

Testimony

Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

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

Statement of

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Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the challenges facing American diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa region. I am honored to appear before you today with General John Allen, our distinguished Special Presidential Envoy. We are both just back from the region. I was with the Secretary in Jordan and Saudi Arabia over the weekend following talks in Vienna with some of our regional partners and the Russians on trying to find a way to end the war in Syria, a conflict that in many ways illustrates the challenges and threats we face in the region.

Mr. Chairman, the growth of violent extremist groups, particularly ISIL - that prey on societies with weak or failed governments and that draw on support from the region and around the world - is unprecedented and creating new threats. As a consequence, the region is experiencing large-scale humanitarian suffering as well as widespread destruction and economic collapse, undermining efforts to end the violence.

We have important national interests in the region to pursue, from counter-terrorism cooperation to coordination on military issues to investment opportunities for American companies. The dedicated women and men at the State

Department are engaged throughout the region and with the international community to press for steps toward peace and stability and promote urgently needed reforms in support of our critical national security interests. I will describe some of our policy challenges and opportunities – today and for the future – and will be glad to take your questions.

### **The Root Causes of Regional Instability**

Today's instability has deep roots in six challenges that occur in varying degrees across the region, including:

- **First, challenges to political legitimacy** – because so few of the region's governments have a consistent tradition of open, democratic elections where leadership can be challenged by an unfettered opposition;
- **Second, lagging institutional competence** – because many regional governments lack effective institutions to provide even basic public services. The most extreme example is Libya, where it became clear that the national government was extremely weak, with tribal, regional, and factional groups that the former Qadhafi government had corralled to hold the country together;
- **Third, demography** – because the region's economies cannot keep up with the rapidly growing population of young job seekers. Unemployed young

men – lacking skills, adrift, and angry – helped lead the Arab Spring.

Today, many of them are prime recruits for armed gangs or violent extremist groups that offer meaning for their lives and give them a sense of purpose;

- **Fourth, lagging economies** – because regional governments respond to the demographically-driven demand for more jobs by expanding public sector payrolls rather than undertaking urgently needed reforms, adding to bloated government and stifling local economies;
- **Fifth, growing religious sectarianism** – because regional rivalries, most particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia, have been manipulated to stoke tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims. This rivalry is playing out violently today in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon. And the bitter sectarian narrative has emboldened extremists on both sides to pursue twisted interpretations of Islam; and
- **Sixth, the role of Islam in politics** – because there is little or no tradition of separation between religion and politics in most of the countries of the region, regional governments are struggling to find a widely-supported consensus on the role of religious political movements and parties.

## **Syria**

All of the long-term challenges I mentioned can be found in Syria. In the four years since the Asad regime launched a civil war on citizens seeking modest

reforms, over 225,000 Syrians have been killed and four million Syrians have become refugees. About half of Syria's pre-war population of 22 million people has been displaced. The conflict has become a magnet for violent extremists from around the world.

Our objectives in Syria remain clear: we will continue to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL; we will continue to advance conditions to foster a negotiated political transition; and we will help Syrians lay the foundation for a free and pluralistic future — a future without ISIL or Asad.

Although other regional countries have been involved in this conflict, both Iran and Russia have been long-time supporters of the Asad regime, and their new military adventurism has been directly pointed at U.S.-supported moderate opposition forces. The dangers of the current situation are clear.

During our meetings on Syria in Europe and in the region last week, Secretary Kerry pressed the Russian, Saudi, and Turkish governments on strategies to end the conflict and advance a genuine political transition. This group, as well as foreign ministers from other nations, will likely meet again this week to press forward on this dialogue.

We believe Russia's decision to intervene militarily in Syria is a losing bet. They know full well that there is no military solution to this conflict. Russia's choice of airstrike targets has been overwhelmingly in areas where ISIL is not

operating or dominant; meanwhile, the regime's attacks on its own people help ISIL recruit fighters to its extremist cause. In contrast, the U.S. is leading a 65-member Coalition against ISIL, its recruitment, financing and propaganda efforts, as General Allen will describe, and we are supporting ISIL's opponents in the moderate opposition. The Secretary told Foreign Minister Lavrov that if Russia wants to effectively combat ISIL, it can contribute constructively to the international efforts already underway against ISIL. And the Secretary told Mr. Lavrov that Russia now has the responsibility to urge the Asad regime to stop brutalizing its own citizens and help advance a political solution. Our partners are relaying the same message.

