

Testimony

United States Senate Committee on Armed Services

By

General John M. Keane, USA (Ret)

on

U.S. Strategy and Policy in the Middle East

0930 hours, 20 January 2016

Hart Senate Office Building

Room SH-216

Thank you Chairman McCain, ranking member Reed, distinguished members of the committee, am honored to be back to provide testimony again on the challenges of the Middle East. This committee's persistence in keeping its focus on the unparalleled upheaval in the Middle East is commendable. I am honored to be part of this distinguished panel, particularly, to be reunited with Ambassador Crocker who remains today America's most successful and preeminent diplomat whose extensive service throughout the Middle East is legendary. I was privileged to work with Ambassador Crocker during the Iraq and Afghanistan surges while I was assisting General Petraeus. I have provided two maps which I will reference in testimony.

The Middle East is experiencing one of the most tumultuous periods in its history with the old order challenged by the aspirational goals of the Arab Spring, radicalized Islamists taking advantage of the political and social upheaval and the Islamic state of Iran using proxies to achieve regional influence and control. Some issues in the Middle East have been simmering for some time and are certainly underlying factors; such as historical sectarianism, repressive regimes, political and social injustice and the lack of economic opportunity. One cannot simply blame these "larger forces operating in the region" and absolve the U.S. of specific policy decisions that has unintended adverse consequences:

- EGYPT: In 2010 the Arab Spring begins, and in looking back while most Arab countries were in some form of a pre-revolutionary phase, it is a strategic surprise. The U.S., in the face of major civil unrest in Cairo abandons Mubarak, a multi decade ally of the U.S. and an ally of the Arab states in the region. The result is the Muslim Brotherhood who are elected, move quickly without any U.S. opposition to transition Egypt, a secular state, to an Islamic state. Iran supports the

Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood, as we know, loses support of the people and are deposed in a military coup.

- LIBYA: In 2011 after Qadaffi is deposed and killed, a newly elected moderate Islamic regime requests support to train a national security force to repress the radical militants. The U.S. refuses. Some of the same militants, Ansar al-Sharia burn down the U.S. consulate, kill the U.S. Ambassador and 3 others, force the evacuation of a covert CIA base and the following year force a U.S. retreat from Libya with the closing of the U.S. Embassy. Libya is now a failed state, a breeding ground for radical Islamists and the largest ISIS presence outside of Syria and Iraq.

- IRAQ: Whether the 2003 invasion was misguided or righteous, it ushered in the first Arab democracy in the Middle East, while also giving rise to Al Qaeda in Iraq, who was defeated in 2008. In 2009 the new U.S. administration began to distance itself politically from Iraq, providing the entrée for greater Iranian influence and culminating in a total military pullout from Iraq in 2011. PM Maliki immediately begins a purge of political opponents and military leaders and Al Qaeda reemerges that same year.

- SYRIA: Syria's civil war growing out of the Arab Spring in 2011 is stalemated because the rebels initial gains are thwarted by Iranian proxies, the Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militias plus the Quods force and much needed supplies and equipment from Russia and Iran. The rebels in 2011 and 2012 seek assistance from the U.S. which is recommended by Secretaries Clinton and Panetta, General Dempsey and Director Petraeus. The U.S. refuses. AQ in Iraq is incentivized by the protracted civil war in Syria, moves out of Iraq with several hundred Iraqi fighters, establishes a sanctuary in north eastern Syria , and grows a terrorist army

of some 30 to 40K. Two years later ISIS invades Iraq and expands its territory in Syria. ISIS as we know it today would not exist without the opportunity that Syria provided. In 2013 the CW redline is crossed, the U.S. does not respond as promised. Arab allies are dismayed. Assad continues to conduct a comprehensive depopulation campaign, killing 250k plus civilians, displacing 11 million people, 4 million outside of Syria, resulting in thousands of Syrians joining tidal waves of others in the region to migrate to Europe.

- YEMEN: Iranian backed Houthis in 2014 force the U.S. backed Yemen government to topple and the much touted U.S. counter terrorism operation is in full retreat with the closing of U.S. military operations and the U.S. Embassy in Yemen.

This is an extraordinary chronology of events where U.S. policy, while not necessarily the primary cause of these disturbing events, was at least a factor in further destabilizing the Middle East, and losing the confidence and trust of our allies in the region. However, the most critical policy failures are essentially strategic and therefore have the most profound impact. Simply stated, they are the U.S. and allies strategic failure to defeat radical Islam and to successfully counter Iranian regional hegemony.

