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U.S. Policy in the Middle East

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Mr. Chairman, Senator Reed, Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the situation in the Middle East.

This is the first time I have testified in open session before Congress since resigning as Director of the CIA nearly three years ago. And I think it is appropriate to begin my remarks this morning with an apology ... one that I have offered before, but nonetheless one that I want to repeat to you and to the American people.

Four years ago, I made a serious mistake—one that brought discredit on me and pain to those closest to me. It was a violation of the trust placed in me and a breach of the values to which I had been committed throughout my life.

There is nothing I can do to undo what I did. I can only say again how sorry I am to those I let down, and then strive to go forward with a greater sense of humility and purpose, and with gratitude to those who stood with me during a very difficult chapter in my life.

In light of all that, it means a great deal that you have asked me to share my views on the challenges in the Middle East, where I spent most of my last decade in government.

I thank you for that, Mr. Chairman, and I thank you for the support and friendship that you have long extended to me.

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The Middle East today is experiencing revolutionary upheaval that is unparalleled in its modern history.

At the root of this upheaval is the weakening or disintegration of state authority in multiple countries. This has led to a violent struggle for power across a vast swath of territory—a competition both between different groups *within* states, and one *between* different states in the region and some outside it. Almost every Middle Eastern country is now a battleground or a combatant in one or more wars.

The principal winners, thus far, have been the most ruthless, revolutionary, and anti-American elements in the region. This includes Sunni extremists like the so-called Islamic State, which is attempting to carve a totalitarian caliphate out of the wreckage of the old order, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, which hopes to establish a kind of regional hegemony.

All of the revolutionary forces—whether Sunni or Shiite—are *exploiting* the upheaval in the Middle East while also *exacerbating* it. While hostile to each other, the growth of each is feeding the sectarian radicalization that is fueling the other. But none of them reflects the hopes of the overwhelming majority of Middle Easterners.

The crises of the Middle East pose a threat not just to regional stability, but also to global stability and to vital national interests of the United States, for the repercussions of developments in the Middle East extend well beyond it.

Indeed, the Middle East is not a part of the world that plays by Las Vegas rules: what happens in the Middle East is not going to stay in the Middle East.

We see this in the global reach of the Islamic State from the sanctuaries it has seized in the region; in the tsunami of refugees fleeing the conflicts of the Middle East; in the danger of a nuclear cascade sparked by Iranian actions; and in the escalating tensions between the U.S. and Russia over Syria.

And, it is in the Middle East today where the rules-based international order—the foundation of American security and prosperity since the end of World War II—is most in danger of coming apart at the seams.

International peace and security do not require the United States to solve every crisis or to intervene in every conflict. But if America is ineffective or absent in the face of the most *egregious* violations of the most *basic* principles of the international order that we have championed, our commitment to that order is inevitably questioned... and further challenges to it are invited.

I will focus here this morning on three countries at the eye of the present geopolitical storm: Iraq, Syria, and Iran.

It has been more than a year since the United States commenced military action against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. And, while there have been significant accomplishments, the progress achieved thus far has been inadequate. An impressive coalition has been assembled, key ISIS leaders have been killed or captured, and support for local forces in Iraq and Syria has helped roll back ISIS in certain areas. Some elements of the right strategy are in place, but several are under-resourced, while others are missing. We are not where we should be at this point.

In *Iraq*, we have halted and reversed ISIS's momentum in some areas. But we have seen gains by ISIS in others, such as Ramadi. In my judgment, increased support for the Iraqi Security Forces, Sunni tribal forces, and Kurdish peshmerga is needed—including embedding U.S. advisor elements down to the brigade headquarters level of those Iraqi forces fighting ISIS. I also believe that we should explore use of Joint Tactical Air Controllers with select Iraqi units to coordinate coalition airstrikes for those units. And we should examine whether our rules of engagement for precision strikes are too restrictive.

That said, we should exercise restraint to ensure our forces do not take over Iraqi units. I would not, for example, embed U.S. personnel at the Iraqi battalion level; nor would I support clearance operations before a viable hold force is available.

As critical as the frontline fight against ISIS is, however, the center of gravity for the *sustainable* defeat of ISIS in Iraq lies in Baghdad.

In this respect, we should recall that the cause of Iraq's unraveling over the past several years was the corrupt, sectarian, and authoritarian behavior of former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki and his government. This is what alienated the Sunni Arab population we worked so hard to get back into the fabric of Iraqi society during the Surge. Maliki's actions, in turn, created the conditions for the Islamic State to reconstitute itself in Iraq, after which it gained additional strength in the Syrian civil war and then, of course, swept back into Iraq.