Over the past months, we have been meeting with a wide range of Syrian opposition leaders, including members of the external and internal political opposition, the leaders and political representatives of major armed factions, and local governance bodies in Syria to encourage their consolidation around a unified set of principles to guide negotiations and a political transition in Syria that preserves public institutions. They are doing so more than at any other time during the conflict. We hope to build on this greater unity to pressure the regime and its allies to enter into a serious dialogue on a political transition in Syria.

## **Yemen**

Yemen is one of the world's poorest countries and for years has been plagued by instability derived from the factors affecting other countries in the region. Conflict has broken out several times over the past 20 years following the unification of North and South Yemen, which ended a several decades-long division of the country but also set off a battle for power and influence by forces from both the north and south hoping to maintain their interests in a unified Yemen. In August 2014, Houthi rebels took Yemen's capital of Sanaa by force, derailing a political transition process that began after a 2011 uprising against ex-President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The Houthi militias, with support from Saleh-affiliated forces, forced out the internationally-recognized government of President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi. In response to a plea from President Hadi to defend the Yemeni government from Houthi advances, the Saudis initiated an air campaign in March 2015 with a 10-member coalition of predominantly Sunni Arab states.

Saudi Arabia is motivated by the threat to their territory, demonstrated by ongoing cross border attacks perpetrated by the Houthis. To help defend Saudi border security and restore the legitimate Yemeni government, we have been providing logistical and intelligence support to the Coalition through a Joint Combined Planning Cell in Riyadh.

We are working intensively to find a political solution for the Yemen crisis. In Riyadh last weekend, we again strongly urged the Coalition to de-escalate its

military campaign and to ensure unfettered humanitarian access, and we are pressing all Yemeni parties, both directly and through the United Nations, to return to negotiations without preconditions. There are some signs of progress that we will work to build on in the coming months. The principal parties in the conflict – the Houthis, representatives of former President Saleh, and President Hadi – have all signaled their willingness to engage in direct negotiations, based on UN Security Council Resolution 2216, adopted last April, and we believe that talks aimed at ending the conflict in Yemen could start very soon.

The UN has reported that over 2,500 civilians have been killed since March due to this conflict. We have pressed all sides to honor their obligations under international humanitarian law and to take all feasible actions to minimize harm to civilians. We have asked the Saudi government to investigate all credible reports of civilian casualties resulting from coalition-led airstrikes and, if confirmed, to address the factors that led to them. Moreover, while we support Saudi Arabia's right to self-defense, we have repeatedly expressed our concern to the Saudi leadership that the continued military campaign is worsening a growing humanitarian crisis in Yemen. We continue to urge all parties in Yemen to allow for the unimpeded entry and delivery of essential relief and commercial items to the civilian population nationwide, including urgently needed food, medicine, and



fuel, and to avoid attacks on infrastructure critical to responding to the humanitarian crisis.

## **Libya**

Libya, a country with enormous petrochemical resources, has been in economic freefall and has become essentially lawless as rival factions compete for political power. UN Special Representative of the Secretary General Bernardino Leon, with support from the United States and our European and regional partners, has been working tirelessly to break the long stalemate between the competing Tobruk-based House of Representatives and the Tripoli-based General National Congress.

Despite the long list of challenges that Libya faces in the coming years, the Libyans are inching closer to a Government of National Accord due to these efforts. The parties still must approve the final political framework text and slate of leaders for its six-member Presidency Council. Both parties need to immediately endorse the final text and the slate of leaders to end the national crisis and help return Libya to a path of peace, stability, and prosperity.

## **Egypt**

Egypt, our long-time partner in regional peace and security, faces daunting economic and security challenges. While daily large-scale protests have largely come to a halt, Egypt faces an increasingly complex picture that includes ISIL-

affiliated terrorists in Sinai and along its Libyan border, as well as emerging domestic terrorist groups.

