

Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Kimberly Kagan
President, Institute for the Study of War
September 16, 2015

The United States faces national security challenges in 2015 of a scope and scale that we have not encountered since the end of the Cold War. The Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has seized control of terrain in Iraq and Syria, declared itself a caliphate, and aims not only to reify that claim but also to provoke an apocalyptic war with the West. ISIS is challenging al-Qaeda, the terrorist organization from which it sprung, as the leader of the global jihadist movement. Russia, a nuclear power, is waging a crypto-war in Ukraine and is using its military capabilities to intimidate NATO. The United States and Iran have signed a nuclear deal that will relieve sanctions in ways that will likely increase Iran's malign behavior in the Middle East, which already includes the use of proxy military forces to undermine U.S. allies. China is laying claim to areas in the South China Sea and is using its increasing military might to enforce those claims.

The threat to the United States in 2015 includes not only states and transnational organizations that have the intent and capability to harm America. The U.S. also faces a threat from the growing global disorder that its enemies and adversaries are exploiting. The Islamic State, for example, is pursuing a strategy that both breaks strong states and preys upon power vacuums in failed states. It has worked to provoke and expand a Sunni-Shia sectarian war since its origins as al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2004. That sectarian war is now engulfing the region and spreading around the world.

Iran is helping to accelerate and expand sectarian war. The Iranians are supporting the Assad regime through a comprehensive strategy, including military resources such as trainers, advisors, and funding. That Alawite regime is deliberately starving its own people, dropping heinous barrel bombs on civilian targets, torturing family members of its opponents, and gassing its own people. These are war crimes committed primarily against Sunni. The perpetuation of the Assad regime is one of the major accelerants of the radicalization of Sunni as well as Shi'a populations, and without the Iranians, the regime would not have survived this long. Tehran has gone so far as to recruit its own people as "volunteers" to fight in Syria, and has mobilized Shi'a from as far away as Afghanistan to enter this sectarian battle.

All of these developments have led to the growth of dangerous power vacuums. The world has witnessed the collapse of governments and states. Governments changed in Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab Spring. Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, all challenged by the Arab Spring, are failed or failing states. The Islamic State, therefore, has room to grow in the voids where government once was and Iran's counter-strategy is making the problem much worse.

The Islamic State announced its intent to "remain and expand" in November 2014. The slogan, which appeared on the cover of its English language magazine, conveyed its strategic objectives: to remain in Iraq and Syria and to expand beyond their borders. My analysts at the Institute for the Study of War assess that ISIS is operating in three rings: an Interior ring, consisting of Iraq

and Syria; a Near Abroad ring in lands that were parts of historical Caliphates; and a Far Abroad ring in Europe, the United States, Australia, and Asia. In the Near Abroad, ISIS has active governorates, or wilayats, in Egypt, Libya, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Yemen, the Caucasus, Algeria, and Nigeria.

The analysts at the Institute for the Study of War have observed that ISIS has brought signature capabilities and campaigns from Iraq to Egypt, where it is now pursuing a campaign against Egyptian Security Forces in the Sinai modeled on the “Soldiers Harvest” campaign that eroded the Iraqi Security Forces’ capabilities and control in Mosul, Iraq in late 2013. That historical campaign’s signature weapon, the House-Borne IED (HBIED), destroyed the houses of Egyptian security forces in Sinai repeatedly this summer. The United States has seen the impact of the fall of Mosul, and it should be extremely concerned about a capable terrorist organization that is trying to thin security forces in internationally significant terrain, such as the Egypt-Israel border.

The United States must therefore evaluate its efforts against ISIS in Iraq and Syria in this wider global context. President Obama, in September 2014, declared his intent to “degrade and ultimately destroy the terrorist group known as ISIL,” the government’s acronym for the Islamic State. The international coalition against ISIS speaks of its mission slightly more modestly, using the military doctrinal term defeat (meaning to break the enemy’s will or capability to fight) in lieu of destroy (meaning physically to render an enemy’s combat capability ineffective until it is reconstituted).

