7 million people and controlled roughly 40 thousand square miles of land essentially forming a proto-state as large as the UK, and earned \$80 million per month by the end of 2015. Mostly via illegal oil sales, while also relying on antiquities sales, the extortion and taxation of local populations and kidnappings for ransom.

Since the coalition military operations against ISIS in Iraq and Syria it has lost 90% of the territory it once controlled to include its former capital Raqqa as well as Mosul. An estimated 3 to 5,000 fighters remain in the area, down significantly from the estimated 40-60 thousand fighters from over 100 countries, while it still earns roughly \$4 million per month from oil sales and black market antiquities trading.

There is potential for an ISIS resurgence in Syria and Iraq if the US pulls its forces out prematurely. What the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) would lose most significantly is the assistance of competent American ground and coalition forces and the devastating use of American air power, while forfeiting the political and diplomatic support that the US military presence brings to the table.

## Virtual Caliphate

The virtual caliphate maintains the connectivity with ISIS affiliate organizations worldwide which indeed have expanded since the loss of the physical caliphate. Using the virtual caliphate ISIS maintains its external terrorist organization (ETO) to, at times, direct or support networks, cells and individuals, but, mostly, to inspire others to kill and maim their own people. While it has taken longer than decimating the physical caliphate, the virtual caliphate has been severely damaged mostly because of physical destruction but also because of sophisticated cyber operations to reduce capacity. This was due to the combined efforts of the National Security Agency (NSA) and the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). The US works alongside foreign partners to strengthen their counter messaging strategies. Further, the US government has enlisted the assistance of social media companies such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to identify potential terrorist accounts and remove violent content from their platforms. To date Twitter has reportedly disabled nearly 1 million handles publishing pro-ISIS content. Despite that positive effort the social media companies must do more.

Reducing the virtual caliphate begins to break the bond that ISIS has so successfully maintained with its worldwide affiliate organizations and its ETO which was also the basis for past recruiting successes.

## Affiliate Organizations Worldwide

With the loss of the ISIS caliphate in Syria and Iraq, the network has shifted its resources to expand the influence and lethality of its affiliates in Northern Africa, the Sahel, The Sinai, Afghanistan and Southeast Asia.

-- Libya – despite losing its presence in Derna and Sirte, ISIS has maintained a strong presence in Libya and remains a potent regional threat having

regrouped and established training centers and operational headquarters in the central and southern parts of the country. ISIS maintains a force of 4 to 6,000 fighters in Libya.

-- Sahel region in Africa – Willingly ISIS roams this area and attacks local and out of region forces as it demonstrated in the October 2017 ambush of a joint US/Nigerian patrol along the Mali-Niger border, resulting in the deaths of 4 US troops and 5 Nigerian soldiers. Given the unwarranted publicity, the US admitted it had 800 US troops in Niger and that the US military was operating a key drone base in the area.

-- Boko Haram – in northeastern Africa pledged allegiance to ISIS in March 2015 and rapidly became the most infamous and violent terrorist group to join the ISIS network. Boko Haram is currently divided into 2 factions and continues to strike government officials, troops and civilians from northeastern Africa despite a multinational Joint Task Force of 8,700 troops. Boko Haram is listed as the world's deadliest terror organization.

-- Sinai – The ISIS Sinai branch has been active in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula since 2011. Over the last few years Sinai Province has frequently attacked Egyptian military and security forces deployed in the Sinai. It has also conducted several attacks in Cairo and bombings of Coptic churches in Alexandria and Tanta.

-- Afghanistan – ISIS in Afghanistan also called ISIS Khorasan Province (ISKP) operates in the east in Nangarhar province and in the north in Kunar and Jowzjan provinces combined. ISIS has carved out a dangerous foothold in Afghanistan which has potential to expand into a bonafide safe haven. ISIS conducts an increasing number of attacks in Kabul against civilian and military targets.

-- Philippines – ISIS managed to overrun the city of Marawi located on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao. The Philippine forces encountered more than expected resistance, ISIS forces aligned with other pro-ISIS brigade groups. After five

months and over a thousand deaths, Philippine forces finally defeated the pro-ISIS militias with US assistance. ISIS is planning to regroup.

### Protecting the Homeland

The best defense since 9/11 has been a good offense, US and coalition partners deployed to fight terrorists in their breeding grounds overseas. US law enforcement agencies have remained vigilant in thwarting terrorist plots against the US homeland as demonstrated by the fact that there has not been a major terrorist attack since 9/11. However, despite law enforcement's best efforts, preventing highly motivated and inspired assailants from carrying out terrorist acts remains a relentless challenge. The December 2015 San Bernardino shooting, the June 2016 Orlando nightclub attack and the October 2017 deadly car ramming in New York are all stark reminders of the difficulty in containing the domestic terrorist threat. It's virtually impossible to monitor everyone who you would want to. With 1,000 plus investigations in the US spreading across the breadth of the Nation and 23,000 persons of interest in the UK as reported by the director of MI-5, it is inevitable some people are going to get through. Our agencies hope to minimize and reduce those possibilities and turn the odds in our favor. This is the price of a free society. It's also an allocation of resources issue. Do we want to deplete everything else we are doing with government funding and throw it all at this problem, when in fact more people are killed in opioid overdose and in automobile accidents than are killed in terrorist attacks? We must make trade-offs and with people operating alone who are not talking to people or linked to a terrorist group, it is very difficult to find them.

### Looking Ahead

Despite the tactical victories over ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the remaining ISIS fighters and leadership should be driven out of southeastern Syria along the Euphrates River valley. And the Iraqi security forces assisted by US and coalition partners must maintain its vigilance in Iraq to prevent a resurgence of ISIS. Key is the formation of a

government after this recent election that enfranchises the Sunnis and the Kurds and does not make the mistake of previous Iraq governments that disenfranchised the Sunnis. Political unity is vital to prevent the rise of ISIS again or another radical Islamist group.

It appears likely that ISIS will resort to more traditional terrorist tactics and attempt to exert control in weakly governed space across Africa, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia. It will always be seeking sanctuary or safe haven and when they do, it must be destroyed as rapidly as possible.

Europe, much more vulnerable than the US, could be the next battlefield as ISIS activates cells to carry out attacks and prove it's still a threat to the West.

In conclusion, there is a tendency and an understandable desire to declare victory over ISIS after retaking the lost territory in Iraq and Syria and go home both physically and psychologically; a serious strategic blunder. The lesson learned from the premature withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 before political stability was achieved is, we got ISIS. Similarly we refused to assist the newly elected moderate government in Libya after Qaddafi was deposed in 2011 and we got Benghazi in 2012 and a failed state shortly thereafter. When we stay post-conflict to insure political stability such as in Germany, Italy and Japan post WWII, in South Korea post Korean War and in Bosnia Herzegovina for almost 9 years, significant and lasting success is achieved.

The US, our allies and partners know we are in a generational struggle in confronting the ISIS threat where the key to long term success is defeating their ideology and propaganda as well as addressing the conditions that help spread it, such as political and social injustice, lack of economic opportunity, corruption and instability.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.