

Testimony

Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on

“The U.S. Role and Strategy in the Middle East”

Statement of

General John R. Allen, USMC (Ret.)

Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL

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Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, esteemed members of the Committee, thank you for providing me the opportunity to update you on the progress of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. I'm happy to be here with my esteemed colleague, and one of America's premier diplomats, Ambassador Anne Patterson who serves as the Department's Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs.

As this Committee knows, the challenges in the region are great. I returned to Washington on Friday from consultations with our Gulf partners, on the heels of a trip to Amman, Baghdad, and Erbil, where I met with their most senior leadership for wide-ranging discussions on the counter-ISIL strategy. This in turn follows immediately on the UN General Assembly where President Obama convened a meeting of the Counter-ISIL Coalition and other key international leaders and groups engaged in countering violent extremism. It's been a very busy time.

Since I began serving in this role in September of 2014, I have traveled to more than 30 Coalition capitals, with some of those capitals repeatedly, over my

tenure. During that time the Coalition has grown and we have added more countries and international organizations to our ranks, and I'm happy to say that the Coalition is now 65-strong. Last month, we welcomed our three newest members – Nigeria, Tunisia and Malaysia – three key nations joining the global effort against ISIL's attempts to expand its influence in new regions. There are other nations similarly preparing to join this unique partnership.

As I appear before this distinguished committee today it's important to take stock of the dire situation that was unfolding one year ago. ISIL had advanced unimpeded into Iraq. We were seeing atrocities, more horrific than any I have ever seen or even could have imagined: the beheadings, the crucifixions, the electrocutions, the drownings, and of course the one that I believe focused the collective horror and rage of the world, the nightmarish burning, the immolation, of Captain Moaz al-Kasasbeh, the Jordanian pilot captured by ISIL, who stands as a hero to us all. He and his family remain in our prayers.

At the same time a year ago, Erbil and Baghdad were under severe threat as ISIL advanced rapidly on those cities – key locations where U.S. government personnel are located. Tikrit had fallen. Kirkuk was threatened. The Mosul Dam, critical strategic infrastructure on the Tigris River, had been taken. ISIL

had also laid siege to a place few had even heard of before in this country or in the West, a place called Sinjar Mountain, where ISIL intended to annihilate the Yazidi population.

A year later, the Coalition has applied significant pressure on this organization, hitting ISIL with more than 7,500 airstrikes – nearly 6,000 of which the United States has conducted – and taking out, as the Pentagon announced last week, some 70 senior and mid-level ISIL leaders since the beginning of May – that’s one killed every two days.

We’ve also removed from the battlefield, in both Iraq and in Syria, over 2,600 vehicles and tanks, over 400 artillery and mortar positions, and nearly 6,500 fighting positions, checkpoints, buildings, bunkers, staging areas and barracks, including 30 training camps. However, we are not naïve, the task is daunting and this fight is far from over.

Coalition strikes are hitting personnel and infrastructure that ISIL relies on for command and control, financing, logistics and propaganda. Even as they replace their leaders and facilitators, our air strikes are forcing ISIL to change the way they communicate, the way they move, reinforce and resupply.

With 18 Coalition members having trained more than 13,000 Iraqi and Peshmerga soldiers to date, we have denied ISIL the freedom to operate in over 30 percent of the populated territory in Iraq they had held last August. The iconic Sunni city of Tikrit has been liberated and 75 percent of the population has returned. ISIL has been almost completely pushed back from Bayji, where the Iraqi Air Force is flying U.S.-supplied F-16s to support operations on the ground. And four columns of Iraqi troops are closing in on Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province, which we anticipate in the coming months will be the next liberated city.

Iraq's Prime Minister Abadi has also proved to be a strong partner, the moderate leader Iraq has needed to help forge a national unity. He has empowered local Sunni leaders like the Governors of Anbar and Salah ad-Din to ensure Sunnis have a role in securing their communities and live with dignity in Iraq. Abadi's ambitious reform agenda and efforts to root out corruption are critical to the national reconciliation process. And we understand too well that to successfully defeat the scourge of extremism one must fight for political reform and inclusion as ardently as one pursues the military battle. Our

continued support to the Iraqi government and to Prime Minister Abadi is essential.

There is no question that this is going to be a long-term conflict and there is much work remaining, but we will succeed in degrading and ultimately defeating this organization. We must make clear that any aura of invincibility that surrounded ISIL has been shattered. ISIL is not invincible; it is defeatable, and is being defeated – by brave Iraqis, Sunni, Shia, Kurdish and minority groups – defending and taking back their towns, cities, and ultimately, their country, with the support of the United States and our Coalition partners.

As this Committee knows, the situation in Syria is no less challenging, and the Russian military operations there have only complicated matters further. The United States continues to support ground forces in northern Syria to take back territory, who have now cut ISIL off from all but 68 miles of the nearly 600-mile border with Turkey. This progress has been essential to our fight against ISIL. These forces have liberated Kobane from ISIL in the west, connected with others who expelled ISIL from Tal Abyad – the group’s primary border crossing with Turkey – and have now cleared al-Hasakah from ISIL in the east

towards Iraq. Today some of those forces are within 30 miles of the group's nerve center – its capital, if you will – in Raqqa.

