

A STRATEGY FOR DEFEATING ISIS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

Prepared statement by

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Chairman McKeon, Ranking Member Smith, members of the committee:

Thank you for inviting me here to testify about what is arguably the most pressing national security threat we face—the takeover of a vast swathe of territory in Iraq and Syria by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS, once known as Al Qaeda in Iraq, has recently renamed itself the Islamic State and proclaimed a fundamentalist caliphate, with its de facto capital in Raqqa, Syria. Its territory encompasses roughly a third of Syria and at least a third if not more of Iraq. The fact that Islamist extremists have taken over an area larger than New England is not just of concern to Iraq, Syria, and neighboring states. It is of direct concern to the U.S. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed emir of this new caliphate, has made no secret of his animosity toward our country. “Our last message is to the Americans. Soon we will be in direct confrontation, and the sons of Islam have prepared for such a day,” Baghdadi said in an audiotape back in January. “So watch, for we are with you, watching.”

Even if ISIS is too busy fighting Iraqi Security Forces at the moment—something that it is doing with disturbing success—to focus on plots against the US, there is little doubt that its continuing control of so much territory greatly heightens the risk of international terrorism. Every time Salafist extremists have managed to consolidate control of territory, whether in Mali or Afghanistan, they have turned their state into a magnet for international jihadists who flock there to be trained and indoctrinated. Some, it is true, never leave—they become “martyrs” while fighting against local enemies. But some small portion

travels abroad in the hope of attacking targets in pro-Western countries or in the West itself. Western intelligence officials estimate that some 10,000 foreign fighters have joined the battle against Bashar Assad and that 3,000 may hold European or other Western passports, including at least 100 Americans. And those figures are growing. Attorney General Eric Holder recently said that intelligence about plots involving terrorists based in Syria were “something that gives us really extreme, extreme concern. In some ways, it's more frightening than anything I think I've seen as attorney general.”

The attorney general is right to be frightened. We should all be frightened by the existence of a jihadist terrorist state in the middle of the Middle East. The harder question is what to do about it. What I would like to do today is to offer some ideas for action in both Syria and Iraq, while stipulating that our chances of success would have been much higher if we had done more to address this threat before it had metastasized as much as it has.

BACK THE FREE SYRIAN ARMY

In particular, we had an opportunity in 2011, when the revolt against Bashar Assad started, to support the relatively moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA) to overthrow a hated dictator. Because we failed to do so, the FSA has been marginalized and more radical groups such as the Nusra Front and ISIS, which have received support from Persian Gulf donors among others, have come to the fore. In the meantime Bashar Assad has become increasingly reliant on support from the Iranian Quds Force and its proxies in the Lebanese Hezbollah. What is effectively happening today is that these two groups of Islamist extremists—one Shiite, one Sunni—are dividing the country between them. Unfortunately one of the few things that unites the two sides is hatred of the United States, the “Great Satan.”

We would have had a much greater chance of achieving our goals in Syria—of denying that country to anti-American extremists—if we had done much more to arm and train the Free Syrian Army three years ago. But even now there is really no better alternative policy that anyone has presented. Simply standing by and letting the conflict continue is hardly a good option—not only for humanitarian reasons (the death of 170,000 people and counting) but also strategic reasons. As many predicted, the conflict has not stayed confined to Syria—it has spilled over into neighboring states, most dangerously so in the case of Iraq. But it has also destabilized Lebanon and threatens to do the same in Jordan. The impact of this barbaric civil war will only grow over time if we don't do something to contain the damage.

For this reason I reluctantly suggest that you support the administration's request for \$500 million to provide weapons and training to vetted fighters of the FSA. I say “reluctantly” not because I doubt the desirability of supporting the FSA—in Syria it is effectively the only game in town—but because I doubt even now the administration's commitment to that cause. I note, for example, a July 16 article in the Wall Street Journal which says that the Pentagon only plans “to train a 2,300-man force—less than the size of a single brigade—over an 18-month period that probably won't begin until early next year.” This is a scandalously low figure that will do little to turn the tide. The administration needs a much more ambitious program of support to the FSA which offers the only viable “third way” in Iraq between the extremism of Hezbollah and Al Qaeda. In fact FSA fighters are happy to target both of these prominent foes of America. They are ready to do battle on our behalf if only we give them weapons and know-how.

