

Opening Statement on U.S. Strategy in the Middle East
Chairman John McCain
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The Senate Armed Services Committee meets this morning to receive testimony on U.S. strategy in the Middle East.

Eight years ago, our nation was losing a war in Iraq. Despite chants of progress, our strategy was simply not working. On September 11, 2007, General David Petraeus appeared before this Committee with Ambassador Ryan Crocker. Their compelling testimony was critical in securing support for the Surge, an integrated civil-military campaign plan that defeated al-Qaeda in Iraq, brought security to the Iraqi people, and created the possibility for meaningful political reconciliation.

Now we meet again at a time of grave security challenges around the world. More than ever, our Nation must be able draw upon the wisdom and experience of its most distinguished leaders. That is why I am pleased to welcome back General David Petraeus for his first appearance before the Congress since leaving government. General, it's good to see you and I want to thank you on behalf of this Committee for your willingness to testify today and offer insights from your decades of distinguished service, especially your leadership in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Across the Middle East today, the old order is collapsing, both the regional balance among states and the social order within states. No new vision has emerged to take its place, and across the region, chaos fills the vast ungoverned spaces left behind. Filling this vacuum have been terrorist groups, such as ISIL and al-Qaeda, on the one hand, and hostile states such as Iran and now Russia, on the other. This regional disintegration has only been made worse by a failure of U.S. strategy and leadership to shape events in this vital part of the world for the better. Too often we have confused our friends, encouraged our enemies, mistaken an excess of caution for prudence, and replaced the risks of action with the perils of inaction.

In Iraq and Syria, one year after the President commenced airstrikes and committed U.S. troops, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Commander of Central Command have characterized the fight against ISIL as a stalemate. ISIL has consolidated control of its core territories and expanded its control in Syria. Efforts to retake key Iraqi cities like Mosul, Fallujah, and Ramadi have foundered. ISIL is expanding globally to places like Afghanistan, Lebanon, Yemen, Libya, and Egypt.

This appearance of success only enhances ISIL's ability to radicalize, recruit, and grow. Indeed, ISIL's recruiting efforts are allegedly replacing its battlefield losses.

Ultimately, ISIL is not ten feet tall. It can, and must, be defeated. However, the current policy does not appear sufficient to achieve our goal of degrading and destroying ISIL. To put it mildly, this Committee's hearing last week on counter-ISIL strategy did little to alleviate these concerns. In the absence of an effective strategy, violent extremist groups like ISIL, Al-Qaeda, and their adherents are expanding across the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, including Afghanistan.

After 14 years of fighting in this country, decisions made in the months ahead will determine whether our sacrifices were worth it. After pulling out of Iraq against the advice of our military leaders, the President's plan to withdraw from Afghanistan would risk a replay of that failure. We look forward to your views on this policy.

In addition to the so-called Islamic State, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been another main beneficiary of the Middle East's descent into chaos. For years, many of us have urged the Administration to adopt a regional strategy to counter Iran's malign activities in the Middle East. Unfortunately, that has not happened. Instead, the Administration has too often treated Iran as merely an arms control challenge, rather than the wider geopolitical challenge that it is. Left unchecked, Iran has stepped up its destabilizing activities in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, Gaza, and elsewhere. Whatever one thinks of the nuclear agreement, it will not resolve this larger Iran challenge, and will likely make it worse as Iran gains new legitimacy, the lifting of sanctions, and billions of dollars in sanctions relief.

Into the wreckage of our Middle East policy 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. Putin's ongoing military build-up in Syria is the greatest expansion of Russian power in the Middle East in four decades. And it will allow Putin to prop up Assad, play kingmaker in any transition, undermine U.S. policy and operations, and ultimately prolong this horrific conflict. The main beneficiary will be ISIL. In classic fashion, the Administration first condemned Putin's move but has now capitulated, agreeing to military-to-military talks.

The first step toward a solution is recognizing there is a problem. Unfortunately, that has appeared beyond the capacity of the Administration. Instead, they continue to resort to a litany of truisms, strawman arguments, partisan attacks, and talking points that, to borrow a phrase, require a "willing suspension of disbelief." In a display of self-delusion that can rival the Bush Administration's Iraq policy at its

worst, the Obama Administration now tells us their strategy is working, that we are making progress, that time is on our side, that strategic patience is all we need, and that we should just stay the course.

When our earlier strategy in Iraq and the broader Middle East was failing, not so long ago, we thankfully had leaders, like our distinguished witness, who were willing to face that situation with realism, and a President who—to his everlasting credit—took responsibility for that failure and changed course. Other American presidents, including Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, have demonstrated a similar capacity for change. There is no reason President Obama could not do the same.

No one believes that there any good options. There never are. No one believes that these kinds of problems lend themselves to purely military solutions. They never have and never will. No one expects us to succeed overnight, and no one believes that America can or should solve every problem by itself. But that does not absolve us of our responsibility to make the situation better where we can.

Yes, these problems are hard, but as our witness once said, they are not hopeless. Now more than ever we need some reasons to be hopeful again. I thank you for appearing before the Committee today and look forward to your testimony.