

**SECRETARY OF DEFENSE ASH CARTER
OPENING STATEMENT ON COUNTER-ISIL OPERATIONS AND U.S.
MILITARY STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST
SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
THURSDAY, APRIL 28, 2016**

Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for having me and Chairman Dunford here today to describe our campaign against ISIL, and more broadly, U.S. military strategy in the Middle East. I appreciate that this is my seventh appearance before this committee, and the fifth one focused on the Middle East, since I became Secretary of Defense last spring. And I should note that your timing is fortuitous. I just returned from a two-week trip to the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East – both regions critical to U.S. and global security, and where our men and women in uniform are deeply engaged, as they are all over the world. It's emblematic of why, with all the challenges going on today – particularly the five challenges I discussed with you last month in my budget testimony, namely Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and terrorism, especially ISIL – DoD can't choose between one or another, or between acting in the present and investing in the future. We have to do it all.

While there's much I could say about the Asia-Pacific, I will of course focus my opening comments here today on the Middle East. There, our actions and our strong military posture continue to be guided by our North Star of what's in America's national interests...these are several things, but including dealing ISIL a lasting defeat.

That was the principal purpose of my visit to Iraq last week, where I conferred with our commanders and visited with our troops; met with Prime Minister Abadi and Defense Minister Ubaidi; spoke to Kurdistan Regional Government President Barzani; and announced a number of key next steps that President Obama has directed to further accelerate the defeat of ISIL...more on that in a moment.

When I appeared before this committee to discuss our counter-ISIL campaign in early December, I outlined how we had embarked on a major acceleration of this campaign – an effort Chairman Dunford and I had recommended to the President in October. And it consisted of multiple steps.

First, there were a number of immediate accelerants. We deployed additional strike aircraft to Incirlik, supporting an expanded air campaign against new targets and new categories of targets illuminated by refined intelligence. We deployed an initial contingent of special operations forces to Syria. We expanded equipping of Syrian Arab forces engaged in the fight against ISIL. We began enabling capable, motivated local forces in southern Syria, and enhancing Jordan's border control and defenses. We leveraged air power and advisors to help the Peshmerga take Sinjar, cutting the Iraqi side of the main line of communication between ISIL's power centers in Raqqa and Mosul. We introduced an expeditionary targeting force. We worked to improve our ability to target ISIL's leadership and presence beyond Iraq and Syria. And we started to expand the military campaign against ISIL to every domain, including cyber and space.

All these capabilities were marshaled against a clear coalition military campaign plan focusing operations on three objectives: one, destroying ISIL's parent tumor in Iraq and Syria;

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two, combatting the metastases of the ISIL tumor worldwide wherever they appear; and three, our most important mission, which is to help protect the homeland.

In addition to accelerating the campaign with additional U.S. capabilities, we renewed our outreach to coalition members. And over the last three months, I've convened my counterparts several times – in Paris, Brussels, and Riyadh – to brief them on the coalition military campaign plan, and urge them to contribute more, and in more meaningful ways.

Since we embarked on that major acceleration, results followed, and they've continued even in recent weeks.

On the battlefield in Iraq, the Iraqi Security Forces retook Ramadi and Hit, and along with Kurdish Peshmerga have begun operations to isolate and pressure Mosul, with the intent to collapse ISIL's control over that city. And in Syria, capable and motivated local forces supported by our coalition retook the Tishreen Dam in the west and the town of Shaddadi in the east...cutting off two significant lines of communication into Raqqa, including one of the last major northern arteries between Raqqa and Mosul, and therefore between ISIL in Syria and ISIL in Iraq.

We've also seen results in targeting ISIL's leaders and finances. We're systematically eliminating ISIL's "cabinet," having taken out its so-called ministers of war and finance. We captured one of the principals of ISIL's chemical warfare enterprise, removed external plotters from the battlefield, and most recently took out the ISIL emir for southern Mosul, weakening ISIL's ranks there. And our attacks on ISIL's economic infrastructure – from oil wells and trucks to cash storage sites to ISIL's financial leaders – is putting a stranglehold on ISIL's ability to pay its fighters, undermining its ability to govern, and making it harder to attract new recruits.

There are results in our coalition's train-and-equip efforts, as well. So far, with Congress's support, we've trained over 20,000 Iraqi Security Forces, and provided six full brigade sets of equipment to the Iraqi Army. And we've provided two brigade sets to the Peshmerga, part of more than 12 million pounds of critical supplies donated by more than 20 countries – for our part, ranging from ammunition, to small, medium, and heavy weapons, to counter-IED equipment.