Granted, we have to be careful whom we support. We don't want to experience “blowback” as we did in the case of Afghanistan in the 1980s when, because of our reliance on Pakistani and Saudi

intelligence, much of our aid to mujahedeen fighters went to Islamist extremists such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani rather than to more moderate leaders such as Ahmad Shah Massoud. We can guard against this danger in Syria, if not foreclose it entirely, by having the CIA distribute aid directly to vetted Syrian fighters rather than relying on Saudi or Qatari intelligence officers to do so.

If we do provide more aid to FSA, its fighters can take the fight to both Shiite and Sunni extremists and inflict serious setbacks on them. At the very least this will distract groups such as ISIS from plotting terrorist attacks in other lands. Eventually, American backing to the FSA, if it were to include air strikes, as in Libya, has the potential to actually topple the Assad regime. If that were to happen, however, the US and its allies would need a better prepare for stabilizing the country after the fall of the regime than we did in Libya—or in Iraq or Afghanistan. Such planning should begin now even if the eventual goal—the fall of Assad—seems much further away than it did in August 2011 when President Obama declared: “For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.”

FIND AN ALTERNATIVE TO MALIKI

Even if the FSA cannot overthrow Assad anytime soon, it can at least put pressure on ISIS in its Syrian strongholds. We also need a plan to fight ISIS on the Iraqi side of the border where it has made rapid gains in recent months with its capture of Mosul and Tikrit to go along with its capture earlier this year of Fallujah and much of Anbar province. The task is complicated by the sectarian nature of the Maliki government. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s anti-Sunni tendencies, manifest in his persecution of senior Sunni politicians and onetime leaders of the Sons of Iraq, have driven many Sunnis who once fought Al Qaeda back into the terrorists’ camp because they see ISIS as the only defender of the Sunni community against “Persian” oppression.

Maliki’s sectarian tendencies have also significantly harmed the fighting capabilities of the Iraqi security forces (ISF). The ISF, in fact, have been going backward ever since the withdrawal of American advisers in 2011. Maliki has repaced professional commanders with political hacks beholden to him. These sectarian officers cannot effectively supply or lead their troops. As the New York Times noted in a July 16 account:

Volunteers are routinely asked to serve for days in temperatures above 110 degrees without enough water and are given little food. Often, they also must supply themselves with another vital item for a soldier: bullets and in some cases weapons. “We have old weapons and not enough ammunition,” said Abdullah Hassan, 17, on Wednesday in Hoar Hussain, a district in northern Babil Province, barely 90 minutes from the center of Baghdad. “Sometimes they give us ammunition, but mostly we buy our own, and it is getting more expensive as the war goes on.”

This particular passage describes the woes of Shiite volunteers hastily recruited to backstop the Iraqi army, but the army’s supply difficulties have been just as drastic. The result has been a catastrophic decline in morale, manifested by the willingness of tens of thousands of Iraqi troops to run away when confronted with a much smaller force of dedicated ISIS extremists in Mosul.

As a result of the damage he has inflicted on his own armed forces, Maliki has been forced increasingly to rely on Shiite militias mobilized and directed by Major General Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Quds Force, who has been spending an increasing

amount of time in Iraq, often near the frontlines. He has been reported, recently, for example, to be in Samarra, one of the few major towns north of Baghdad still in government hands. As in Syria, the Shiite militias run by the Quds Force are brutal in dealing not only with Sunni insurgents but Sunni civilians. The result is a vicious circle: As the security situation worsens, ruthless Iranian-directed militias become more prominent in defending the government; their prominence scares Sunni civilians and drives them further into the arms of ISIS; and the security situation worsens some more.

How do we break out of this dysfunctional dynamic? We need a political strategy and a military strategy. The political strategy must begin with trying to get Iraq's parliament, the Council of Representatives, to cobble together a new government that is not led by Nouri al-Maliki. It is hard to imagine lasting progress being made against ISIS as long as Iraq's government is led by someone like Maliki who is so firmly identified with Shiite sectarian tendencies. Iraq desperately needs a leader who can credibly reach out to Sunnis in the way that Maliki did in 2007-2008 under American prodding—but that Maliki can no longer do with any credibility. This new leader must also accept curbs on his power that Maliki has refused to accept—in particular there must be a division of power in the next government so that one person cannot directly control both the Defense and Interior ministries as Maliki has done. This is necessary to reassure all sides that Iraq will not risk a return to dictatorship.

Administration officials have been paying lip service to removing Maliki, but even now I question whether they are doing enough to bring it about. This appears to be a second-order issue, relegated to the ambassador and occasionally to Vice President Biden. President Obama is still not getting involved in this issue personally and neither is Secretary Kerry. The president and his secretary of state are not calling Iraqi political leaders directly, and they are not talking about this issue much in public. They are focusing their public remarks instead on Gaza and Ukraine, among other issues. Given the high stakes involved in Iraq, much more direct and concerted presidential involvement is called for.

