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# THE U.S. ROLE AND STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: SYRIA, IRAQ, AND THE FIGHT AGAINST ISIS

UNITED STATES SENATE FULL COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

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## HEARING CONTENTS:

### MEMBER STATEMENTS:

**Sen. Bob Corker (R-TN)** [*no pdf available, see 14:52 of [webcast](#)*]  
Chairman, Committee on Foreign Relations

**Sen. Ben Cardin (D-MD)** [*no pdf available, see 18:52 of [webcast](#)*]  
Ranking Member, Committee on Foreign Relations

### WITNESSES:

**Dr. Kimberly Kagan** [[view pdf](#)]  
President, Institute for the Study of War

**Mr. Brian Katulis** [[view pdf](#)]  
Senior Fellow, Center for American Progress

**Mr. Michael Bowers** [[view pdf](#)]  
Vice President of Humanitarian Leadership and Response, Mercy Corps

### AVAILABLE WEBCAST(S):

**Full Hearing:** <http://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/watch?hearingid=5E5D5A19-5056-A055-64E9-4A80A235880A>

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Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
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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.



# Assessing the Anti-ISIS Campaign After the First Year

Testimony Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
Hearing on Syria, Iraq, and the Fight Against ISIS

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September 16, 2015

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, and members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Syria, Iraq, and the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS. I have structured my testimony today around five main points:

1. Overall assessment of the campaign
2. The broader regional security and political context for the anti-ISIS campaign
3. The anti-ISIS coalition efforts one year into the campaign
4. Iraq
5. Syria

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## Overall assessment one year into the campaign

At the outset, my bottom line assessment of the overall campaign one year since it began is that the United States and its coalition partners have fallen short in the effort to counter ISIS. The next U.S. president will inherit the problem of ISIS. But the coming 16 months offer an opportunity to make important course corrections and place the anti-ISIS strategy on a stronger footing.

The United States mounted the anti-ISIS campaign in reaction to the group's surprisingly rapid advances across Iraq and Syria in the summer of 2014. The campaign has helped key partners in Iraq's governing authorities and some countries in the region, such as Jordan, develop a more effective response to the group's rise.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the campaign has not moved beyond a mix of limited tactical successes and setbacks.

The primary reason for these incomplete results is that many of the countries engaged in the anti-ISIS campaign have not made the effort to degrade, dismantle, and defeat ISIS their top priority over the past year. The Obama administration's number one priority in the region over the past year was securing a diplomatic deal with Iran on its nuclear program. The fact that the administration and Congress have not been able to arrive at a consensus over an authorization of the use of military force after one year also suggests that the anti-ISIS campaign has not been a leading priority.

Key regional partners in the anti-ISIS coalition, including Saudi Arabia, shifted their focus just months into the start of the anti-ISIS campaign and diverted resources to Yemen.<sup>2</sup> The actions of Turkey's government, a NATO ally and member of the anti-ISIS coalition, seem to indicate that it sees a bigger threat to its interests from Kurdish separatist groups and the Assad regime in Syria than from terrorist groups such as ISIS and Al Qaeda affiliate al-Nusra Front.<sup>3</sup> But now with an Iran nuclear deal completed, there is a possible opportunity to shift the focus to actions that enhance regional stability and marginalize the terrorists and extremists operating in the region, including ISIS.

A second key reason for the incomplete results is the lack of reliable ground forces that are motivated, capable, and equipped to counter ISIS effectively in many parts of the region. Airstrikes alone clearly will not effectively degrade and defeat ISIS. This does not mean the United States should send large numbers of ground troops—doing so would amount to repeating the mistakes of the past decade. Rather, this past year has demonstrated that there is a need for more reliable and capable partners that are motivated to counter ISIS. In some parts of northern Iraq and northern Syria, various Kurdish forces have taken territory from ISIS, offering an example of what can be achieved with capable and reliable ground forces.<sup>4</sup>

A third key reason for the incomplete results of the anti-ISIS campaign one year into the effort is the lack of sufficient attention to the political and power-sharing dynamics that have given rise to a strong sense of grievance among large sectors of the Sunni Muslim communities in Iraq and Syria. Groups such as ISIS have fed off of this dynamic and exploited the political vacuums in parts of Iraq and Syria. Thus far, the anti-ISIS campaign has not done enough to help these communities create the space to define a counter-ISIS political alternative.

