

Opening Statement of Senator John McCain Chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee

**Room SH-216, Hart Senate Office Building
9:30 am, Tuesday, March 24, 2015**

To receive testimony on U.S. Policy in the Middle East.

The Committee meets today to receive testimony on U.S. policy in the Middle East. This hearing could not be more timely, and I want to thank each of our expert witnesses for appearing before us today on this critical and complex topic:

- Dr. Ray Takeyh, Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations;
- Dr. Kenneth M. Pollack, Senior Fellow for Foreign Policy, Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution;
- Colonel Derek J. Harvey, US Army (Retired), Director of the Global Initiative for Civil Society and Conflict at the University of South Florida;
- Dr. Dafna H. Rand, Deputy Director of Studies and Leon E. Panetta Fellow at the Center for a New American Security.

Last month, the Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, testified before this committee, quote, “[I]n my 50-plus years in the intelligence business, I don’t know of a time that has been more beset by challenges and crises around the world.” Nowhere is that truer than in the Middle East.

From Libya and Yemen, to Iraq and Syria, the old order in the Middle East—both the regional balance among states and the social order within states—is collapsing, and no new vision has emerged to take its place. This underlying dynamic is made worse by the failure of U.S. strategy and leadership to shape events in this vital part of the world for the better. Instead, unfortunately, we have too often confused our friends, encouraged our enemies, and created a vacuum for hostile states such as Iran and Russia and vicious non-state actors such as al Qaeda and ISIL.

The President has stated our goal as “degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL.” However, I fear our effort in Iraq may be exacerbating the conditions that gave rise to ISIL in the first place, by overly relying on brutal Shia militias and insufficiently empowering Sunni Iraqis. The situation is far worse in Syria.

The Administration has defined its policy in Syria more by what it will not do, rather than by what end state we aim to achieve. The President repeatedly stresses that he will not put boots on the ground and that we will not go after Assad. But we still do not know whether we will defend the Syrian opposition we are training against Assad’s barrel bombs. And the Administration still believes somehow that Assad will negotiate his own removal from power, even though conditions on the ground do not support it. Our partners are not assured of U.S. resolve by statements of what we will not do. And hope, in Syria or anywhere else, is not a strategy.

Likewise, nuclear negotiations with Iran are clearly reaching the end game, and we should recall how much we have conceded. As Dr. Henry Kissinger testified in January, an international effort supported

by six UN Security Council resolutions to deny Iran a nuclear weapon capability has become an essentially bilateral negotiation over the scope of that capability. As Dr. Kissinger put it, “The impact of this approach will be to move from preventing proliferation to managing it.”

What has been obscured—and possibly downplayed—in our focus on the nuclear negotiations is the reality that Iran is not simply an arms control challenge. It is a geopolitical challenge, as we see more clearly than ever today:

- In Iraq, the same Iranian-backed Shia militias that killed hundreds of American soldiers are dictating the battle plans of the Iraqi Government and exacerbating the sectarian tensions that first led to the rise of ISIL.
- In Syria, the Iranian-backed Assad regime together with Iranian proxies like Hezbollah continue the slaughter that has killed more than 200,000 Syrians and displaced 10 million more.
- In Yemen, only six months after President Obama held it up as a successful model of U.S. counterterrorism, the takeover by Iranian-backed Houthis has pushed the country to the brink of a failed state and a sectarian civil war, strengthening the hand of both al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Iran.

And yet, while Iran is increasing the scope and pace of its malign activities in the region, there is a dangerous delusion that somehow Iran can be a force for good in the region, aligning with the United States in the fight against ISIL. For example, Secretary Kerry recently said of Iranian military action in Iraq, quote, “the net effect is positive.” Similarly, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Dempsey, said, “As long as the Iraqi government remains committed to inclusivity of all the various groups inside the country, then I think Iranian influence will be positive.”

General David Petraeus gave a realistic picture in a recent interview, which is worth quoting in full:

“The current Iranian regime is not our ally in the Middle East. It is ultimately part of the problem, not the solution. The more the Iranians are seen to be dominating the region, the more it is going to inflame Sunni radicalism and fuel the rise of groups like the Islamic State. While the U.S. and Iran may have convergent interests in the defeat of Daesh, our interests generally diverge. The Iranian response to the open hand offered by the U.S. has not been encouraging. Iranian power in the Middle East is thus a double problem. It is foremost problematic because it is deeply hostile to us and our friends. But it is also dangerous because, the more it is felt, the more it sets off reactions that are also harmful to our interests — Sunni radicalism and, if we aren't careful, the prospect of nuclear proliferation as well.”

This is a perilous moment in history for a region of enormous importance to American national interests. It is clear that we are engaged in the generational fight against brutal enemies, and that defeating these enemies will require clear thinking, setting priorities, and a strategy funded by adequate resources.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today on these important questions.