As long as Maliki remains in charge, providing blind, blanket support to the Iraqi security forces would be counterproductive. We should not willy nilly provide the ISF with arms such as Hellfire missiles and we should certainly not call in airstrikes based on their say-so. This would turn the US, as many have warned, into Iran's air force. But that doesn't mean we should refuse to play a more active role in rolling back ISIS as long as Maliki remains ensconced in Baghdad. In fact the more that the US does militarily, the more leverage we will gain over the Iraqi political process; whereas if we do nothing we effectively cede the entire political process to the Iranians and their proxies.

WHAT KIND OF FORCES WE NEED IN IRAQ

In recent weeks President Obama has sent a few hundred military advisers back to Iraq. Along with security elements, this has brought our troop presence there to 825 troops. This is a good start but only a start. If we are to have any success in rolling back ISIS, we need a much bigger presence of military and intelligence personnel to carry out four closely related missions: collecting and distributing intelligence; advising military units (not only from the Iraqi army but also from the Sunni tribes and the Kurdish peshmerga); calling in air strikes; and carrying out direct-action Special Operations raids. In the process our personnel must be careful to work not just with the ISF but with all three major, potentially friendly armed groups in Iraq: the ISF (or at least the elements thereof that are not under direct Iranian control), the Sunni tribes, and the Kurdish peshmerga.

Why do we need all four types of specialists?

Good intelligence is always the prerequisite for successful counterinsurgency operations, even more so than in conventional warfare, since in such a conflict the enemy does not typically wear a uniform. To arrest or kill your enemies, you must first identify them—hence the need for intelligence. The Iraqis have some good human intelligence capabilities, but they are very deficient in collecting signals intelligence and other types of technical data, and they have great difficulty in analyzing and distributing the resulting information. That is a task that American intelligence personnel, both civilian and military, can facilitate in “fusion” centers manned jointly with carefully vetted Iraqi personnel (from the ISF, Sunni tribes, and the peshmerga). US personnel have, in fact, already established two Joint Operations Centers with Iraqi personnel, one in Baghdad and one in Erbil, and both are now functioning, enabling personnel from both countries to draw on increased intelligence, including stepped-up American overflights of Iraqi territory.

The advisers can help buttress the professionalism of some of the better remaining Iraqi army units, such as the Iraqi Special Operations Forces, helping them to resist political pressure to target Sunni political figures. Advisers can also help with intelligence and planning functions, where the Iraqis particularly lag behind. Many Iraqi units remain intact and capable of providing effective resistance to ISIS; they are worth helping. At the same time advisers can serve as critical enablers for the peshmerga, which have many of the attributes of professional military units, and for the Anbar tribes, which are more unconventional and less organized fighters but can nevertheless be effective because of their superior knowledge of the human and geographical terrain in waging warfare against ISIS as they did during the surge in 2007-2008.

The combat controllers can call in air strikes—a mission we cannot carry out responsibly without American eyes on the ground to ensure that such strikes are being aimed at Sunni extremists, not simply at Sunni political opponents of Prime Minister Maliki. We saw in the early days of the Afghanistan war, in the fall of 2001, how effective a relatively small cadre of Special Operations Forces and combat controllers could be by calling in accurate strikes with precision-guided, air-dropped munitions. Such attacks rapidly broke the Taliban front lines and enabled the Taliban’s overthrow. We should not expect such quick results in Iraq, but ISIS forces, which are starting to take on some attributes of conventional armies, will also be very vulnerable to precision air strikes especially when their fighters are on the move in convoys.

Special Operations Forces can help carry out each of the above missions, while their Tier I operators—in Delta Force, SEAL Team Six, and other elite units—can conduct the kind of methodical leadership targeting of ISIS that has become a JSOC trademark over the past decade. Based on carefully collected intelligence, JSOC raids can take out an entire tier of mid- and high-level ISIS organizers, leaving the entire organization vulnerable to defeat, even if such raids cannot by themselves defeat an insurgency as large as ISIS.

I do not have a fully realized operational plan to present to you, but my educated guess is that we are talking about a minimum of 10,000 troops including the logistics elements and security elements we need to allow the intelligence personnel, advisers, combat air controllers, and Special Operators to do their jobs within an acceptable margin of safety. That is coincidentally about the minimum number of troops that US commanders had recommended we leave behind in 2011 if we had been able to reach a Status of Forces Agreement with the Iraqis.

