

**SECRETARY OF DEFENSE ASH CARTER
OPENING STATEMENT ON COUNTER-ISIL
SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2015**

Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed, Members of the Committee: Thank you for inviting me to discuss the U.S. counter-ISIL military campaign with Vice Chairman Paul Selva. Chairman Dunford is, as you know, currently visiting our troops deployed around the world this holiday season, conveying to them the thanks of a grateful nation for all they do in our defense. I will soon be doing the same.

The attacks in Paris and San Bernardino were an assault on the civilization we defend. ISIL requires, and it will receive, a lasting defeat. The President had directed us to intensify and adapt the military campaign before the Paris attacks. The necessity of accelerating our efforts, as we're doing, has only been made more plain by the recent attacks. We are urging others in the region and around the world to do the same, because those attacks further highlighted the stakes that not just the United States but the world has in this fight.

The defense of the homeland must be strengthened, to be sure, but it is absolutely necessary to defeat ISIL in its parent tumor in Syria and Iraq, and also to take necessary action wherever else in the world this evil organization metastasizes. Achieving these objectives means leveraging all the components of our nation's might – diplomatic, military, law enforcement, homeland security, intelligence, economic, informational.

That's the right strategic approach for three principal reasons. First, it takes the fight to the enemy where they are, as we must do.

Second, it seeks to develop capable, motivated, local ground forces – as the only force that can assure a lasting victory. U.S. and international coalition forces can and will do more to enable them, but we cannot substitute for them.

And third, it seeks to set the conditions for a political solution to the civil war in Syria and for inclusive governance in Iraq, which are essential because they are the only durable ways to prevent a future ISIL-like organization from re-emerging there. And that's why the diplomatic work, led by Secretary Kerry and the State Department, is the first and absolutely critical line of effort in our strategy.

The Defense Department is, of course, centrally responsible for the military campaign – the focus of my statement today. Through our and our coalition partners' actions, the military campaign must and will deny ISIL any safe territorial haven, kill or capture its leadership and forces, and destroy its organization – all while we seek to identify and then enable capable, motivated local forces on the ground who can expel ISIL from the territory it now controls, hold and govern it, and ensure that victory sticks.

Militarily, we are taking new steps each week to gather momentum on the battlefield in Syria and Iraq. I will take a few extra minutes this morning to give as much detail as possible about the new things we are doing – applying multiple pressures, on multiple fronts, simultaneously – to accelerate ISIL's defeat.

The reality is, we are at war. That's how our troops feel about it, because they're taking the fight to ISIL every day – applying the might of the finest fighting force the world has ever known.

AS PREPARED - EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

In northern Syria, local forces, with our support, are fighting along the Ma'ra line, engaging ISIL in the last remaining pocket of access into Turkey. Meanwhile, a coalition of Syrian Arabs that we helped equip in Northeastern Syria are fighting alongside Kurdish forces and have recaptured important terrain, most recently pushing ISIL out of the town of Al Hawl and at least 900 square kilometers of surrounding territory. They are now focused on moving south to isolate ISIL's so-called capital of Raqqa, with the ultimate objective of collapsing its control over the city.

To build on that, President Obama, on my and Chairman Dunford's advice, ordered U.S. special operations forces to go into Syria to support the fight against ISIL. American special operators bring a unique set of capabilities that make them force multipliers, such as intelligence gathering, targeting, and enabling local forces. Where we find further opportunity to leverage such capability, we will not hesitate to expand it.

Next, in the south of Syria, we are also taking advantage of opportunities to enable indigenous fighters, trained and equipped by us and other Coalition partners, to conduct strikes inside Syria. We are also enhancing Jordan's border control and defenses with additional military assets and planning assistance.

Turning to northern Iraq, Peshmerga units, with the help of U.S. air power and advisers, have retaken the town of Sinjar, cutting the main line of communication between Raqqa and Mosul, the two largest cities under ISIL's control. To move people and supplies, ISIL now must rely on backroads, where we will locate and destroy them.

