

Statement of
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Before the
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
“The Plan to Defeat ISIS: Key Decisions and Considerations”
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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Cardin, Distinguished Members of the Committee, I am pleased to appear before you today, alongside one of our country’s great public servants, Ambassador James Jeffrey.

I come at this issue having seen counterterrorism campaigns and military operations through the prism of those who led those efforts at the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon. In addition to developing and executing these missions, it was the role of these senior leaders to advise the President on the most fateful decisions a President makes: whether to send our women and men into harm’s way. A President must be able to avail himself of information, facts, expertise, and candid advice. From what I observed, the Commander in Chief simply cannot do his job of keeping our country safe without these critical inputs. Hearings like these provide one of those critical inputs.

Decisions made in the White House Situation Room have enormous consequences. I commend President Trump for taking the time last week to travel to Dover Air Force Base to pay his respects to one of our fallen heroes. I have made that trip myself and seen the bravery of the family members whose loved ones we welcomed home. I do not think it is possible to understand the stakes of these decisions until you see the faces of the mothers and fathers, siblings and spouses, and most poignantly, the young children of those who sacrifice everything for our nation.

During my decade in government, we witnessed many false starts and missteps in the effort to take on Al Qaeda – in Iraq, in the Arabian Peninsula, in the Maghreb, and in Afghanistan and Pakistan. But over time, we developed strategies to disrupt, dismantle and

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defeat the senior leadership of Al Qaeda, stopping specific external plots, and denying them the ability to plan and execute another large-scale attack on our homeland. I believe there are lessons to be learned from both the failures and the successes that can inform the plan against ISIS.

What is needed today is a **comprehensive** strategy to defeat ISIS and protect American national security interests.

I use the term “comprehensive strategy” because this challenge is so urgent and yet so complex that, in my view, the only way to accomplish all of our objectives simultaneously is to employ the full measure of our diplomatic, intelligence, military, law enforcement, economic, and public diplomacy efforts.

I want to focus my testimony on four areas:

First, the campaign in Syria and Iraq;

Second, the global hunt for ISIS;

Third, the effort to counter ISIS propaganda, primarily online; and

Fourth, adjustments to the current approach against ISIS.

Campaign in Syria and Iraq

The United States-led counter-ISIS campaign in Mosul, Iraq, and in Raqqa, Syria, should be intensified to make it even harder for ISIS to plan external operations. Intensification requires three elements:

- First, we should devote greater intelligence resources to tracking ISIS senior planners – their whereabouts, their communications practices, and their ties to cells or individuals in Europe, Asia, or the United States. I would urge any new Administration to conduct a searching review of our intelligence posture against ISIS senior leaders and make recommendations to upgrade that posture.
 - This is particularly important in light of the Feb. 4, 2017 article in the *New York Times* that revealed that ISIS leaders were in direct communication with operatives in 10 out of the 40 attacks that occurred outside of the so-called caliphate. In other words, a large portion of attacks thought to be “lone wolf” attacks had an actual operational connection to ISIS in Syria.

- Second, we should increase the pace of air strikes against ISIS targets, particularly in Raqqa. We have hit ISIS with over 17,000 airstrikes – including nearly 7,000 in Syria -- since Operation Inherent Resolve began. But we need more pressure. These strikes are necessary to destroy the command-and-control infrastructure of ISIS. These strikes also force ISIS commanders to choose between keeping their head down or communicating with each other. We employed this strategy to great effect from 2008-2012 against Al Qaeda senior leaders along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. We saw many plots stopped dead in their tracks once air strikes took out the operational leader of the plot.
- Third, we should continue to train and equip those forces on the ground who can deny ISIS a safehaven. Training and equipping local forces are necessary tools to avoid U.S. casualties and ensure that counter-terrorist operations are not seen as U.S. efforts to impose a solution from afar or plunder their natural resources. In Iraq, the Iraqi military units have retaken about half of Mosul. We must continue to work with the Iraqi military to finish the Mosul campaign. In Syria, we should fund, train, and provide lethal offensive equipment to the Syrian Defense Forces (SDF). The SDF represent our best chance to take back ground in Raqqa.
 - I know there is not unanimity on this point. While this option would have some near-term costs (such as creating friction with Turkey), it must be weighed against the alternatives. Other forces in the area are far less capable and will take too much time to mature. And doing nothing is not an option, for as long as ISIS feels comfortable in Raqqa, they will continue to look for ways to export their terror. A successful operation to liberate Raqqa will require a robust effort by Secretary Tillerson and his team to manage Ankara's concerns.
 - One of the reasons that Assad must go is because he will never allow a moderate opposition to exist in his country. He has relentlessly attacked any moderate Syrian group, under the banner of counterterrorism. He enjoys protection and support from Iran and Russia. Keeping him in power will not help defeat ISIS; it will maintain the status quo of a Syria in chaos. ISIS, Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups will thrive in that chaos.

