

**Opening Statement of U.S. Senator Jack Reed  
Ranking Member, Senate Armed Services Committee**

**Room SH-216  
Hart Senate Office Building  
Tuesday, March 24, 2015**

**To receive testimony on United States Middle East Policy  
(As Prepared for Delivery)**

Good Morning. Let me join Senator McCain in welcoming our witnesses and let me thank the Chairman for arranging this hearing in the lead-up to Thursday's session with our Combatant Commanders responsible for Africa and the Middle East. Both regions are facing critical security challenges that will continue to demand our time and consideration for the foreseeable future and hearing from experts outside of our government is an important input into our process.

Among the most significant issues in the Middle East today is whether there will be any nuclear framework agreement reached between the P5+1 and Iran. The end of March is fast approaching and, deal or no deal, the outcome of these negotiations will undoubtedly have an impact not only on the international community's relations with Iran, but also reverberate across the region. It is critical that we ensure our nation's military is prepared to respond to any contingencies resulting from the possible failure of those negotiations.

In Iraq and Syria, despite the setbacks that extremist fighters have suffered, ISIS remains capable militarily and continues to consolidate its power in the region, including through the coercion of local populations. Coalition airstrikes have enabled Kurdish peshmerga in northern Iraq and Iraqi security forces, operating with militia forces north of Baghdad and most recently in Tikrit, to begin to retake ground from ISIS. But significant concerns remain about the growing influence of Shia-dominated militias, many with close ties to Iran's Qods Force, and if, when, and how those forces will be integrated into the Iraqi security forces or disbanded. In addition, increasing reports of human rights abuses and brutal violence by Shia militias in Sunni communities retaken from ISIS control, for example in Amerli,

threaten to exacerbate the sectarian divide in Iraq and undermine efforts by the Abadi Government to govern more inclusively. Also of concern is when Iraqi security forces will be ready to launch a counteroffensive to retake Mosul, and about Iran's growing influence inside Iraq.

In Syria, coalition airstrikes have enabled Syrian Kurdish fighters to regain control of Kobani and expand outward, but ISIS remains a formidable force. General Nagata will begin training the moderate Syrian opposition in the coming month and – if successful – these forces could over time further roll back ISIS gains and assist the coalition to promote the conditions for a political settlement with Assad. I am interested in the views of our witnesses on the potential of the Syria training initiative to achieve its objectives and the challenges it will face in confronting ISIS. I am also interested in their assessment as to whether Iran or Russia could help facilitate an Assad departure.

In North Africa, the deadly events in Tunisia last week are a reminder that ISIS is bent on expanding its power and influence and, despite setbacks, it continues to draw fighters to its self-declared “caliphate.” While we must continue to apply pressure on ISIS in Iraq and Syria, I believe it will also be critical for the Coalition to use diplomatic and other tools of statecraft to more strategically counter ISIS's narrative and undermine their appeal globally. Over the past week in Yemen the world has watched the Houthis gain additional territory in Southern Yemen and all indications today are that Yemen is headed towards a protracted civil war. Given U.S. counterterrorism interests in Yemen, these developments are of deep concern and how the U.S. will adjust our posture to ensure our CT operations can continue is an issue to monitor closely.

Thank you again for appearing today, and I look forward to hearing from you on these and many other important issues.