Elsewhere in Iraq, we have about 3,500 troops at six locations in support of Iraqi Security Forces, or ISF. There, we've been providing increased lethal fire and augmenting the existing training, advising, and assisting program. And we're prepared to do more as Iraq shows capability and motivation in the counter-ISIL fight and in resolving its political divisions.

After a frustratingly long time, we are starting to see some movement in the operation to recapture Ramadi. Over the past several months, the coalition has provided specialized training and equipment – including combat engineering techniques like in-stride breaching and bulldozing, and munitions like AT-4 shoulder-fired missiles to stop truck bombs – to the Iraqi Army and counter-terrorism service units that are now beginning to enter Ramadi neighborhoods from multiple directions.

In fact, in the last 24 hours, the ISF retook the Anbar Operations Center on the northern bank of the Euphrates River across from Ramadi's city center. This is an important step, but there is still tough fighting ahead. ISIL has counter-attacked several times, but thus far the ISF has shown resilience. The United States is prepared to assist the Iraqi Army with additional unique capabilities to help them finish the job, including attack helicopters and accompanying advisors, if requested by Prime Minister Abadi.

I mention all this because it represents how we've adapted in the way we support our Iraqi partners. And it shows that training, advising, and assisting is the right approach. We will do more of what works going forward.

While we are focused on making additional tactical gains, the overall progress in the Sunni-populated areas of Iraq has been slow, much to our and Prime Minister Abadi's frustration. Indeed, with respect to Sunni tribal forces, we would like to see the government do more to recruit, train, arm, and mobilize Sunni popular mobilization fighters in their communities. We continue to engage the Iraqi government at all levels to move forward on this critically important aspect of the counter-ISIL campaign, including working with Sunni local police to ensure there is an Iraqi hold force to sustain any future gains.

AS PREPARED - EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

Next, in full coordination with the government of Iraq, we're deploying a specialized expeditionary targeting force to assist the ISF and Kurdish Peshmerga forces and to put even more pressure on ISIL through a variety of raids and intelligence gathering. While this force will also be in a position to conduct unilateral operations in Syria, in Iraq the force will operate at the invitation of the Iraqi government and focus on defending its borders and building the ISF's ability to conduct similar operations. We will not be discussing specifics of this expeditionary targeting force or its operations in unclassified settings, both to protect our forces and preserve the element of surprise. We want this expeditionary targeting force to make ISIL and its leaders wonder when they go to bed at night, who's going to be coming in the window?

Chairman Dunford and I recognize that in principle there are alternatives to the strategic approach we have adopted to drive ISIL from Syrian and Iraqi territory – including the introduction of a significant foreign ground force, hypothetically international but including U.S. forces, even in the absence of capable, motivated, local ground forces. While we certainly have the capability to furnish a U.S. component to such a ground force, we have not recommended this course of action for several reasons:

In the near-term, it would be a significant undertaking that, realistically, we would have to do largely by ourselves; and it would be ceding our comparative advantage of special forces, mobility, and firepower, instead fighting on the enemy's terms.

In the medium-term, by seeming to Americanize the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, we could well turn those fighting ISIL or inclined to resist their rule into fighting us instead. As Chairman Dunford testified last week, ISIL "would love nothing more than a large presence of U.S. forces on the ground in Iraq and Syria, so that they could have a call to jihad."

And lastly, in the long-term, there would still remain the problem of securing and governing the territory – these must be done by local forces. So in the end, while we can enable them, we cannot substitute for them.

Momentum on the ground in both Syria and Iraq has been enabled by increased coalition airstrikes. Additional strike aircraft we've deployed to Incirlik Air Base in Turkey along with improved intelligence allowed us, in November, to significantly increase our airstrikes against ISIL, to the highest level since the start of our operations in August 2014.