Meanwhile, in addition to the local forces we're working with in both Iraq and Syria, 90 percent of our military coalition partners – from Europe, the Gulf, Asia; 26 countries in all – have committed in the past few months to increase their contributions to help accelerate the defeat of ISIL.

All this has been necessary for putting ISIL on a path to a lasting defeat, but it's not sufficient. Indeed, I've consistently told you that we're looking to do more and that we would be doing more. As we take advantage of opportunities, we're generating new ones, and then seizing those opportunities to repeat this virtuous cycle – reinforcing success. This has been our intent and is consistent with our overall strategic approach, which is to enable capable, motivated local forces to recapture and then hold and govern territory tyrannized by ISIL.

Now, based on the results we've had, and our desire to continue accelerating ISIL's lasting defeat, we are conducting the 'next plays' of the military campaign. They are: one, stabilizing Iraq's Anbar Province; two, generating Iraqi Security Forces to envelop Mosul; three, identifying and developing more local forces in Syria that will isolate and pressure Raqqa; and four, providing more firepower, sustainment, and logistical support to our partners to enable them to collapse ISIL's control over both those cities.

To help facilitate these next plays, we're taking a number of key actions in both Iraq and Syria – actions President Obama directed and that he and I announced over the last week and a

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half. And I should note that the President has approved all the actions that Chairman Dunford and I have recommended to him to date.

In Iraq, our actions are in support of ISF operations to isolate and pressure Mosul. They've all been approved by Prime Minister Abadi.

As I told our troops in Baghdad last week, we'll be placing advisors with the ISF down to the brigade and battalion level. We'll be leveraging Apache attack helicopters to support the ISF's efforts to envelop and then retake Mosul. We'll send additional HIMARS to support the Iraqi ground offensive there. We'll provide financial assistance to the Peshmerga, up to \$415 million, to bolster one of the most effective fighting forces against ISIL. And, to do all this, we're going to adjust how we use the U.S. forces already in Iraq, and immediately bring in about 215 more of them.

In Syria, our actions are to help our local partners continue isolating and pressuring Raqqa.

As the President announced on Monday, we're increasing U.S. forces there six-fold, from 50 to 300. These additional 250 personnel, including special operations forces, will help expand our ongoing efforts to identify, train, and equip capable, motivated local anti-ISIL forces inside Syria, especially among the Sunni Arab community. And they'll also serve as a hub to incorporate partner SOF – from both European and Gulf partners – that will augment our coalition's counter-ISIL efforts there.

In the meantime, in addition to initiating training inside of Syria, we're also continuing to train and equip other vetted Syrian forces outside of Syria – keeping our focus, as we have in recent months, on battle-hardened, proven anti-ISIL leaders whom we can make more capable as enablers and amplifiers of our effects.

In this context, the Section 1209 program is central to our ground campaign in Syria, and we're now carrying out a different approach than before – and instead one that we've used to train and enable local elements that have proven themselves against ISIL on the battlefield. We've moved away from last year's disappointments with the former approach to the program, and we need your support to fully overcome them, focus on the program as it is now, and, in particular, release the now \$349 million in 1209 funding currently being blocked by Congress.

Mr. Chairman, I understand you intend to help clear these funds with this committee. And I hope the other committees will follow suit.

The fact is, for our commanders to be agile in accelerating our campaign against ISIL, we need a similarly agile Congressional process. We are required to submit reprogramming requests to the four Congressional defense committees, and so far on these funds we've received differing responses, on differing timelines, and sometimes with conflicting demands. We must get this working better going forward. I would also urge you and the other three defense committees to consider ending the reprogramming requirement for Syria, so that it's on equal footing with how you've structured your oversight of our train-and-equip programs in Iraq and Afghanistan. As it stands, the current setup invites troubling micromanagement of a wartime effort, and risks inhibiting results.

Beyond Iraq and Syria, we're also addressing ISIL's metastases. In Afghanistan, since we authorized our forces to conduct targeted strikes against ISIL there, we've been able to degrade the terrorist group's elements in the country. And in Libya, we have continued to follow ISIL activities closely, undertaking a successful strike last year in which we took out ISIL's key leader in the country, and another strike in February against an ISIL training camp. And as the new Libyan government gets on its feet, we will support it in the fight against ISIL. We will

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counter ISIL and work with partners wherever ISIL has or tries to gain a foothold, whether in Yemen, West Africa, or South and Southeast Asia.