As we know, the SOFA negotiations fell apart and we pulled all of our troops out. But the lack of a SOFA has not prevented the deployment of 825 US troops in recent weeks and it should not prevent the deployment of thousands more, because in Iraq, as in other countries, we can deploy troops based on an exchange of diplomatic notes with the local executive. We do not need ratification for such an agreement from the Council of Representatives; the administration's insistence on such ratification in 2011 was a needless obstacle to obtaining a SOFA. In reality the greatest protection that US troops enjoy from persecution in Iraq or anywhere else comes not from a piece of paper but from fear of American power. Do Iranian Quds Forces fighters in Iraq have a SOFA? Of course not. If they don't need one, why do we?

SOFA or no SOFA, we should deploy a limited number of troops urgently not to take part in ground combat operations but in order to carry out the specialized missions specified above.

ONE COUNTRY OR THREE?

As suggested earlier, our deployment should not show favoritism to the ISF. We should spread our personnel among the ISF, Sunni tribes and the peshmerga, so as to maintain good relations with moderates in all three major communities.

Does this mean that we should give up the ghost of Iraq? Not necessarily, since there is no plan to dismantle Iraq that will win universal acceptance. It would be particularly hard to divide mixed communities such as Mosul (divided between Arabs and Kurds) and Baghdad (Shiites and Sunnis). But at the very least we should acknowledge the de facto division of Iraq which already exists and work within that framework with whatever indigenous allies we can find. We should also push for greater reforms at the national level to devolve more power to Iraqi regions and provinces; a country as diverse as Iraq needs a more federalist system to survive.

The most reliable allies we have are in the Kurdish Regional Government and we should take advantage of their offer to host American troops in the KRG without fear of a backlash in Baghdad. (This would be a good perch from which to send JSOC operators and drones to attack ISIS in and around Mosul.) Likewise we should not try to block oil sales by the Kurds, however much they may rankle Baghdad.

But while the Kurds are the most pro-American element in Iraq, the Sunni tribes are the most important factor in stopping ISIS because only they can effectively contest ISIS for the support of Sunnis. There are fissures within the insurgent movement—in particular between ISIS and Saddamists, between religious fundamentalists and more secular nationalists—that could be skillfully exploited by US military, diplomatic, and intelligence officers. Given the tribes' nationalist sentiments, we must be careful of being too closely identified with the cause of Kurdish separatism. It was the defection of the Sunni tribes in 2007-2008, during the surge, which sealed the defeat of Al Qaeda in Iraq. Today it is once again necessary to do what we can to turn the tribes against ISIS—a task that will be significantly enhanced by a change of leadership in Baghdad but one that we must pursue no matter what happens in Baghdad.

CONCLUSION: THE BATTLE CAN STILL BE WON

I realize that the strategy I have outlined here is sure to be a tough sell with a war-weary American public—and a war-weary Congress. Everyone remembers all too well the nightmare that was the Iraq

War. No one wants to get involved in Iraq again. But as we have learned since 2011, there are costs not only to American engagement—there are also costs to American disengagement. In Iraq and Syria we are seeing a particularly severe cost: the emergence of a new fundamentalist state that is likely to threaten us even more than the Taliban did in Afghanistan.

I wish there were some way to roll back ISIS's advances without greater American military involvement. But there isn't. Again, I stress I am not advocating fighting another ground war. What I am advocating is a prudent and limited deployment of American trainers, special operators, air controllers and intelligence agents whose primary job will be to mobilize indigenous opposition to ISIS. Such opposition exists because in every country where Islamist fundamentalists have come to power their Draconian decrees have triggered a backlash from ordinary people who want to be left alone to live their lives. The job of our armed forces, our diplomats, and our intelligence community is to catalyze and channel that backlash to prevent Al Qaeda-aligned extremists from winning their most significant victory since 9/11.

The good news is that the battle is far from lost. The situation in Iraq may seem hopeless today. But remember that the outlook appeared even more pessimistic in late 2006 when the senior Marine intelligence officer was writing off Anbar province and the widespread assumption was that the war was lost. But as General David Petraeus said back then, "Hard is not hopeless." Petraeus and the troops under his command proved that with the success of "the surge" which dismantled Al Qaeda in Iraq, brought violence down by 90%, and allowed Iraqi politics to function again. Similar success can be possible today and without nearly as big a troop commitment as long as we are skillful in mobilizing and enabling indigenous opposition in both Syria and Iraq to the violent fanatics of ISIS.

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