

**SECRETARY OF DEFENSE ASH CARTER
OPENING STATEMENT BEFORE SENATE COMMITTEE ON ARMED
SERVICES HEARING
WEDNESDAY, JULY 29, 2015**

Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed, Members of the Committee: thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning – after my trip to the Middle East last week – on our defense strategy in the region. And I am pleased to be joined by my fellow Cabinet members who can talk in detail about the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action reached in Vienna earlier this month.

That deal is an important step ...one brought about by the leadership of President Obama, the persistent diplomacy of Secretaries Kerry and Moniz and others, and the crippling sanctions Secretary Lew led and that Congress helped to put in place.

It is a good deal. It prevents Iran from getting a nuclear weapon in a comprehensive and verifiable way. Once implemented, it will therefore remove a critical element of risk and uncertainty from the region. For those reasons, and those my colleagues have provided in testimony before other Congressional committees, I urge you to support it. I also urge you to support the broader elements of the defense strategy in the Middle East I will describe, including and especially by supporting a stable and reformed defense budget.

The successful negotiation of this deal is one part of our broader foreign and defense policy. As the most influential power in the world, we have responsibilities all around the globe. The Middle East remains important to America's national interests. And, as a result, the Department of Defense is committed to confronting the region's two principal security challenges: Iran and ISIL.

The Department's strategic approach to protecting our interests and confronting those challenges will remain unchanged. We will continue to maintain a strong military posture to deter aggression; to bolster the security of our friends and allies in the region, especially Israel; to ensure freedom of navigation in the Gulf; to check Iran's malign influence; and to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL. We're also continuing to advance our military capabilities that provide all options, as the President has directed, should Iran walk away from its commitments under this deal.

Last week, I was in the Middle East, and I had the opportunity to visit with some of our men and women in uniform who are carrying out this strategy. I know how much all of you care for our personnel, and like me, you are proud of their impressive work. And I will tell you this morning what I told them: we're

continuing full speed ahead – standing with our friends, standing up to ISIL, and standing against Iran’s malign activity.

On ISIL, as I testified earlier this month, we have the right strategy in place – built on nine, synchronized lines of effort – to achieve ISIL’s lasting defeat. But we continue to strengthen execution. Today, in Iraq and other places, we are working – with partners on the ground and in a global coalition – to enable capable and motivated ground forces to win back Iraq’s sovereignty and peace in its own territory. I saw several parts of this effort last week and spoke with some of our partners on the ground. We’re headed in the right direction in this counter-ISIL effort: we’ve made some progress; but we need to make more.

On Iran, this new deal – when implemented – will place significant limitations on Iran that will effectively cut off its pathways to the fissile material for a nuclear bomb. But it is also important to note that it places no limitations – let me repeat that, no limitations – on what the Department of Defense can and will do to pursue our defense strategy in the region. It places no limits on our forces, our partnerships and alliances, our intensive and ongoing security cooperation, or on our development and fielding of new military capabilities – capabilities we will continue to advance.

If Iran were to commit aggression, our robust force posture ensures we can rapidly surge an overwhelming array of forces into the region, leveraging our most advanced capabilities, married with sophisticated munitions that put no target out of reach.

Iran and its proxies will still present security challenges. Iran supports the Assad regime in Syria, backs Hizballah in Lebanon – whose fighting positions I observed firsthand during a visit to Israel’s northern border last week – and is contributing to disorder in Yemen. And Iran still directs hostility and violence to our closest ally in the region, Israel.

In the face of that malign activity, we will continue to meet our commitments to our friends and allies in the region, especially Israel, and continue to build on and enhance our cooperation in meaningful ways. I made that clear last week in Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Iraq. I also made clear that we will continue to maintain our robust regional force posture ashore and afloat, which includes tens of thousands of American personnel and our most sophisticated ground, maritime, air, and ballistic missile defense assets.

Our friends understand, despite our differences with some of them about the merits of this deal, that we have an enduring commitment to deterrence and to regional security. I am proud to say that our defense partnerships in the region have never been stronger. And, as I made clear in Israel and as we agreed at Camp David with our Gulf partners, we’re committed to making them even stronger and more capable against a range of threats.

The United States will maintain its ironclad commitment to Israel's qualitative military edge. And we will keep providing Israel with advanced capabilities – for example, next year, Israel will be our first and only friend in the region flying the F-35 stealth fighter.

And we are working multilaterally and bilaterally to improve the capacity and capabilities of our Gulf partners. At the GCC Summit at Camp David hosted by the President in May, and last week with Saudi leaders, I stressed a number of functional areas that will be critical to enabling Gulf countries to play a stronger regional role: including maritime forces, ground forces including especially special operations and counterterrorism forces, air and ballistic missile defense forces, and cyber protection. We also conduct over 50 military exercises a year with our regional partners, including the International Mine Counter Measure Exercise, and the Eagle Resolve and Eager Lion exercises, which deepen coordination and interoperability. And, we've offered sophisticated defense equipment, including the THAAD ballistic missile defense system and long-range precision strike capabilities, to some of our Gulf partners.

In conclusion, this is a good deal because it removes a continued source of threat and uncertainty in a comprehensive and verifiable way by preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. It is a deal that takes no option away from a future President. This is an important achievement and a deal that deserves your support.

Meanwhile, the United States, the Department of Defense, and the men and women of the finest fighting force the world has ever known, with your support, will continue to be committed to the defense of America's interests, friends, and allies, to counter ISIL and Iran's malign influence, and to uphold the President's commitment that Iran will not obtain a nuclear weapon should it walk away from this deal.

Thank you.

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