Defeating ISIS is a correct mission statement for the activities of the United States. It does not mean U.S. troops must be everywhere that ISIS is, or that military force is the only instrument that should be used. Rather, defeating ISIS requires using military force, diplomacy, and all the instruments of U.S. national power to break the organization’s capability to fight, since the will of an apocalyptic enemy is not likely to break. Some in policy circles might hope that ISIS could be contained in Iraq and Syria. But unfortunately, ISIS has already spread beyond those areas, as I have noted. The opportunity for containing ISIS in Iraq and Syria has passed. The opportunity to defeat it in Iraq and Syria in ways that collapse its global reputation and capabilities is fleeting.

The United States is not succeeding at defeating ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Make no mistake, the United States and the international coalition have been essential to limiting ISIS’s expansion and reversing some of its gains. Airstrikes in Iraq have been vital to helping ground forces retake terrain and degrade ISIS. The U.S. has helped the Iraqi Security Forces recover some territory that ISIS had seized, such as the very important gain in Tikrit. ISIS has gained new terrain in Ramadi, however, and still retains its safehaven in Mosul. This is not surprising. The U.S. has not provided support to the Iraqi Security Forces in ways sufficient to render them sufficiently effective against this enemy, such as close air support.

The problems of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) at this time stem from the government’s lack of a monopoly on the use of force, an unsurprising consequence of the long delay in providing any U.S. military support to Iraq and then constraining that support to levels inadequate to meet the crisis Iraq faced. Iranian-backed proxy forces thus took the field shortly after the fall of Mosul and have gained influence from the reliance the Iraqi government must place on them. The

Iranian proxies are different from the popular mobilization of Shi'a volunteers that have also taken the field. The popular mobilization has largely remained under the control of Iraq's clergy and political parties. But the Iranian-backed groups have asserted their own command and control. They include Katai'b Hezbollah, which the United States designated as a terrorist organization, and Asai'b Ahl al-Haq, the Lebanese Hezbollah-trained militia responsible for kidnapping and killing five U.S. soldiers in Iraq in 2007, among many other American and Iraqi deaths it has caused.

Since the fall of Ramadi, the Iranian-backed militias have deliberately chosen campaign objectives different from those designated by Iraq's Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, in order to throw Abadi's strategy off track and take control of the military situation. They are motivated by the determination they share with their Iranian masters to drive the U.S. out of Iraq once more and install pliable Iranian clients—a role in which these groups' leaders fancy themselves—permanently in Baghdad. In recent weeks, they have threatened Iraqi officials in order to ensure that they do not advance the Prime Minister's vital and popularly supported reforms. They or another Iranian-backed element have kidnapped Turkish workers in order to compel Turkey to change its policies in Syria. And they are increasing violence among Shi'a in vital cities such as Baghdad and Basra. The Iranian-backed militias are in a showdown with the Prime Minister, and the future of the government of Iraq and the unity of the country rely on the Prime Minister winning this very real contest for power.

The U.S. is trying to counter ISIS as though it is the only enemy on the battlefield, when in fact it is but one of the terrible actors driving the global sectarian war. A strategy that tries to empower Iran and help Tehran expand its influence throughout the region will inevitably fail. It is actually making things worse. Exclusive focus on the Islamic State has also led the U.S. to ignore the growing threat of al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra.

Jabhat al-Nusra poses a threat to the United States for several reasons. It is strong, growing, and effective, and it creates momentum for global al-Qaeda, which is still a real threat to the United States. It hosts the Khorosan Group, elements of al-Qaeda core that are plotting to attack the West. It recruits foreign fighters from a global network who will eventually bring the fight to their home countries. It also precludes many of the political and military solutions that the United States seeks. It violently eliminates moderate opposition from the battlefield; it was the organization that killed, kidnapped, and dispersed the group of roughly fifty U.S. vetted and trained rebels introduced this summer. It opposes political transition or working with the West. It is intertwined into courts, administration, and command structures in rebel-held Syria. Jabhat al-Nusra embeds itself in existing opposition civilian and military structures and gradually remakes them in al-Qaeda's image. It is therefore stealthier, more intertwined with social and military groups, and harder to defeat than ISIS. Jabhat al-Nusra uses more patient means than ISIS to achieve its objectives, but those objectives are no less dangerous: namely an emirate for al-Qaeda in Syria that is a part of al-Qaeda's global caliphate.

The United States needs to recalibrate its policy to the security realities that we face. A strategy that tries to compartmentalize the ISIS threat from other drivers of regional and global instability will fail.