We welcome the Egyptian Army's military campaign against a growing ISIL-affiliated insurgency in Sinai and along the Libyan border. We are working to provide the Egyptians with both the equipment and the training required to make the difficult transition from a force focused on conventional warfare to one that can defeat a terrorist enemy using asymmetrical tactics. And we are focused on helping Egypt better defend its borders against terrorists. We will continue to urge the Egyptians to also provide economic assistance and compensation to the people of the Sinai who have been affected by combat operations.

Over the past two years, the Al-Sisi government has initiated economic reforms designed to control spending, increase revenues, and stimulate investment. Growth has increased and Egypt's credit ratings have improved, but reforms appear to have slowed in recent months. We are encouraging Egypt to sustain the momentum, and we have offered assistance to support Egypt's reforms and encourage economic growth.

But if Egypt is to recover and resume its leading role in the region, it will need to improve its human rights record. We welcome recent pardons for some democracy activists and journalists. However, at the Strategic Dialogue in Cairo on August 2, Secretary Kerry specifically raised — publicly and privately — our

concerns about the radicalizing effect of continued restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, as well as mass trials and the intimidation of civil society organizations.

Egypt's parliamentary elections have begun – with the U.S. supporting teams of monitors. The first phase of voting took place October 17-19; the second phase will take place November 21-23. The new unicameral legislature will seat 596 members, with minimum quotas for women and Christians.

### **Tunisia**

Since its 2011 revolution, Tunisia has taken remarkable and inspiring steps to build an accountable and representative democracy. Tunisia's democratic progress is an important counterpoint to those who assert that Islam and the Arab world are somehow incompatible with democracy. Tunisian Islamists, secularists, and many in-between are working together daily to negotiate and seek consensus for the benefit of their society and its future.

The Nobel Committee rightly recognized the National Dialogue Quartet recently with its Peace Prize. Next week, I will participate in a ceremony celebrating Tunisia's accomplishments by presenting an award to Houcine Abassi, who heads one of the organizations that made up the National Dialogue Quartet. In recent years, these organizations have promoted consensus-building and social cooperation by working across the spectrum of Tunisian society to advance

dialogue and foster Tunisia's continuing democratic transition. Their inspiring achievement is an example for societies working towards an inclusive transition from dictatorship to democracy.

The consolidation of democratic governance will take time and patience as Tunisia builds its institutions and works to ensure the freedoms guaranteed to Tunisian citizens by their constitution. Despite historic legislative and presidential elections in 2014 and the formation of a consensus government, the democratic transition and the country's security and economy remain fragile.

The economy was mismanaged for decades prior to the revolution, but the government has publically stated its commitment to reform. High levels of youth unemployment, feelings of marginalization, and instability in Libya are helping spur radicalization among young Tunisians. The Administration strongly believes that we must help the Tunisian government and people build their security institutions and help bring their economy into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **The Gulf**

The United States has a long and deep history of political, military, and economic ties with the GCC states. We continue to work with our partners in the Gulf to attempt to solve problems across the region, including in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. Our military and security cooperation with Gulf countries play an essential role in our efforts to fight extremist threats. Even with their substantial

oil and gas, the Gulf countries face the need to economically diversify, provide employment opportunities for a growing population of young people, and combat extremist messaging and recruiting.

Following the meeting at Camp David in May between President Obama and Gulf leaders, the U.S. and the GCC reaffirmed our resolve to work together to strengthen regional security in light of the challenges our GCC partners must tackle, including Iranian aggression.

Secretary Kerry and his GCC counterparts convened on the margins of the UN General Assembly in late September to review progress since Camp David, including facilitating arms transfers, bolstering counter-terrorism efforts, enhancing military preparedness, building cybersecurity capabilities, and establishing a GCC interoperable ballistic missile defense architecture. We will continue to deepen this cooperation with the GCC in the months ahead.

We also are also strengthening our bilateral engagement with key Gulf partners. Just last weekend, Secretary Kerry and I were in Riyadh for one of his many meetings with Gulf partners to discuss a way forward in Syria, follow up on Camp David, review efforts to improve Gulf military capabilities, and discuss enhanced economic cooperation.