The main remedy to address these challenges is a stronger U.S. effort to synchronize the various aspects of its anti-ISIS strategy with the recently proposed efforts to counter Iran's destabilizing regional role.<sup>5</sup> In essence, the United States needs to advance a clearer, more compelling, and proactive strategy for its engagement in the Middle East and move beyond the reactive, ad hoc, and tactical mode of operations that has dominated policy for years.

The recent Obama administration proposals to increase security cooperation and military transfers to partners in the wake of the Iran nuclear deal merit close consideration and must be analyzed in the context of the broader regional security efforts underway, including the anti-ISIS campaign.<sup>6</sup> Sending arms without having a more integrated political and diplomatic strategy for the region could end up contributing to greater fragmentation. Increased arms transfers to Gulf states also need to be carefully balanced with the additional assistance the Obama administration has provided to meet Israel's security needs, which remain significant and will grow if Iran increases its support to its proxies, such as Hezbollah and Hamas.

Sending more U.S. troops to train, advise, and assist security forces in Iraq and possible partners in Syria, together with airstrikes, may eliminate some immediate terrorist threats and produce short-term security gains. Providing more advanced weapons systems to regional security partners might help reassure them in the face of concerns about Iran's role. But these actions on their own will not lead to the marginalization and ultimate political defeat of terrorist movements such as ISIS that are shaking the fragile state system in the Middle East.

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### The Middle East's shifting environment and the crisis of political legitimacy

The anti-ISIS campaign and the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Syria are part of a broader period of transformation in the Middle East. The region has entered an unpredictable and fluid period of transition involving increased competition for influence among key countries and the growing power of nonstate actors, including new categories of Islamist extremist groups, such as ISIS.<sup>7</sup>

The region's top powers are engaged in a multipolar and multidimensional struggle for influence and power. This competition is multipolar because it includes Shia-Sunni sectarian divisions as witnessed in the tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, but it also involves tensions between different countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, as well as Turkey, over the status of Islamist movements. In this multipolar competition, no single government is likely to emerge as a dominant power or hegemon. Rather, the structure of this competition is likely to strain the overall state system of the Middle East for the foreseeable future.

The competition is multidimensional because it involves both traditional forms of power projection—such as military aid and economic assistance—as well as new tools, including direct investments in media outlets, nonstate actors, and political movements. The region's wealthier, more politically stable states compete with each other by proxy—and, in some cases, directly—on the ground in poorer and more politically polarized states.

A core part of the challenge in this current regional dynamic is the crisis of political legitimacy for some of the major states in the region. Some governments lack support and a sense of allegiance from key sectors of their populations. This crisis has deep roots in the region's history over the past century, and the political legitimacy crisis is linked to the some governments' failure to provide basic security and a sense of inclusion, ownership, and justice to some of their citizens.

Groups such as ISIS have exploited this lack of political legitimacy and thrived in the vacuums that have emerged over the past decade in the Middle East. ISIS is part of a wider phenomenon of extremist ideologies taking root and the threat from terrorist networks mutating in dangerous and unpredictable ways. This broader context helps explain why the anti-ISIS campaign has had such limited impact after one year: A campaign against a group like ISIS requires a holistic, integrated approach that uses all aspects of U.S. power in coordination with partners, and it will require a longer time horizon to degrade and ultimately defeat these groups politically.

A central part of a long-term strategy for defeating ISIS and stabilizing the Middle East must involve some forward thinking about the possible governance structures that would most likely succeed in providing basic law and order, justice, and vital services while also enjoying the popular legitimacy of its people. In both Iraq and Syria, one possible sustainable end state is a decentralized federal structure of government—one that allows greater autonomy and a devolution of power from the center. This idea is not a call for an imposed partition or a breakup of these countries; past experience of international actors trying to delineate new borders without the consent of the people has contributed to the problems witnessed today in the Middle East. Rather, the long-term strategy for stability in the Middle East will likely require extensive negotiations over the balance of power within key countries. In Iraq, that discussion has been ongoing for much of the past decade and there is a clearer possible pathway forward than there is in Syria today.