The key now is for the U.S. to help strengthen those in Baghdad who are prepared to pursue inclusive politics and better governance—goals that unite Iraq's Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds. It is vital that Sunnis and Kurds, in particular, are again given a stake in the success of the new Iraq, rather than a stake in its failure.

There is, at present in Iraq, an unprecedented opportunity to support Prime Minister Abadi who, with the backing of Iraqi citizens in the streets, Iraq's senior Shia cleric, and the Shia ISCI party, is embarked on very serious reforms that are being resisted by the leaders of the major Iranian-supported militias and former Prime Minister Maliki.

The reality is that the challenges in Iraq are neither *purely* political nor *purely* military. They are both. What is required therefore is an integrated civil-military plan, in which diplomatic and military lines of effort are coordinated to reinforce each other. That is what Ambassador Crocker and I pursued during the Surge, and all the elements of that effort are once again required, though it is the Iraqis who must provide the ground forces and achieve reconciliation if the results are to be sustainable.

Unfortunately, we do not yet have the proper civil-military architecture in place to support this, though we appear to be moving closer to it.

Notably, the operational headquarters for the military campaign against ISIS in Iraq is based in Kuwait. This means that the U.S. ambassador in Baghdad does not always have a day-to-day military counterpart. I would strongly recommend facilitating this by moving key elements of the headquarters to Baghdad—and ensuring that a comprehensive civil-military plan is pursued.

I note here that I am very encouraged that the general selected to lead the campaign in Iraq is the officer who, as a brigade commander in Ramadi in the fall of 2006, launched the reconciliation initiative on which we subsequently built during the Surge, leading eventually to what became the Anbar Awakening.

I should also note that, in my view, the commander in Baghdad should focus primarily on Iraq, while another commander, perhaps positioned in Turkey and perhaps under the three-star in Iraq, should be designated to focus on operations in Syria, which clearly need greater unity of effort.

Let me now turn to the situation in Syria.

Syria today, Mr. Chairman, is a geopolitical Chernobyl—spewing instability and extremism over the region and the rest of the world. Like a nuclear disaster, the fallout from the meltdown of Syria threatens to be with us for decades, and the longer it is permitted to continue, the more severe the damage will be.

It is frequently said that there is “no military solution” to Syria or the other conflicts roiling the Middle East. This may be true, but it is also misleading. For, in every case, if there is to be any hope of a political settlement, a certain military and security *context* is required—and that context will not materialize on its own. We and our partners need to facilitate it—and over the past four years, we have not done so.

It has been clear from early on in Syria that the desired context requires the development of capable, moderate Sunni Arab ground forces. Such Sunni elements are critical for *any* objective one might have in Syria: defeating extremists like ISIS, changing the momentum on the battlefield to enable a negotiated settlement, and upholding that agreement while keeping ISIS down.

Unfortunately, we are no closer today to having that Sunni force than we were a year ago—or when support for such forces was first considered several years ago.

The central problem in Syria is that Sunni Arabs will not be willing partners against the Islamic State unless we commit to protect them and the broader Syrian population against *all* enemies, not just ISIS. That means protecting them from the unrestricted warfare being waged against them by Bashar al Assad—especially by his air force and its use of barrel bombs. This, not ISIS, has been the primary source of civilian casualties; it has also been a principal driver of the radicalization fueling ISIS and the refugee crisis.

The problems in Syria cannot be quickly resolved. But there are actions the U.S., and only the U.S., can take that would make a difference.

We could, for example, tell Assad that the use of barrel bombs must end—and that if they continue, we will stop the Syrian air force from flying. We have that capability.

This would not end the humanitarian crisis in Syria, or end the broader war, or bring about the collapse of the Assad regime. But it would remove a particularly vicious weapon from Assad’s arsenal. It would demonstrate that the United States is willing to stand against Assad. And it would show the Syrian people that we can do what the Islamic State cannot—provide them with a measure of protection.

I would also support the establishment of enclaves in Syria protected by coalition airpower, where a moderate Sunni force could be supported and where additional forces could be trained, Internally Displaced Persons could find refuge, and the Syrian opposition could organize.

Now, no one is more conscious of the costs of military intervention, or of the limits of our military power, than I am. As commander in Iraq and then Afghanistan during the height of combat in those countries, I wrote more letters of condolence to parents of America’s sons and daughters than any of my contemporaries. I do not make recommendations for any kind of military action lightly.