1. RADICAL ISLAM

Twenty three years after the first World Trade Center bombing and fourteen plus years after 9/11 we still have no comprehensive strategy to defeat radical Islam. Radical Islam is morphing into a global Jihad with the expansion of Al Qaeda and the extraordinary success of ISIS which has rapidly become the most successful terrorist organization in history still growing at 1.5 to 2K per month and expanding into affiliate organizations throughout the Middle East, Africa,

South and South East Asia and developing a worldwide following where believers are willing to kill their fellow citizens, foment terror and unrest and polarize the population between Muslims and non Muslims. See the map provided by the Institute for the Study of War which depicts ISIS's desire to expand into affiliates in the "near abroad" in orange and the "far abroad" in yellow with the number of current affiliates as represented by the black stars and affiliates that are in process of approval in blue stars. Most of the "far abroad" will not have affiliates but rather radicalized followers who are inspired by ISIS to act either as individuals or small cells.

U.S. strategic failure derives from not understanding the nature of the conflict. The Bush war on terror and the Obama counter terrorism war are simply tactics. The battle is within Islam itself where in the Arab world this battle is intersecting with authoritarian regimes and family monarchies failure to politically reform and to adjust to the needs of their societies. Therefore, we are fighting a political and religious ideology which draws its origin from the very strict interpretation of the Quran and Hadith as well as the intolerance of Wahhabism and Salafism . Political leaders such as al-Sisi and King Abdullah have referred to it as a "religious revolution." Yet the current U.S. administration fails to define radical Islam, or explain it nor understand it. How can we possibly defeat radical Islam if we don't understand it? Knowing the kind of war you are fighting is the first priority of a national or military leader. Given this purposeful misunderstanding or self deception at best by not acknowledging this narrowly focused Islamic ideology it creates an unnecessary condition where all Muslims are brought under suspicion. Law abiding, faith based, traditional or modern Muslims who would do no harm to their fellow man and resent any association with radical Islam, deserve better treatment than that.

This is a 21st century generational, ideological struggle similar to the 20th century multi generational struggle with communist ideology. The 9/11 Commission recommended a global alliance to design a strategy and to work together to defeat radical Islam. King Salman of Saudi Arabia is organizing a 34 member alliance to combat radical Islam and it remains to be seen if it amounts to anything substantive. I do know it begs for the U.S. to play a leadership role. The next President of the U.S. will likely defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria but ISIS and radical Islam is a global movement. It is not a question of whether we want to fight radical Islam. It's unavoidable. The only question is how?

While I believe global alliance members should design a strategy and not the U.S., there are some elements that are obvious and critical:

- National leaders and Muslim clerics must undermine the political and religious ideology with not just what is wrong but what is the right thinking and ideology.
- Arab Muslim countries must change the levels of intolerance and the influence of Wahhabism.
- Financial and economic support must be countered and countries permitting such behavior by their citizens should be held accountable.
- Intelligence, technology, and selected equipment should be shared.
- Partnering for training and military education is essential to raise the level of operational competence. There is no substitute for an effective ground force supported by air power. Air power is an enabler not a defeat mechanism.

- Enemy combatants should be pursued aggressively and ruthlessly.
- Destroy and defeat radical Islamist sanctuaries. Sanctuaries or safe havens by themselves protract the conflict and drive up the casualties. Syria is a sanctuary, Libya is rapidly becoming one and Pakistan for 14 years has provided two sanctuaries for the Taliban.

2. IRAN

In 1980 Iran declared the U.S. as a strategic enemy and its goal is to drive the U.S. out of the region, achieve regional hegemony and destroy the state of Israel. It uses proxies, primarily, as the world's number one state sponsoring terrorism and to fight proxy wars. Beginning in the early 1980's it began jihad against the U.S. by bombing the Marine barracks, the U.S. Embassy and the Annex in Lebanon, the U.S. Embassy in Kuwait, the AF barracks, Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia and attacking the U.S. military in Iraq using Shia militias trained in Iran with advanced IEDs developed by Iranian engineers. During the 80's Iran began an aggressive kidnapping and assassination campaign which resulted in the death of CIA station chief Buckley and numerous American hostages. A policy of hostage taking for political gain continues to this day.

To date, the result is, U.S. troops left Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and initially Iraq while Iran as you can see on the "Changing Middle East Map" in red has direct influence and some control over Lebanon, Gaza, Syria, Iraq and Yemen while strategically desiring to influence not only the major shipping in the Gulf but the shipping entering and departing the Suez Canal. Is there any doubt that Iran, is on the march and is systematically moving toward their regional hegemonic

objective? Some suggest that Iran in agreeing to a delay in acquiring a threshold capability toward a nuclear weapon is a transforming event that may lead to Iran joining the community of nations seeking stability and security. Given a return of 100B in sanction relief funds and a proven track record of belligerence and armed violence to pursue its goals, a tough minded skepticism is in order, to force compliance on the nuclear deal and finally, once and for all, the first development of a regional strategy to counter Iran. A remarkable fact is that since the killing of Americans and hostage taking by Iran and its proxies began, in the 1980's, no American president, Democrat or Republican, has ever countered Iran's regional strategy. Now more than ever with Iran developing a ballistic missile capability and likely to cheat on the conditions of the nuclear deal, because it can, it is an imperative to join with Israel, our Arab and European allies, to counter Iran's strategy of regional hegemony.