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### The anti-ISIS coalition: The right concept with major gaps in implementation

Last year, the Obama administration took some important first steps in building a sound policy framework to combat ISIS through its efforts to build an international coalition with key Middle Eastern powers. This framework was essential—having stakeholders from the region engaged is a necessary component in any long-term effort aimed at defeating ISIS and producing sustainable security in the Middle East. This impressive coalition now has more than 60 formal members working together on five main lines of effort:<sup>8</sup>

1. Providing military support to partners
2. Impeding the flow of foreign fighters
3. Stopping ISIS's financing and funding
4. Addressing humanitarian crises in the region
5. Exposing the true nature of ISIS

In addition to building this coalition, the United States also worked with relevant international organizations, including the United Nations, to structure the dialogue aimed at developing an effective response to ISIS. As with all international efforts, follow-up and implementation are as important as the structure—and this points to one major area for increased efforts to realign the strategy in the next 16 months.

Overall, the anti-ISIS coalition's efforts along these five main areas are largely incomplete. The coalition has provided crucial military support to partners in Iraq and the broader region to counter the ISIS threat, but the absence of viable ground troops in key theaters has limited the overall impact of airstrikes conducted by the U.S.-led coalition in many parts of Iraq and most parts of Syria.

On impeding the flow of foreign fighters, several countries in the coalition—including Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, Morocco, Spain, and Jordan—have passed new laws and undertaken law enforcement and intelligence actions aimed at stopping recruitment, but it is unclear whether these efforts have stemmed the flow of thousands of recruits from around the region and the world in a substantial way. Moreover, there appear to be no clear metrics for measuring success on this front in a way that defines the flow of foreign fighters to a broader range of extremist groups, including Al Qaeda's affiliate, al-Nusra Front.

As with foreign fighter recruitment, several countries—including the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Jordan—have launched financial task forces and new efforts to try to stem the flow of financing to ISIS, but it remains unclear how much these efforts are affecting the group's ability to fund itself, particularly as it has acquired quasi-state status in controlling key sources of revenue and access to basic services in parts of Iraq and Syria.

The humanitarian crisis resulting from the turmoil in Iraq and Syria continues unabated, as witnessed in the increased flows of refugees and displaced persons from those two countries this summer. Nearly 15 million people are displaced in Iraq and Syria: There are 4 million Syrian refugees, 7.6 million people displaced inside of Syria, and 3 million people displaced inside of Iraq.<sup>9</sup> The international community's response to the needs of the millions uprooted by the conflict has fallen far short.

On the last line of effort, countering ISIS's message and propaganda and exposing its true nature, the coalition has had a coordinated and focused effort. Earlier this summer, the United States and the United Arab Emirates launched an online messaging center to counter ISIS propaganda on social media platforms, and the leaders of some countries in

the region, such as Jordan, have been strongly vocal in condemning the violent extremism of ISIS.<sup>10</sup> But the fact that the ISIS movement has continued to go viral beyond Syria and Iraq—with groups and followers pledging allegiance in places that include Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Nigeria, and Afghanistan<sup>11</sup>—points to the incomplete nature of the response.

Overall, the structure and framework of the coalition and how its lines of effort are defined seem correct, but the implementation and integration of different measures have been less successful. There does not appear to be a clear identification of the tasks, roles, and responsibilities expected from each member of the coalition.

In sum, more effort is needed to strengthen and coordinate all components of the campaign and place more emphasis on the nonmilitary aspects of the effort required to degrade and defeat ISIS. In Iraq, a strategic approach that integrates the military, diplomatic, and economic components of U.S. and coalition engagement is currently clearer than it has been in Syria over the past year.

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### Iraq: Mixed results in the first year, an opportunity to move forward in the coming year

In the past year, the center of gravity in the anti-ISIS campaign for U.S. policy has been Iraq. It is the area where the United States has the greatest room to maneuver militarily and diplomatically and the coalition finds some of its most capable partners on the ground to counter ISIS.

#### Lessons learned from the past year.

The Obama administration began the anti-ISIS campaign in Iraq last year by linking additional security assistance and airstrikes to a diplomatic effort to help produce an Iraqi national government that has ruled somewhat more inclusively than the previous government and broadened its outreach to key communities, but this political effort remains incomplete. The United States utilized additional security assistance as leverage to help the Iraqis agree upon a new prime minister. The current prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, has been trying to take more steps to address the lack of inclusion and the extreme challenges in providing basic governance and dealing with corruption in Iraq.<sup>12</sup>

On the security front, the anti-ISIS military campaign has produced limited and tentative advances in certain parts of northern and central Iraq, but the effort remains incomplete and directly linked to building the capacity of Iraqi security forces. The addition of limited numbers of U.S. troops to support Iraq's security forces have produced some results. These military actions were necessary first steps to arrest the rising tide of

ISIS. At the same time, the Obama administration made the correct decision to limit the number of U.S. ground troops sent back to Iraq—sending a larger force would have repeated the mistakes of the previous decade, when the U.S. troop presence became a rallying cry and recruitment tool for terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda.