Additionally, we are expanding our economic cooperation with the GCC. For example on Monday, Secretary Kerry and Secretary Lew co-hosted the first

meeting of the U.S.-Qatar Economic Dialogue and last month Secretary Pritzker participated in the launch of the Qatar Investment Authority office in New York, which will facilitate \$35 billion in Qatari investments in the U.S.

Bahrain is one example of the partnerships we have built in the Gulf. It plays a critical role in broader Gulf security, hosting the Fifth Fleet and U.S. Navy Central Command Headquarters, at a base that allows the U.S. Navy to cover 2.5 million square miles of ocean and seas, and ensure freedom of commerce and navigation in a vital waterway. Our naval presence is a critical piece of the regional security architecture – without Bahrain’s partnership, the United States would require additional deployed military assets to defend against external threats in the Gulf region. As a major non-NATO ally, Bahrain provides extensive basing and overflight permissions for the counter-ISIL campaign, participated in initial coalition airstrikes last September, and sent F-16 fighters to Jordan in February for anti-ISIL operations.

Over the past several months Bahrain has raided, interdicted, and rounded up numerous Iran-sponsored weapons caches, arms transfers, and militants.

But Bahrain will need to balance its legitimate security concerns with universal rights guarantees for its citizens, especially on freedom of expression and with the judicial system.

## **Iraq**

The United States is committed to Iraq's success, including efforts to govern effectively and inclusively and ensure that all Iraqis have a stake in the country's long-term campaign for security and stability. The Iraqi government continues to face many challenges, such as decaying infrastructure, lagging social services, and security issues related to ISIL and the militias formed to combat it. These challenges are compounded by a dire fiscal crisis resulting from the steep drop in oil prices and the need for increased spending in the anti-ISIL campaign.

In addition to the efforts of the Coalition and our military that General Allen describes, our support has been critical to many of Iraq's achievements: the establishment of Prime Minister Abadi's more inclusive government in September 2014; Iraq's improved ties with its Arab neighbors; stabilization work in newly-liberated territory to allow for the return of displaced families; and concrete steps toward decentralization of authority that will empower local communities.

In August, Prime Minister Abadi announced an ambitious reform program that aims to reduce corruption, improve service delivery, increase accountability, and empower local authorities. Abadi's reforms were immediately and unanimously approved by the Council of Ministers. The reform program has gained the support of a broad cross-section of Iraqi society, including Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and others. The United States has stepped up with

technical assistance, providing expertise to the government in order to help it manage its fiscal crisis and continue implementation of its plans for decentralization.

Reconciliation between Sunni and Shia Iraqis is a key component of our strategy. Regrettably, hardline voices continue to oppose much of Prime Minister Abadi's efforts at reconciliation among the various Iraqi communities. However, U.S. support for the Abadi Government's ongoing efforts to mobilize Sunni tribal fighters against ISIL and to reestablish services and facilitate returns in liberated areas – many of which are majority-Sunni – is critical in ensuring that Sunnis in Iraq and in the region feel they have a stake in the country's future. The strong U.S. partnership with the Kurdistan Regional Government has helped shore up Iraq's Kurdistan Region against the ISIL threat, and we continue to encourage cooperation between Baghdad and Erbil on the many common issues they face.

The United States is also helping to mitigate the humanitarian crisis caused by the fighting in Iraq. There are an estimated 247,000 Syrian refugees in Iraq, mainly in the Kurdistan Region, and 3.2 million internally displaced Iraqis. The United States has provided more than \$600 million in humanitarian aid for Iraq over the past two years and is the top donor for addressing this crisis.

As the Coalition's military campaign proceeds, we are working to ensure that areas liberated from ISIL's control are secure, stable, and hospitable for Iraq's



significant displaced communities to return home. The United States has donated \$8.3 million to the UNDP stabilization fund for Iraq, and the Coalition is helping lead efforts with the UN to support rehabilitation and the return of displaced civilians. To date, over 100,000 civilians have returned to Tikrit and surrounding areas, and we are already actively planning with the Government of Iraq and the international community for the stabilization of Anbar and other provinces.