Campaign to track down ISIS, Al Qaeda and their recruits world-wide

Intensification will put pressure on ISIS's strongholds in Syria and Iraq. But the threat does not end there. We must stay on the offensive everywhere ISIS or Al Qaeda operates, from the Sahel to Europe to South Asia. These global efforts require coupling United States capabilities with those of our allies and partners. We are working with the French in Mali. We are working with African Union-led forces in Somalia. We are working with key Gulf partners in

Yemen. When American airpower is necessary – as it was recently in Libya to degrade an ISIS stronghold² – we must deploy it without hesitation. But in many cases, our work is going to entail the less headline-grabbing activities such as information-sharing, data correlation, and law enforcement and intelligence training.

In Europe, where ISIS has attacked with deadly effect, we must keep our focus on the travel of foreign fighters, and work 24/7 with our European allies and partners to track potential extremists, penetrate the plots, and stop them before they harm innocent civilians. We must strengthen our relationships in Europe and help them build their counterterrorism capabilities.

In some areas of the world, such as Libya and Somalia, we will be able to use air strikes and limited ground troops from the Special Operations Forces. But in most areas of world – Europe, India, and Asia – the main levers of U.S. power will be intelligence cooperation and diplomacy. That is why our campaign cannot be led by the military alone.

Campaign to provide an alternative narrative to ISIS's propaganda

Perhaps more important to ISIS than a physical caliphate is a virtual caliphate they have tried to create through their propaganda and incitement, particularly on social media. ISIS's use of Twitter, Telegram, and other social media outlets is well known. Of course, ISIS claims in its propaganda to be representing the true nature of Islam, but it is, in fact, perverting Islam.³

A recent study co-sponsored by the University of Chicago looked at the 104 individuals in the U.S. who the Department of Justice charged with ISIS-related crimes from 2014-2016.⁴ Two-thirds went to college. Three-quarters had jobs or were in school. Many of these people had a great deal to live for, but they were radicalized by terrorist propaganda. Nearly 85 percent had exposure to propaganda videos, either by ISIS or by Al Qaeda. Propaganda is an accelerant on the process of radicalization.

American efforts to counter the propaganda of terrorists have been met with mixed results. Fundamentally, the voices that will do the most to discredit ISIS are voices from within Islam itself. Our efforts should be geared toward working with Muslim leaders here in the U.S. and Muslim-majority countries from Africa to the Gulf to Southeast Asia to counter ISIS's narrative. When the American government is shown to be behind these messages, they are apt to be disregarded or even disbelieved.

² <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/19/politics/us-airstrikes-libya-isis/>

³ For that reason, I prefer not to use the term “Islamic,” lest it legitimize their efforts; I prefer “Islamist,” or simply “terrorist.”

⁴ See *Trump's Travel Ban Misses the True Threat: Homegrown Terrorism* by Michael Morell, foreignpolicy.com, Feb. 2, 2017 (citing a study from the Chicago Project on Security and Threats.)

I have been impressed with the energy and focus of the State Department's Global Engagement Center and would urge Congress to continue support for this activity.

Adjustments to the current Administration's approach

Although the new Administration is less than three weeks old, it has already moved forward with several aggressive policy approaches that will have an impact on the ISIS campaign. I strongly support the President's decision to conduct a quick review of the anti-ISIS campaign. We do not want our momentum in this campaign to stall, and our allies and partners on the ground are awaiting the results of this review. In other areas, however, I would seek adjustments to the Administration's current course. My recommendations for the new Administration are as follows:

- 1) **Support our allies.** Our allies in the anti-ISIS coalition are working very hard to stop the next ISIS attack. We should stand by them. For example, Australia has fought with us in every war since WWII and is the second-largest contributor of troops to the counter-ISIS effort. We should be thanking Australia every chance we get because we need them in the fight that is currently underway. We also will need the support of our NATO Allies, who continue to play a role in training and equipping forces confronting ISIS. President Trump's decision to attend the NATO Summit in May is the right decision.
- 2) **Ensure that diplomacy is on equal footing with military planning.** The Presidential Memorandum of January 28 was addressed to all relevant departments and agencies. The memorandum, in my view, correctly catalogued ISIS's heinous record of depravity and the attacks inside the U.S. that can be traced to ISIS. The memorandum goes on to call for "comprehensive" strategy and plans for the defeat of ISIS. I agree that a comprehensive strategy is required.