Even as we do more, we're continuing to marshal our friends and allies across the counter-ISIL coalition to do more also to accelerate ISIL's lasting defeat.

When I met with my counterparts from the Gulf Cooperation Council last week, I emphasized the importance of their countries doing more...not only militarily, as Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been doing, but also politically and economically. That's because Sunni support for stabilization, multi-sectarian governance, and reconstruction will all be critical to ensuring that ISIL stays defeated. And next week, in Stuttgart, Germany, I'll be convening my fellow defense ministers from the major contributors to the military campaign, to discuss ways we can all continue to accelerate our efforts.

That said, while the military momentum is gathering strength and ISIL is struggling to resist our multi-faceted pressure, I am increasingly concerned about political, economic, and diplomatic challenges in both Iraq and Syria affecting the pace of the military campaign.

In Iraq, as the proximity of the ISIL threat against Baghdad has diminished, political ambitions have created discord, and, in some instances, ethno-sectarian competition has increased – creating an added burden and distraction for Prime Minister Abadi's government before the task of defeating ISIL is complete. This, of course, is occurring while Iraq struggles with significant fiscal challenges due to the lower price of oil and a huge reconstruction bill as it retakes cities from ISIL. And in Syria, competing agendas for the future of the political transition are inhibiting the generation and coalescing of anti-ISIL forces. Secretary Kerry, Secretary Lew, and my colleagues from the other departments and agencies are focused on this intently, but they need support from you in Congress to help ensure that military momentum is matched with political and economic momentum, and that the military defeat of ISIL in Syria and Iraq, when it is complete, will be lasting.

I've articulated a clear strategy with the end-state being a lasting defeat of ISIL – and that means it must be achieved by local forces. Our strategic approach is therefore to enable such forces to collapse ISIL's control of Mosul and Raqqa, by bringing to bear in support of them the full might of the U.S. military through some of our most unique and cutting-edge capabilities...such as a precision air campaign, an expeditionary targeting force, offensive operations in cyberspace, training, logistics, sustainment, and equipment. Enabling local forces – not substituting for them – is necessary to ensure a lasting defeat. And sometimes that means our pace is predicated on the speed at which local forces can absorb our enabling.

Some seem to suggest we pursue different strategies. There are, in fact, alternative strategies, and I've addressed these alternatives in previous testimonies. But we don't recommend them, and this is why:

One alternative would be to leave the complex and chaotic Middle East, try to contain ISIL's danger to the United States, and target terrorists entirely from off-shore. An approach of this sort has its attractions, since it avoids the many complexities of the Middle East. But the reality is that such a containment approach simply cannot succeed in today's connected and globalized world, and I do not recommend it.

Another alternative would be to introduce a significant foreign ground force – hypothetically “international,” although almost certainly preponderantly American – to capture Raqqa and Mosul and other territory seized by ISIL. But as I have testified previously, there are several problems with this approach that have led me not to recommend it either.

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In the near-term, such a strategic approach would entail a significant military undertaking that, much as we'd wish otherwise, realistically we would embark upon largely by ourselves. And it would be ceding our comparative advantage of special forces, mobility, and firepower, instead fighting on the enemy's terms of ground combat amid a local population that has previously responded violently to such an approach.

In the medium-term, by seeming to Americanize or Westernize the effort to expel ISIL from the populations of Iraq and Syria, we might turn those local people who are fighting ISIL, or who are inclined to resist their rule, into fighting us instead. As Chairman Dunford has said, 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 recaptured, which in the end must be done by local forces. We simply cannot substitute for them.

The bottom line is this: We can't ignore this fight, but we also can't win it entirely from the outside in. That's why we're helping capable, motivated local forces in every way we can, without taking their place.

Finally, I want to conclude with a few words about resources, as I have serious concerns with a proposal from one of the defense committees to underfund DoD's overseas warfighting accounts by \$18 billion, and spend that money on programmatic items we didn't request. I have to say this approach is deeply troubling and flawed. Having detailed my objections yesterday before the Appropriations Committee, today, in the context of this testimony, I want to highlight the danger of underfunding our war effort and gambling with funding for our troops in places like Iraq and Syria. As Secretary of Defense, I cannot support such a maneuver.

Indeed, it's exceedingly important that we provide our troops and commanders in the field with all the resources they need to succeed. And I know that with your support, and with the continued dedication of our people and our partners, we will deliver ISIL a lasting defeat.

Thank you.

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