We must not forget the Turkish government, a critical partner in this fight, which recently increased its participation in the Coalition, opening its bases to U.S. and other Coalition members, and conducting air strikes on ISIL targets inside Syria alongside other Coalition aircraft. This cooperation has already had an impact and will continue to have a significant impact on our operations in Syria, reducing the transit time to just 18 minutes from up to 4 hours from bases in the Gulf.

These and other military aspects of the campaign will inevitably receive the most attention. But as I have seen in the four previous Coalition efforts with which I've been involved, it will ultimately be the aggregate and cumulative pressure of campaign activity over multiple, mutually supporting lines of effort that will determine the campaign's success.

It is for this reason that when I visit a Coalition capital and meet with a prime minister or a king or a president, I describe the Coalition's counter-ISIL strategy as being organized around multiple lines of effort: denying safe haven

to ISIL militarily and providing security assistance to partners on the ground; disrupting the flow of foreign terrorist fighters; disrupting ISIL's financial and economic resources; providing stabilization support to newly liberated areas; and countering ISIL's messaging – or defeating ISIL as an idea.

First and foremost, the immediate and generational challenge presented by foreign terrorist fighters evokes nearly universal concern in my conversations with Coalition partners.

While we've taken back ISIL's primary border crossing between Turkey and Syria, we must stress that the Turkish border is the last line of defense in this equation. As I already mentioned, we are now working with Turkey and local partners to clear ISIL from the final 68 miles of that border, and ultimately prevent the further infiltration of foreign fighters.

Since the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 2178 that the United States led in September of last year, 22 countries of the Coalition have upgraded their legislation to create greater barriers for traveling to Syria and Iraq. At least 34 countries have arrested foreign fighters or aspirants, and 12 have successfully prosecuted them. We need all nations working together at



each link along the chain – from the point of radicalization, to the point of violence, and to the point of return and rehabilitation. We are, however, deeply concerned that the Russian intervention into Syria will further complicate, indeed exacerbate, the foreign fighter problem. Many of the Gulf leaders with whom I met recently predicted Russian actions in Syria will even more increase the flow of foreign fighters to the region.

The kind of information sharing that has helped on foreign fighters has also allowed the Coalition to make significant gains in squeezing ISIL's access to financial resources and networks in both Syria and Iraq, and more broadly globally.

You'll recall earlier this year in May, our Armed Forces conducted a Special Operations raid on ISIL's finance, oil and antiquities emir, Abu Sayyaf. We took from the raid seven terabytes of information – hard drives, thumb drives, DVDs, CDs, paper – and the exploitation of that material is giving us very important insights into the organization of ISIL and its economic portfolio.

It was from information yielded in this raid that our Coalition aircraft hit 26 targets just last week in Syria and Iraq, including most importantly the Omar oil

field in Deir-ez-Zor, which yielded ISIL up to \$5 million per month. Among our targets were other oil refineries, command and control centers, transportation nodes, and cash distribution sites, making it one of the largest set of strikes since launching the air campaign last year. And pressure will continue to build.

As ISIL continues to brutalize and extort its population for cash, the Coalition is coordinating efforts to stabilize areas liberated from ISIL's grasp. Stabilization is central to our long-term success as we eliminate threats and help local communities recover and provide a safe, welcoming environment for their displaced populations.

The Italians are leading an effort to train an effective Iraqi police force that can ensure the safety and security of liberated areas. The Canadians have stepped forward to ensure protections and programs for women and girls are incorporated. Several nations, including the United States with the support of Congress, have made sizable contributions to a fund for immediate stabilization in Iraq, which we have created with the UN Development Program. This multilateral fund has enabled Iraqi authorities to respond quickly to the urgent needs of returning Iraqis, such as water, electricity, and healthcare. Germany

and the United Arab Emirates are helping organize contributions from more than 20 Coalition partners to provide support for this fund.

The ravaged communities ISIL leaves in its wake bear witness to ISIL's true nature, one we are actively working with Coalition partners to expose, ensuring there be an Arab face and Muslim voice in our messaging strategy. The State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications helped manage a multimedia campaign of testimonies from "ISIL Defectors," generating some 900 news articles, reaching an estimated audience of 90 million people worldwide.

The United Arab Emirates has launched a joint messaging center with the United States in Abu Dhabi called the Sawab or "Right Path" Center, which is coordinating and driving counter-ISIL messaging activity in the region, combating ISIL's efforts to recruit foreign fighters, raise funds, and terrorize local populations. As we learn from Sawab's operations, we are institutionalizing best practices and helping others grow capacity, including setting up new messaging centers in Malaysia, Nigeria, and Tunisia, as well as in Saudi Arabia with the OIC, and in Brussels with the EU.

Over the past year, the Coalition has sought to send a clear message, a message to ISIL and a message to the world: *We refuse to observe and stand idly by its atrocities. We reject its toxic, false ideology and doctrines. And we abhor its vicious and continual assault on human dignity.*

To that end we as a people must never, ever accept that organizations like ISIL can become the new normal. It cannot become the new normal. We must never lose our moral outrage at what we have seen this organization do and is doing every day, and what it intends to do to the people that it subjugates, and to the people of this country and in this room if left unchecked.

Taking the fight to ISIL requires that we be flexible and patient in our efforts. It also requires close coordination with this Committee and with your colleagues in Congress, so that we are constantly evaluating our tactics and strategy, and that we are resourcing them appropriately.

I thank you for the opportunity to continue that process of coordination and consultation today, and I look forward to taking your questions.