

**Opening Statement on Counter-ISIL Strategy**  
**Chairman John McCain**  
**Wednesday, September 16, 2015**

The Senate Armed Services Committee meets today to receive testimony on U.S. strategy and military operations to counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL. I want to thank our witnesses, Under Secretary Wormuth and General Austin, for appearing before us today, and for their continued service to our nation.

It has been one year since President Obama spoke to the nation about the threat posed by ISIL and increased U.S. military operations against it. Many of us believe that the goal the President laid out—to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL—is right. Many of us also agree with a military strategy that seeks to empower local forces in Iraq and Syria to combat ISIL, with U.S. and Coalition training, equipment, assistance and airpower. However, one year into this campaign, it seems impossible to assert that ISIL is losing and that we are winning, and if you are not winning in this kind of warfare, you are losing. Stalemate is not success.

It is accurate that we have conducted thousands of air strikes against ISIL trucks and fighters, bunkers and buildings. This conjures the illusion of progress. But what effect has that had? ISIL has lost some territory on the margin, mainly to Kurdish and Shiite forces. But ISIL has consolidated control of its core territories and expanded its control in Syria. It continues to dominate Sunni Arab areas in both Iraq and Syria. It maintains control of key Iraqi cities like Mosul, Fallujah, and Ramadi, and efforts to retake those territories appear to have stalled entirely.

Meanwhile, ISIL is expanding globally: It is now operating in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Yemen, Libya, and Egypt. And other radical Islamist groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria and al-Shabaab in Somalia have pledged allegiance to ISIL. This appearance of success only enhances ISIL's ability to radicalize, recruit, and grow.

Published media reports suggest that the CIA's estimate of ISIL's manpower has remained constant, despite U.S. airstrikes—which suggests that either they were wrong to begin with, or that ISIL is replacing its losses in real time. Neither is good. Indeed, this Committee is disturbed by recent whistleblower allegations that officials at Central Command skewed intelligence assessments to paint an overly-positive picture of conditions on the ground. We are currently investigating these allegations, which we take with the utmost seriousness. The Department of Defense should as well. And if true, those responsible must be held accountable.

Ultimately, it is not that we are doing nothing to counter ISIL. It is that there is no compelling reason to believe that anything we are currently doing will be sufficient to achieve our strategic objective of degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL. The United States and our partners do not have the initiative. Our enemies do. They are capitalizing on our inadequate policy to maintain and enhance their initiative, as they have for the past four years. Indeed, the situation on the ground is now taking yet another dramatic turn for the worse, as several recent events make clear.

Recent published media reports state that U.S. officials believe that ISIL is using mustard gas, and may even be manufacturing these chemical weapons by themselves. Whether ISIL is manufacturing chemical weapons themselves or acquired from former or current stocks maintained by Bashar Assad, this is a potential nightmare scenario for our partners in the Middle East, and for us.

At the same time, the U.S. effort to train and equip Syrian rebels to fight ISIL is clearly, and unfortunately, failing. The goal was 3,000 fighters in the first year. Instead, this program has trained and equipped only 54 fighters, some of whom were killed or captured by Al-Qaeda as soon as they returned to Syria. This program the Administration promised would result in a viable indigenous ground force in Syria has yet to produce any significant effects on the battlefield.

To be sure, the fixation with perfect vetting, both in the Congress and the Administration, is contributing to this failure. But far worse has been the Administration's requirement that this new Syrian force could only fight ISIL, not the Assad regime—which has killed far more Syrians than ISIL—and the President's refusal, until just weeks ago, to authorize the close air support and other military assistance to ensure that our Syrian partners would be successful.

Unfortunately, these contradictions were clear from the beginning, and many members of this Committee warned the Administration to change course. Their failure to do has squandered a lot of time, money, and worst of all, credibility. For this Committee to continue supporting this program, we need some major changes.

Into this vacuum has now stepped Vladimir Putin. As in Ukraine and elsewhere, he perceives the Administration's inaction and caution as weakness, and he is taking advantage. According to media reports, Putin has deployed strike aircraft, T-90 tanks, howitzers, armored personnel carriers, Russian marines, and housing for up to 1,500 personnel in military bases in western Syria. This is an expansion of Russian power in the Middle East that we have not seen in four decades. And it will allow Putin to further prop up Assad; fuel his indiscriminate killing machine;

play kingmaker in any transition; undermine U.S. goals, policy, and operations; and ultimately prolong this horrific conflict. The main beneficiary will be ISIL.

Many of us have said from the beginning that the conflict in Syria would not be contained, and for four years we have seen evidence of that—the hundreds of thousands dead, the millions of driven and displaced people, the use of chemical weapons, and the rise of the worst terrorist army in the world. Now we are seeing the latest manifestation of this failed policy—the flood of people pouring out of the Middle East that has led to the worst refugee crisis in Europe since World War II.

The Administration has promised to accept 10,000 refugees in the coming year. That is a noble gesture. But unless we address the cause of this crisis, which is the continued grinding conflict in Syria, the refugees will keep coming, ISIL will grow stronger, the Middle East will descend further into chaos, and U.S. national security interests will be put at greater risk.

For four years we have been told that there is no military solution to this conflict, as if anyone believes there is ... that there are no good options, as if anyone believes there are ... that our influence is limited, as if that has not always been the case ... that we will not succeed overnight, as if our problem is one of time not policy ... and that we cannot solve every problem in the Middle East, as if that absolves us of our responsibility to make the situation better where we can.

This is not a question of our capacity, or our capabilities, or our options. We have options between doing nothing and invading Iraq and Syria. Many members of this Committee have suggested such options for years now, and they are still relevant.

We need to put an end to Assad's ability to use airpower against his people, especially his use of horrific barrel bombs, which is one of the leading killers of innocent Syrians. We need to help establish safe zones inside Syria where refugees and displaced people can be secure. We need forward air controllers to add precision and lethality to our air campaign. We need to make significant changes in order to improve and rapidly expand our training of Syrian and Iraqi forces. And while no one believes that we need to invade Iraq or Syria, the fact is that we will likely need additional U.S. Special Forces and military advisers to be successful.

I hope our witnesses will not merely repeat our desired policy goals, and a list of tactical achievements, and talk about “nine lines of effort.” We have heard all of that before. But we have yet to hear a theory of victory. I hope to hear one today.