Three key lessons learned from the past year of increased U.S. engagement in Iraq include:

- **Iraqi internal political dynamics can be shaped and influenced to achieve more positive political outcomes, within limits.** The fact that the United States, working with other outside powers, created incentives to motivate Iraq’s political leaders to make leadership changes demonstrates that the tough efforts of diplomatic engagement combined with other forms of assistance can help produce some positive results. Much work remains incomplete in helping Iraq develop an inclusive approach to governing, and the current prime minister faces a difficult, fractured, and often dysfunctional political system. But a system exists for negotiations over power, and the discussion continues with many key sectors of Iraq’s population, including the dialogue between the Kurdistan Regional Government and Iraq’s central government.
- **Security assistance to Iraqi forces is important but needs to be linked to efforts to boost the legitimacy and credibility of sustainable governing structures in Iraq.** After spending more than \$25 billion on security assistance in Iraq for nearly a decade,<sup>13</sup> the collapse of the Iraqi security forces in key parts of the country last year demonstrates the importance of linking all security assistance efforts to governing authorities that have the population’s broad support.
- **Economic challenges will continue to strain the overall effort in Iraq.** The global drop in oil prices presents severe budget challenges to Iraq’s government and will continue to affect the political dialogue inside of Iraq. In order to enhance the credibility of Iraq’s governing structures as a viable alternative to the model that ISIS has developed in some areas, the strategy will also need to focus on how economic resources are allocated.

### Looking ahead to the coming year

Iraq has many assets and structures in place that Syria does not, and the United States has a deeper and more extensive knowledge of Iraq’s internal dynamics. Degrading and ultimately defeating ISIS in Iraq will require a continued focus on all elements of the strategy—the political, the diplomatic, and the military. Often, U.S. debates get stuck on the tactical questions of how many troops the nation might send to train and advise Iraqi forces. More U.S. ground troops on their own are unlikely to fundamentally alter the political dynamics and balance of power in the Iraqi political system. Continued, active diplomatic engagement will be necessary on several fronts to help Iraqi leaders produce an inclusive, national response to the threats posed by ISIS.

For the most part, the Obama administration has reengaged in Iraq after several years of neglect, which has helped develop an initial response that has mostly stopped the advances of ISIS, with a few notable exceptions such as the ISIS seizure of Ramadi earlier this year.

In the coming year, U.S. strategy will need to continue its efforts to build capable Iraqi security forces and conduct targeted strikes against ISIS. It will also need to safeguard against the potential long-term threats posed by armed groups operating outside of the control of the Iraqi governing authorities, such as the popular mobilization forces.

Most importantly, U.S. strategy must continue to remain engaged diplomatically on helping Iraqis achieve the right balance of power in their internal political system. There is a risk that the anti-ISIS campaign could produce a more fractured Iraq. Ultimately, a heavily decentralized system of government may be the only viable pathway to help Iraq's governing structures gain greater support and political legitimacy and offer an alternative to ISIS.

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## Syria: In need of a major course correction

The current state of affairs in Syria is dismal. The structure of the overall conflict remains increasingly fragmented and the devastating impact that the war has had on most Syrians is difficult to comprehend, with more than 200,000 people killed and about half of the country's residents pushed out of their homes over the past four years.<sup>14</sup>

The Assad regime in Damascus, with support from regional actors such as Iran and Hezbollah and global powers such as Russia, has been able to remain in power years after the United States and other countries initially called on President Bashar al-Assad to step down. But the past year has presented major challenges to the Assad regime, as it has lost territory to a range of terrorist organizations and other opposition forces.

## Lessons learned from the past year

The gap between the stated goals of U.S. policy—a negotiated political settlement with a transition from Assad's leadership—and the key tactics being used to achieve those goals, including support for a viable third-way opposition to ISIS and the Assad regime, remains wide. After receiving support from Congress to boost the training of opposition forces last year, the Obama administration has not produced meaningful results in the overall battlefield dynamics. Airstrikes and limited, targeted special forces raids have done some damage to ISIS and its leadership, but these measures have not fundamentally altered the movement's ability to control territory and expand its grip in certain parts of the country.