## **Iran**

The October 18 “Adoption Day” of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) marks a critical juncture in ensuring Iran’s nuclear program will be exclusively for peaceful purposes as the JCPOA participants to the agreement begin to make the necessary preparations for the implementation of their JCPOA commitments. The intent of all JCPOA participants to move forward with implementation remains clear. As we have previously stated, however, the lifting of nuclear-related sanctions by the United States will only take effect once the IAEA has verified that Iran has completed its required nuclear steps. It is now up to Iran to take the nuclear steps required by the deal.

The JCPOA is intended to remove the biggest threat to our security and that of the region – Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon. Yet Iran’s destabilizing activities in the region remain a serious concern. Iran has continued its efforts to prop up the Assad regime in Syria and continued its attempts to provide weapons, funding, and

training to Hizballah, the Houthis in Yemen, Shia militants in Bahrain, and Palestinian terrorist organizations in Gaza. Iran has also continued its provocative testing of ballistic missile technology, its use of naval mines, and other surface and sub-surface weapons to threaten key areas of the Gulf, and its malicious activity in cyberspace. We work vigorously with our regional partners to counter these activities.

Our ongoing efforts to push back on Iranian destabilizing activities fall into five broad lines of effort: First, we are undermining Iran's capacity to execute attacks directly or through its partners and proxies by expanding our cooperation with and strengthening the capacity of regional partners. Second, we are working to restrict Iran's ability to move men, money, and materiel for illicit purposes through sanctions. Third, we remain committed to Israel's security and that of our other regional allies, and we continue to build up our partners' capacities for self-defense against Iranian aggression. Fourth, we are working unilaterally and with allies to weaken and disrupt Hizballah's financial, commercial, and procurement networks. And finally, we are working to disrupt Iran's relationships with its proxies by publicizing Iran's meddling wherever we can, and are strengthening democratic institutions and the rule of law in countries facing threats from Iranian proxy activities.

With the GCC in particular, we have developed a robust initiative to build on the historic summit that President Obama held with Gulf leaders in May. This initiative represents a comprehensive approach to enhance our defense and security cooperation with GCC states and to advance our shared interests in the region, particularly countering Iranian aggression. Five working groups on Arms Transfers, Military Preparedness, Ballistic Missile Defense, Counterterrorism, and Cybersecurity have already met. A sixth working group, focused on countering Iran's destabilizing activities in the region, will meet next week. We have already made important progress in these efforts, including securing consensus to design a Gulf ballistic missile early warning system, an agreement to streamline arms sales to GCC countries, plans for a major multilateral military exercise, and steps to improve cybersecurity for critical infrastructure.

In parallel to our Camp David initiative with the GCC, we continue our close cooperation with Israel to maintain its qualitative military edge and strengthen its defense against Iran, its proxies, and other regional threats. We have provided Israel with unparalleled access to some of the most advanced military equipment in the world that no other country in the region has access to, including the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, and in cooperation with our partners in Congress, we continue to provide more Foreign Military Financing (FMF) to Israel than any other country in the world. The United States, through Department of Defense

Authorities, has also invested \$2.9 billion in the Iron Dome system and other missile defense programs and systems for Israel.

In addition to the above measures, and even as the JCPOA is formally implemented, the United States will continue to enforce sanctions on Iran for its Iran's human rights abuses, its ballistic missile activities, its support for terrorism, and its destabilizing activities in the region.

We will also continue to seek the immediate release of imprisoned Americans Amir Hekmati, Saeed Abedini, and Jason Rezaian and continue our calls on Iran to cooperate with the United States to determine the whereabouts of Robert Levinson, who went missing in Iran in 2007. We will do so until they are all reunited with their loved ones here in the United States.

### **Middle East Peace**

We are deeply concerned about recent violence and escalating tensions between Israel and the Palestinians and are very troubled by the attacks in recent weeks. We condemn in the strongest possible terms violence against Israeli and Palestinian civilians. We extend our condolences to the victims and their families.

We have seen positive steps by both Israeli and Palestinian leaders to ease tensions and are hopeful that the violence will soon subside. We need to see an end to any statements that inflame tensions or incite attacks.