But the memorandum directs the Defense Department to develop the Plan. The State Department, the Director of National Intelligence, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff are directed to provide input and collaborate with the Defense Department. As noted above, a comprehensive strategy requires that diplomatic efforts be treated just as importantly as the military efforts. The State Department and the Defense Department should be tasked to develop the plan together. This is a small but important fix. As this Committee appreciates, the solution in Syria is not going to be found solely through military power. Military power is necessary to stopping ISIS by force, but it is insufficient for the broader effort to end the war in Syria or to conduct the global hunt for ISIS operatives.

- 3) **Repeal the Muslim-only ban.** Counterterrorism missions require focus. They require acquisition of specific time-sensitive information that allow plots to be stopped. They require correlation of data with real-time intelligence to screen those who

would seek to do us harm. When intelligence or law enforcement officials are required to put entire civilian populations under suspicion, they take their eye off real threats. Furthermore, by enacting a Muslim-only ban, we have handed ISIS the ultimate recruiting tool. ISIS has already been leveraging this propaganda online. A main theme of ISIS propaganda is, in effect, “look at how America is treating its own Muslims.” Given that thousands of students from the seven countries were affected, given that Muslim families were separated, given that lawful permanent residents were prohibited from entering the country in which they live lawfully and permanently, ISIS has been given a tailor-made message for its theme that America does not treat its own Muslim population on par with its Christian population.

Late Sunday evening, 10 former national security officials, including two former Secretaries of State, a former Secretary of Defense, four former heads of the Central Intelligence Agency, a Secretary of Homeland Security, and senior National Security Council officials, filed a declaration with the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals stating that the ban would not make the country safer from terrorism and would, in fact, undermine those efforts.⁵ Those officials have shouldered the solemn responsibility of protecting the country from terrorism, and I agree with them that this ban cannot be justified on national security grounds.

- 4) **Disavow ‘taking their oil’ and torture.** Threatening to take Iraq’s oil or expressing support for torture plays into the worst fears of the people we are trying to win over to our cause. It thus undermines the brave and heroic work conducted every day by women and men in the military, the diplomatic core, the intelligence and homeland security community, and the Muslims who fight alongside us.

- 5) **Do not trust Russia to handle ISIS for us.** Outsourcing to Russia the counter-ISIS effort in Syria is a dangerous idea that runs counter to fundamental American interests and values. Russia lacks the professionalism, the training, and political will to cooperate with us in any serious way. Russia is not seeking cooperation with the United States, but instead has worked consistently to undermine U.S. efforts in Syria and the Middle East. The State Department and the Pentagon tested the proposition that U.S. could work with Russia in Syria over the past six months, and the test failed. Putin’s Russia has sought to use the Syria conflict as a way to end Russia’s isolation from Ukraine, bolster its last remaining foothold in the Middle East, undermine U.S. influence in the region, and showcase its military improvements. Russia has played their own game, which was to keep Bashar al-Assad in power at all costs. The result is that Russia and Syria continue to kill moderate Syrians in the name of counter-terrorism. They liquefied the town of Aleppo, Syria, in a scene too horrible to allow to be shown on TV in our living room when young children were present. Russia has consolidated its position in Syria and will continue to work with

⁵ <http://cdn.ca9.uscourts.gov/datastore/general/2017/02/06/17-35105%20opposition%20exhibit.pdf>

its Iranian allies to forestall American influence and interests in the region. Russia's misdeeds have shown that they cannot be trusted and the Administration will inevitably come to this conclusion after a period of time.

Conclusion

The counter-ISIS campaign has made important progress in both taking terrorists off of the battlefield and in liberating civilian populations. ISIS has lost more than half its territory. ISIS no longer controls most major population centers. Its ability to recruit is getting more difficult. Many of its senior leaders have been removed from the battlefield. ISIS is being squeezed. But we cannot and should not be complacent. Now is the time to accelerate the campaign, intensify our efforts, and hasten the defeat of ISIS so that it no longer threatens us.

I am pleased to answer any questions that you may have.