

**Opening Statement, Hearing on Counter-ISIL Strategy**  
**July 7, 2015**

The Senate Armed Services Committee meets today to receive testimony on U.S. strategy to counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL. I am grateful to our distinguished witnesses for appearing before us today.

The risk posed by ISIL must be seen in the context of what many of America's most accomplished leaders and foreign policy experts have described as the most complex and uncertain international environment since the end of World War II. All across the globe, America's interests in security and stability are at risk.

As part of a broader strategy to dominate eastern Europe, Vladimir Putin's Russia continues its onslaught in Ukraine, with Russian troops and equipment leading an asymmetric campaign to undermine Ukraine's government and independence as the United States has refused weapons for its defense.

China's destabilizing behavior also poses a growing challenge to U.S. national interests—its reclamation and militarization of vast land features in the South China Sea, its continued military build-up, and of course, its blatant and undeterred cyber-attacks against the United States.

Iran is expanding its malign activities and hegemonic ambitions across the Middle East—as we see clearly in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, and elsewhere—and yet some in the Administration seem to be operate under the delusion that a nuclear agreement could lead to a new modus vivendi with the Islamic Republic.

And in Syria, Bashar Assad's slaughter of his own people, which has been the single greatest contributor to the rise and continued success of ISIL, goes on, and on, and on—aided by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. For four years, the President has said Assad must go as part of a political transition in Syria, but conditions on the ground have never allowed it. Tragically, that remains true today.

What each of these growing threats has in common is a failure of deterrence, brought on by a dangerous perception of American weakness and lack of resolve, which our adversaries have taken as a provocative invitation for hostility.

When it comes to ISIL, President Obama's comments yesterday at the Pentagon reveal the disturbing degree of self-delusion that characterizes the Administration's thinking. It is right but ultimately irrelevant to point out, as the President did, that

we have conducted thousands of air strikes, taken out many ISIL fighters and much equipment, and pushed it out of some territory. None of the so-called progress that the President cited suggests that we are on a path to success.

Since U.S. and coalition airstrikes began last year, ISIL has continued to enjoy battlefield successes, including taking Ramadi and other key terrain in Iraq, holding over half the territory in Syria, and controlling every border post between Iraq and Syria. Moreover, the longer ISIL remains undefeated in Iraq and Syria, the more potent its message is to those around the world who may be radicalized and inspired to join the group and spread violence and mayhem on its behalf.

It is not that we are doing nothing; it is that there is no compelling reason to believe that anything we are currently doing will be sufficient to achieve the President's stated goal of degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL—either in the short-term or the long-term. Our means and our current level of effort are not aligned with our ends. That suggests we are not winning, and when you are not winning in war, you are losing.

The reality today is that ISIL continues to gain territory in Iraq and Syria, while expanding its influence and presence across the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia. There is no responsible ground force in either Iraq or Syria that is both willing and able to take territory away from ISIL and hold it, and none of our current training efforts of moderate Syrians, Sunni tribes, or Iraqi Security Forces are as yet capable of producing such a ground force. It is unclear why the latest gradual escalation of effort, the deployment of a few hundred additional advisers to Anbar, will make the difference that our previous efforts failed to achieve.

While our coalition may own the skies, as the President said yesterday, our air campaign against ISIL continues to be limited significantly by overly restrictive rules of engagement and a lack of ground intelligence, which only gets worse as ISIL moves into urban areas to avoid coalition bombing. Pilots will tell you that they are only as good as the targets they receive, and when three-quarters of our air missions against ISIL still return to base without dropping weapons, that is indicative of a fundamental problem with our air campaign.

What's worse, none of our efforts against ISIL in Iraq can succeed while the conflict in Syria continues, and with it the conditions for ISIL's continued growth, recruitment, and radicalization of Muslims across the world. As published media reports indicate, our Syrian train and equip program is anemic and struggling because our stated goal does not include going after Assad and his regime forces,

and we still do not provide the forces we are training with the enabling capabilities to succeed in any engagement they may face inside Syria.

Given the poor numbers of recruited and trained Syrian fighters thus far, I am doubtful we can achieve our goal of training a few thousand this year. But even if the program achieves its goal, it is doubtful that it will make a strategic difference on the battlefield. Yes, we need a political solution in Syria. But no such solution is possible with Bashar Assad still in power. Unless and until the United States leads a coalition effort to put far greater battlefield pressure on Assad, a political solution will never be within reach, the conflict will grind on, and ISIL will thrive.

The lack of a coherent strategy has resulted in the spread of ISIL around the world—to Libya, Egypt, Nigeria, and even to Afghanistan, where I visited last weekend. Afghanistan is certainly not Iraq, but the parallels are eerily familiar. As in Iraq, the United States is contemplating a drastic reduction in force presence that places at risk the hard-won gains of the last decade. While Afghanistan's security forces are improving in quality, they are still missing the same set of key capabilities the Iraqis were missing when the U.S. withdrew in 2011, including intelligence, aviation, special operations, and logistics capabilities. At the current pace, our military commanders know these capabilities will remain critically underdeveloped at the end of 2016, when President Obama has announced that U.S. and coalition forces will dramatically downsize to a presence solely in Kabul.

We have seen this movie before. And if we make the same mistakes, we should expect similarly tragic results. I do not want to attend another hearing like this with your successors trying to figure out a strategy to clean up after avoidable mistakes. What that means is that the President must provide our commanders on the ground with necessary forces, capabilities, and the authorities to help our Afghan partners in continuing to secure their country and defeat our terrorist enemies together.

ISIL is not ten feet tall. It can be, and must be, defeated. But that will never happen if we continue to delude ourselves about our current campaign. The President is fond of the truism that there is no military solution to ISIL or any other problem. What he has so often failed to realize is that there is sometimes a major military dimension to achieving a political solution. This was the critical lesson that the United States learned in the Iraq surge, and we must learn again: security on the ground is a precondition to political reconciliation, not the other way around.

The unfortunate irony is that a president elected in opposition to the war in Iraq is repeating some of its worst strategic mistakes. And what's worse, despite obvious

indications that the current strategy against ISIL is failing, he has yet to find the courage of his predecessor to admit mistakes and choose a new direction. This needs to happen sooner rather than later, or the disaster the next president will inherit—in the Middle East, but also far beyond it—will be overwhelming.

It is clear we are living in a time of unprecedented turmoil. We see it on our television screens everyday: ISIL's spread across the Middle East, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and China's maritime expansion in Asia.

Once again I thank our witnesses and look forward to your testimony.