Moreover, because of improved intelligence and understanding of ISIL's operations, we've intensified the air campaign against ISIL's war-sustaining oil enterprise, a critical pillar of ISIL's financial infrastructure. In addition to destroying fixed facilities like wells and processing facilities, we've destroyed nearly 400 of ISIL's oil tanker trucks, reducing a major source of its daily revenues. There's more to come too.

We're also improving our capability to eliminate ISIL's leadership. Since I last appeared before this committee in late October, we have removed two more key ISIL figures from the battlefield – Mohammed Emwazi, a.k.a "Jihadi John," an ISIL executioner; and Abu Nabil, ISIL's leader in Libya. Like previous actions, these strikes serve notice to ISIL that no target is beyond our reach.

And, as our military campaign intensifies on the ground and in the air, the Defense Department is also developing more strategic options in the cyber domain.

These are just nine areas of the adaptations we've made over the past six weeks to accelerate this campaign, and we've seen momentum build. President Obama is committed to doing what it takes – as opportunities arise, as we see what works, and as the enemy adapts – until ISIL is defeated in a lasting way. The President has consistently supported the

AS PREPARED - EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

recommendations from me and General Dunford and we know he is prepared for us to bring him more. We will.

At the same time that we're constantly looking to do more in this fight, the world must do the same. The international community – including our allies and partners – has to step up before another attack like Paris.

France has been galvanized by the attacks in its capital, and the French have intensified their role. Britain has now expanded its air campaign to strike ISIL in Syria. Italy has deployed its most elite police units, the Carabinieri, to assist in Iraq. Germany is now making additional contributions. And the Netherlands is actively considering doing more as well.

But we all, let me repeat that, we all must do more. Turkey must do more to control its often porous border. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states joined the air campaign in the early days, but have since been pre-occupied by the conflict in Yemen. And just this past week, I personally reached out to some 40 countries around the world to ask them to contribute, and in many cases contribute more, to enhancing the fight against ISIL. The types of things I've requested from our partners include special operations forces, strike and reconnaissance aircraft, and weapons and munitions.

Meanwhile, Russia, which has publicly committed to defeating ISIL, has instead largely attacked opposition forces. It's time for Russia to focus on the right side of this fight.

Before I conclude, I'd like to respectfully request the committee's attention to matters that bear upon our security and its responsibilities.

First, over a month ago I submitted a request to the four Congressional defense committees, including this one, to release 'holds' on the final tranche of funds in the Syria equipping program – that is, some \$116 million dollars. We need these funds to provide and transport ammunition, weapons, and other equipment to further enable the progress being made against ISIL in Syria by partners like the Syrian Arab Coalition. The committees have failed to act on that request, and I ask you to release these holds urgently. We should not be impeding the very momentum we are trying to build.

Next is the necessity to fill key vacancies in the Defense Department's critical leadership positions. I have appeared before this committee six times over the last 10 months – four times on the Middle East, and twice in just the last six weeks on ISIL. While this committee has held 58 full hearings over the last year, only three have been confirmation hearings for DoD civilian leaders.

DoD currently has 16 nominees awaiting the Constitutional advice and consent of the Senate. Twelve of those 16 are still awaiting even a hearing – including our nominees to be Secretary of the Army, the Under Secretaries of each of our three military departments – Army, Navy, and Air Force – and the Under Secretaries of both Intelligence and Personnel and Readiness. These positions should be filled by confirmed nominees, especially in a time of conflict. So I welcome that the process is now moving, and I urge it to move quickly for all of our civilian nominees, and also for senior military nominations that will be made next year.

Finally, as I conclude, I want to commend this committee on last month's budget deal, which is the kind of deal I called for back in March. It was a consequential agreement for the nation's security.

As current funding for government is set to expire, it is vital that the two houses now conclude work on funding all of government consistent with the budget deal. Now is not the time for games. I thank this committee in advance for your efforts, because funding this budget

AS PREPARED - EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

deal is what our national security demands. And it sends the right message to our troops, our allies and our enemies in this time of broad national security challenges – and conflict.

Thank you.

###