

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

SD-106

Dirksen Senate Office Building
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**To receive testimony on U.S. military operations to Counter the Islamic State in Iraq
and the Levant**
(As Prepared for Delivery)

Secretary Wormuth, General Austin, welcome.

This morning's hearing continues the committee's review of U.S. military operations to counter ISIL in Iraq and Syria, and its growth in the broader Middle East, Africa and South Asia.

Through its extreme ideology and brutal tactics, including the reported development and use of chemical weapons, ISIL has gained control over portions of Syria and Iraq, effectively erasing the border between these countries. The violent extremist group has slaughtered civilians, enslaved women and girls, carried out horrific attacks against ethnic and religious minorities, and broadcast its barbaric acts on social media. To escape the violence of ISIL, the Assad regime, and multiple other armed elements, millions have been displaced or fled outside Iraq and Syria. The crush of fleeing refugees into Europe has only added to the sense of urgency regarding the need to restore security in the region.

The military campaign against ISIL remains complex, with no easy answers. While the coalition has had success in pushing ISIL out of some territory --including gains by the Kurdish Peshmerga in the north, the retaking of Tikrit by Iraqi security forces, and the Syrian Kurds' removal of ISIL along sections of the border with Turkey—the self-described Islamic State continues to hold key cities, including Al Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq. The Iraqi security forces' counter-offensive to take back Ramadi has struggled over the last few months, and Baiji remains contested. At the same time, Iranian-backed Shiite militias have stalled in their operations near Fallujah. And despite

its recent setbacks, ISIL is consolidating its control over the local populations in the areas that it holds in both Iraq and Syria.

The recent agreement between the United States and Turkey, expanding access to and use of Turkish air bases and seeking to create an ISIL-free zone on the Syrian side of the border, is an important step forward. However, the provocative deployments by Russia of additional military forces to bases in Syria, under the guise of assisting in counter-ISIL efforts, appears to be an effort by Putin to prop up the Assad regime, further complicating efforts to restore security in Syria.

These events have raised concerns over whether the current level of our efforts against ISIL is sufficient. A critical issue for the military lines of effort within the counter-ISIL strategy is the progress of the U.S. train and equip programs for coalition-backed forces in both Iraq and Syria. While the U.S.-led air campaign has had an effect in degrading ISIL, effective local forces that can take full advantage of coalition airpower, seize ground from ISIL, and then hold it are essential to success.

In Iraq, operations to retake Anbar require recruiting significant numbers of Sunnis into the Iraqi security forces and equipping them to resist the ISIL threat. I am concerned by reports that Sunni recruitment has fallen short of its targets, and that the Government of Iraq has been slow in delivering equipment for arming Sunni forces.

In Syria, the DoD Syria Train and Equip Program, according to public reports, has experienced a variety of setbacks. We will be interested in your assessment of this effort.

General, I also hope you will address what you believe might be done to intensify our military operations to counter the ISIL threat. For example, would you support a more active role for U.S. military personnel in facilitating the engagement with Sunni tribes, or providing advisers within the Iraqi Ministry of Defense to build institutional capacity, or accompanying Iraqi security forces on a limited basis when direct contact with the enemy is not anticipated?

The ISIL problem is not geographically bounded by Syria and Iraq, and indeed, ISIL-inspired or directed groups have appeared in Yemen, Afghanistan, Egypt, Libya, Nigeria, Horn of Africa, the Caucuses, and elsewhere. General, I am interested in your assessment of the group's growth in the region and how CENTCOM is contributing to transregional efforts to combat the group.

Ultimately, the success of the counter-ISIL effort will depend on a number of non-military factors, including:

- Whether the reforms Prime Minister Abadi has initiated are implemented and result in an Iraqi Government that is more inclusive and responsive to the concerns of the Sunnis, Kurds, religious minorities and other factions in Iraqi society;
- Whether the international coalition, including states in the region, can effectively counter ISIL's propaganda, financing, and the spread of its extreme ideology; and
- Whether a political solution can be found for the crisis in Syria.

These issues are the primary responsibility of departments other than the Department of Defense, but I assume our witnesses would agree that these issues are integral to our comprehensive approach to countering the ISIL threat.

General Austin, I hope that you will also, to the extent possible given the ongoing review by the Inspector General, address questions involving intelligence assessments with respect to ISIL. It is important that we wait for the Inspector General's investigation to be completed before making a judgment, but I have no doubt you take such allegations as seriously as we in Congress do. Like Senator McCain, I expect the committee will be kept apprised of this investigation as it continues.

I thank the witnesses for their testimony this morning.