But inaction can also carry profound risks and costs for our national security. We see that clearly today in Syria. And Russia’s recent military escalation in Syria is a further reminder that, when

the U.S. does not take the initiative, others will fill the vacuum, often in ways that are harmful to our interests.

Russia's actions to bolster Assad increase the imperative of support for the moderate opposition and Syrian civilians. We should not allow Russia to push us into coalition with Assad, which appears to be President Putin's intention. While we should not rush to oust Assad without an understanding of what will follow him, Assad cannot be part of the solution in Syria. He is, after all, the individual seen by Sunnis across the region as responsible for the death of some 250,000 Syrians, the displacement of well over a third of Syria's population, and the destruction of many of Syria's once thriving communities.

Finally, let me turn to *Iran*.

The nuclear agreement negotiated by the Obama Administration contains many positive elements; it also contains problematic elements.

Over the next 10-15 years, the agreement will impose meaningful constraints on Iran's nuclear activities. It will also, however, increase considerably the resources available for the Iranian regime to pursue malign activities. And, in the longer term, as constraints imposed by the agreement expire, the risk of Iranian proliferation will increase.

The key question, going forward, is: What will be the relationship of the United States to Iranian power? Will we seek to counter it, or to accommodate it?

As the Obama Administration sought to promote the nuclear agreement, its senior members pledged the former, to counter malign Iranian activity. But many in the region worry that the White House will now pursue the latter—attempting to work with Iran, perhaps beginning in Syria.

This would be a mistake. To be sure, the idea of reconciliation with Iran should not be dismissed. But it is one thing if reconciliation means that Iran abandons its Qods Force-driven foreign policy, sponsorship of extremist proxies, and pursuit of hegemony over its neighbors. It is a very different matter if reconciliation entails accommodating these actions.

As we have seen in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, Iran's activities are not only hostile to us and our partners. They also exacerbate Sunni feelings of alienation and disenfranchisement, which in turn drive sectarian radicalization and the growth of groups like ISIS.

Thus, rather than viewing the nuclear agreement as marking the end of a hostile relationship with Iran that will enable our disengagement from the Middle East, we should see it as inaugurating a new, more complex phase of that competition that will require intensified U.S. involvement in the region.

This should include several important actions.

First, the United States should make absolutely clear that we will never allow Iran to possess highly enriched uranium, and that any move in that direction will be met with military force. This guarantee must be ironclad to reassure our partners in the region and have the desired effect

with Iran. Such a declaration would carry maximal credibility if issued by the President and Congress together.

Second, we must intensify our work with our Arab and Israeli partners to counter Iran's malign regional activities. This can take several forms, including continued use of existing sanctions authorities against Iranian entities tied to terrorism, ballistic missile development, and human rights abuses. It should also include expedited approval of weapons systems sought by our partners in the region and greater integration of their capabilities. And it should encompass additional actions to demonstrate that the theater remains "set" with respect to our own capabilities to carry out military operations against Iran's nuclear program, if necessary.

Beyond those actions, we should understand that the most immediate test for the credibility of our policy will be what we do in Iraq and Syria. The outcome in those countries will be the basis for the judgments of friend and foe alike about our steadfastness and competence in thwarting ISIS, other extremists, and Iran's quest for hegemony.

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Mr. Chairman, the situation confronting the U.S. in the Middle East today is very hard. But as I observed when I took command in Iraq in early February 2007 amidst terrible sectarian violence, hard is not hopeless. As complex and challenging as the crises in the region are, I am convinced the United States is capable of rising to the challenge—if we choose to do so.

I ended my statements before the Senate Armed Services Committee in the past by thanking its Members for their steadfast support of our men and women in uniform. I will end my statement this morning the same way—repeating the gratitude that so many of us felt during the height of our engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan for the Committee's extraordinary support for so many critical initiatives, on and off the battlefield, even when a number of Members questioned the policies we were executing.

This Committee has also long played a critical oversight role, posing tough questions about U.S. policy and strategy. I highlight the leadership of Chairman McCain in this regard for questioning the strategy in Iraq before 2007 and calling for many of the key elements that ultimately made possible the stabilization of that country. The questions that Members of this Committee ask about our approach in Syria and the broader fight against ISIS continue in this tradition.

Again, this Committee's unwavering support of those serving our Nation in uniform has meant a tremendous amount to those on the battlefield and to those supporting them. And it is with those great Americans in mind that I have offered my thoughts here this morning. Thank you very much.