

**Statement of Senator Jack Reed
Ranking Member, Senate Armed Services Committee**

**Tuesday, October 27, 2015
Dirksen Senate Office Building**

Hearing to receive testimony on U.S. military strategy in the Middle East

Let me join the Chairman in welcoming you both back to the Armed Services Committee.

Today's hearing comes in the midst of a series of events altering the security situation in the Middle East. These include a massive wave of refugees fleeing the continued violence on the ground in Syria and Iraq; the deployment of Russian air and ground forces in Syria; the suspected ISIL attack in Turkey that killed over 100 people and injured hundreds more during a peace rally in Ankara; the deployment of Lieutenant General McFarland, the new Commander of Operation Inherent Resolve; and Secretary Kerry's recent meetings with the Foreign Ministers of Russia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. The hearing also comes only weeks before the G20 Summit in Turkey where these issues and the international response will be at the forefront.

General McFarland has been in command of military operations in Syria and Iraq for a little more than 45 days and I understand he has used this time to evaluate the situation on the ground and may be recommending changes to the campaign. General McFarland's arrival comes at a critical time as the coalition military campaign requires a reevaluation of our strategy.

In Syria, the coalition faces a series of intermingled conflicts, including: the counter-ISIL fight; a Syrian civil war; a regional proxy war between the Gulf states and Iran; a sectarian Sunni-Shia conflict; our counterterrorism fight; and with the intervention of Russia, a great powers struggle. Considering these challenges, it is important that we continually assess the role of our nation's military in helping to bring about the conditions for an acceptable and sustainable settlement.

In Iraq, the recent visits by Chairman Dunford and General Austin have focused attention on the coalition's efforts to train and equip the Iraqi Security Forces. However, taken as a whole, the ISF have not shown the will to make necessary advances in the operation to retake Ramadi. And the political

leaders in Baghdad have not made the progress needed on the broader agenda of improving the inclusiveness of the Iraqi Government and addressing the long-standing grievances of Kurds, Sunnis, moderate Shia and minorities.

The recent operation by Kurdish Peshmerga forces accompanied by U.S. Special Operation Forces in Northern Iraq, despite the tragic loss of one of our soldiers, demonstrated that such targeted efforts can have significant success in protecting innocent civilians and degrading ISIL. These kinds of operations can also result in critical intelligence to support the Coalition's broader campaign against ISIL. While these operations are obviously not without risk, the time may have come to evaluate whether the tempo of such counter-ISIL operations can be increased and whether our troops can play an even more active role in enabling the ISF, including by accompanying their forces at lower echelons especially when direct contact with the enemy is not expected.

According to reports, the Coalition's provision of close air support to Syrian Kurdish forces has shown success in the Northern Syria. The recent decision by the Administration to equip a group of Sunni tribes who have come together to form a "Syrian Arab Coalition" to fight alongside Syrian Kurdish forces shows promise for placing additional pressure on ISIL in Raqqah and the surrounding areas. If successful, this would be a positive development towards the objectives of the broader campaign.

However, I am concerned that the decision to completely suspend the Department's overt train and equip program may not enable us to accomplish our goals in Syria. While the program clearly failed to live up to heightened expectations, my understanding is that the Combined Joint Interagency Task Force had recently recalibrated the program based on lessons-learned and that later graduates are today having a direct impact as enablers in the fight against ISIL. The Coalition cannot succeed in Syria without a reliable Sunni force on the ground to hold any territorial gains. Building this force will require time and patience, and, critically, it will require the building of trust through training engagements and persistent contact between the Coalition and our new partners on the ground. I hope the Secretary will provide the committee a clear understanding of the conditions required to reengage in training of vetted individuals or small groups.

The deployment of Russian forces into Syria and their indiscriminate military operations targeting the moderate opposition have the potential to set off another wave of refugees across Europe. More specifically, Russia's military operations in Syria have complicated the Coalition air campaign and have the potential to draw the attention of moderate Syrian opposition forces away from counter-ISIL operations. Russian operations have also negatively impacted the distribution of humanitarian and other non-lethal aid to the Syrian people.

In the coming months, I hope General McFarland will be provided with the operational flexibility to implement necessary modifications to the campaign against ISIL. Secretary Carter and Chairman Dunford, I would be interested in your recommendations for how to ensure that General McFarland receives the operational flexibility and support needed to be successful going forward.

Thank you and I look forward to your testimony.