As part of that strategy concrete steps should be taken:

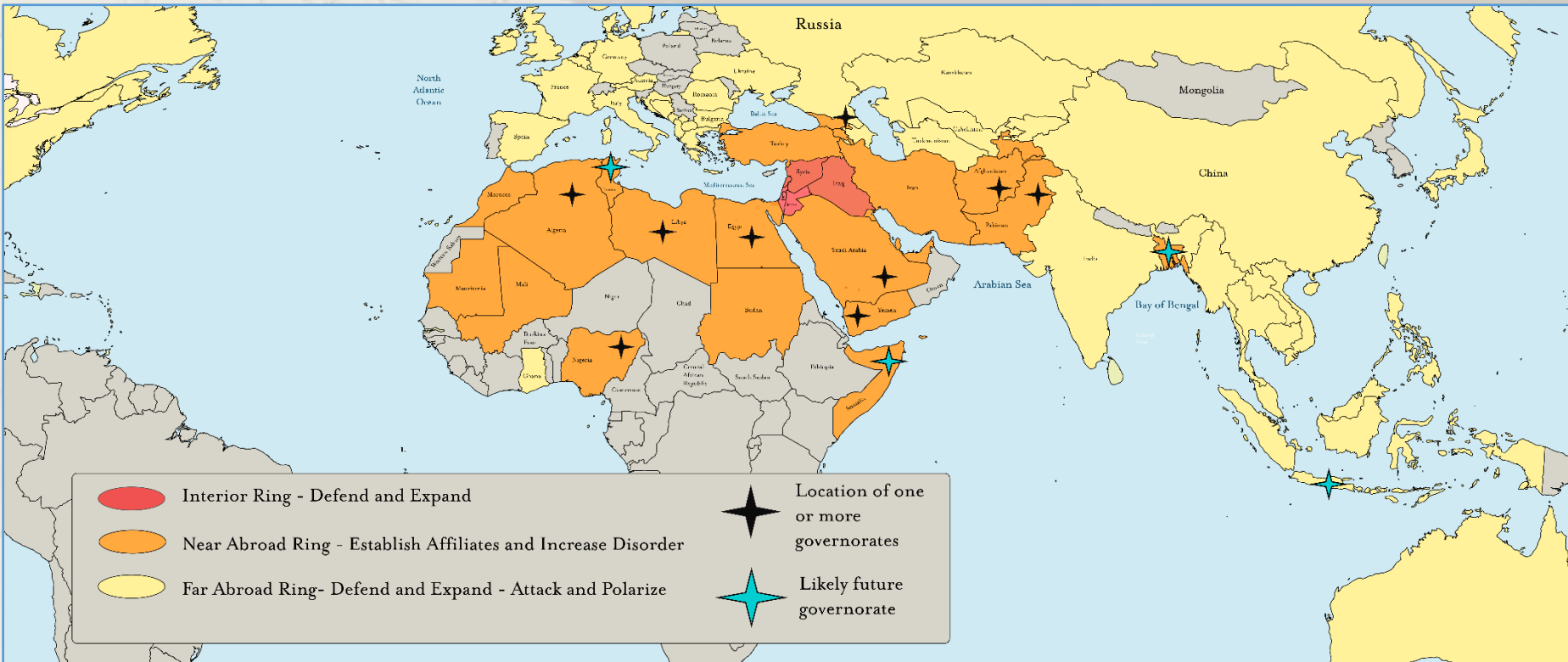
- 1) In Syria to reverse the decision that Assad can stay, which guarantees there will never be a negotiated peace. Establish safe zones and no fly zones in Syria to change the momentum against the Assad regime and protect the Syrian people. Move to a transition government and eventual independently observed national elections.
- 2) In Iraq establish a key political objective to reduce Iranian influence and to gain PM Abadi's strong political, military and economic support for the Sunni tribes and the Kurds. Dispatch Ambassador Crocker to Iraq to once again assist an Iraq government in achieving political unity.
- 3) In Yemen assist KSA and the Gulf states in pushing back against the Houthis with intelligence, targeting and striking targets if necessary.

- 4) Ballistic missile testing, malign proxy regional behavior, hostage taking, and, of course, any nuclear deal violation should all be met with tough, unrelenting economic sanctions.

Failure to counter Iran's malign influence has encouraged their aggressive and destructive behavior for 36 years.

In conclusion the U.S. major policy challenges in the Middle East surround the development of comprehensive strategies to defeat radical Islam and to counter Iranian aggression and malign behavior. If these competencies are not addressed the Middle East will continue to be in freefall as the Middle East problems become the world's problems in confronting global jihad, a conventional Middle East war between KSA and Iran supported by their allies and nuclear Middle East proliferation leading to the horror of the world's first nuclear exchange. The risk has always been high in the Middle East and the challenges certainly complex but now inadequate strategies and misguided policies are driving up that risk exponentially.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.



The Changing Middle East