Secretary Kerry met last week with Prime Minister Netanyahu in Berlin and Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas and King Abdullah in Amman to discuss efforts to reduce tensions.

At the same time, the U.S. commitment to Israel's security remains unshakeable. Israel remains the leading recipient worldwide of U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF). The current ten-year \$30 billion Memorandum of Understanding between the United States and Israel, of which Israel currently receives \$3.1 billion per year, is just one example of our strong, ongoing partnership.

### **Lebanon**

Lebanon has been without a president since May 2014, contributing to a paralysis of key political institutions at a critical moment. We have urged Lebanese leaders of every faction to put aside their differences, elect a president, and restore a functioning cabinet that will fulfill its responsibilities and meet the needs of the people.

Meanwhile, we are doing everything we can to strengthen Lebanon's institutions, particularly the Lebanese Armed Forces. Lebanon is a member of the Counter-ISIL Coalition, and the Lebanese Armed Forces must have the equipment and training required to do the job. In September, we announced that we're doubling – to \$150 million – the amount of Foreign Military Financing to the

Lebanese Armed Forces this year. These funds will allow the Lebanese Armed Forces to buy munitions, improve close air support, sustain vehicles and aircraft, modernize airlift capacity, provide training to its soldiers, and add to the mobility of armored units.

We share Congress's goal of putting pressure on Hizballah by targeting the group's financial support infrastructure. The State Department and Treasury Department work together to identify Hizballah operatives and witting supporters around the world, publicly designate them, and freeze their assets and make it impossible for them to access the international financial system. This means targeting individuals and companies around the world that provide support to Hizballah. The Administration will continue to work with Congress to advance this shared goal in the most effective way possible. Hizballah's global terrorist activity, criminal enterprises, and military operations in Syria and elsewhere threaten global security and contribute to regional instability. Disrupting Hizballah's far-reaching terrorist and military capabilities by targeting the group's financial support, commercial, and procurement infrastructure remains a top priority for the U.S. government and has been implemented through the application of a range of U.S. government authorities. We will seek to take action against any individual or entity wittingly providing support to Hizballah, wherever they are located. U.S. government agencies work closely together to expose and target

Hizballah's financial and commercial activities around the world and we press our international partners to support this effort.

## **Conclusion**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, as I described at the outset today, the Middle East and North Africa is a troubled region where profound challenges stand in the way of the better, economically successful and politically stable future that the vast majority of people across the region fervently hope to achieve. At the same time, most of these countries are counting on the United States for support as they navigate this period of instability – for security cooperation, for economic partnerships, and for a leg up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is America's role. This is what is expected by our partners in the region and beyond.

As I explained, the State Department is working very hard, and in partnership with dedicated professionals across our government, to address the conflict in Syria, to stabilize Iraq, and to mitigate the impact on our friends in Lebanon and Jordan. We are helping press the parties toward negotiations in Libya and in Yemen. We are taking steps to implement the Iran deal, while strengthening our partnership with the Gulf countries to address Iran's continuing efforts to destabilize the region. We are continuing to work on our partnership with Egypt, particularly in strengthening its security and economic reforms. And,

we continue to support Israel's security and urge the resumption of negotiations toward a two-State solution that will bring a lasting peace to the Middle East.

The United States is deeply engaged with the countries of the region because we have shared interests that are important to our national security and economic well-being. Our diplomats are involved in the painstaking details of negotiations to end conflicts and to build new, more stable partnerships. American vision and leadership is needed to help the region's leaders take the steps necessary to reform their political systems and their economies and provide hope for young people. With the funds provided by Congress, we are also able to provide critical support for societies in transition.

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, members of the Committee: We have to keep our long-term vision in mind. Even during these difficult days, there is evidence that irreversible changes are underway in the region. Investment in the United States by our Gulf partners continues to grow, reflecting confidence in our relationships. Unprecedented numbers of young people from the region are studying in the United States or in regionally-based U.S. institutions. In some countries, women are seeking and attaining greater freedoms. And a younger generation of political leaders – many with extensive U.S. experience – are moving to positions of responsibility in government and business. Beyond the need to



address current crises, all these trends speak to the continuing need for an American leadership role in this region.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to answering your questions.