The recent moves by Russia to increase its support to the Assad regime<sup>15</sup> add a new layer of complexity to the dynamics in Syria and demonstrate that other actors will likely continue seeking to fill perceived vacuums and asserting themselves in actions when the United States and its anti-ISIS coalition partners are unwilling or unable to produce results.

Three key lessons from the past year of U.S. policy in Syria include:

- **Building alternative armed forces opposed to ISIS is difficult, cannot be done half-heartedly, and must be connected to a wider long-term strategy to produce peace and stability.** The U.S. effort to build an armed opposition to ISIS has not succeeded thus far, and it has had no discernable impact on the structure of the conflict in Syria. The airstrikes and some limited, targeted cross-border raids have had some impact on the ISIS movement, but these represent tactical gains and have not fundamentally altered the nature of the conflict in Syria. The effort has been slow to ramp up. Vetting possible forces to ensure that they do not have ties to terrorist groups and will not defect to other camps is a major challenge. Also, there is great difficulty in finding Syrians who are willing to pledge to fight ISIS but not turn their weapons on the Assad regime.
- **ISIS is a leading terrorist challenge, but it is not the only one in Syria.** The vacuum produced in many parts of Syria has been filled not only by ISIS but also al-Nusra Front, Al Qaeda's affiliate, and several other smaller terrorist organizations. The U.S.-led airstrikes have exacted some costs on these movements and may have prevented international terrorist attacks, but they have not fundamentally degraded these movements.
- **The Assad regime's brutal actions continue to delegitimize it in the eyes of many Syrians.** The majority of deaths in Syria are the result of the Assad regime's actions. Salvaging key institutions that are part of the current Syrian government should be an objective of U.S. policy; the continued breakdown of Syrian institutions will only accelerate the country's overall fragmentation. But any notion that the Assad regime will be part of a long-term plan to stabilize and unify the country is not connected to today's reality.

### Looking ahead to the coming year

The United States needs to chart a new course on Syria and work with the international community and key regional actors to help deescalate the conflict and move back to some notion of a negotiated settlement. This process will take years, and this next year could be pivotal in establishing a framework for a long-term resolution to Syria's conflict. But this will require the Obama administration to give a much sharper focus and higher priority to Syria. Without a long-term strategy to stabilize Syria, the massive humanitarian challenges witnessed in the ongoing refugee crisis will continue.

The growing involvement of outside actors, including Russia, mirrors a wider internationalization of the civil war in Syria. With each passing month, regional and other outside powers become more deeply invested in the proxy conflict playing out across the country. The Gulf states and Turkey have focused largely on groups organized across the north. Jordan is playing an increasingly overt role in the southern front along its border. Russia and Iran continue to appear to double down on their support for the Assad regime in Damascus.

These international players continue to battle each other through their proxies on the ground, fueling the conflict for which Syrian civilians continue to pay the price. But this greater internationalization may provide a window for diplomacy in the coming year. It is hard to see how any of these sponsors achieve their objectives through protracted proxy warfare. This only promises to splinter what remains of the Syrian state. A strategic stalemate will eventually emerge but at extremely high costs.

A truly integrated regional strategy would leverage U.S. support to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen and proposed weapons sales to the Gulf states in order to achieve a greater alignment of objectives in Syria. This means improving focus on ISIS and cutting off assistance to the most radical elements among their proxies. The United States' Gulf partners need help in Yemen and against Iran in the region. The United States need theirs against ISIS in Syria.

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## Conclusion

The United States and its coalition partners have taken some important steps to counter the threats posed by ISIS in Iraq, Syria, and beyond, but the steps are incomplete and require a higher priority focus than in the first year of the campaign. The strongest component of the campaign has been Iraq, and even there, the results are mixed. The weakest aspect of the strategy has been Syria, and a major recalibration of that effort is required. Keeping the actions within the framework of the coalition that the Obama administration has assembled is essential, but tighter coordination among the members of the coalition along all five lines of effort is necessary.

The United States has an extensive network of security partnerships with a wide range of actors in the Middle East. No other outside power rivals the range of relationships the United States currently has. At a time of increased activism by actors in the region, the United States needs to define a clearer strategy for engagement that takes into account the roles and actions of the region's countries. This is a new period of complex transition.

For several decades during the Cold War, the strategic framework for U.S. engagement in the Middle East was defined by the rivalry with the Soviet Union. In the immediate post-Cold War environment, the United States redefined its strategy in the Gulf region as dual containment of Iraq and Iran. The 2003 Iraq War marked a shift away from this strategy, and the strategic consequences of that shift are still underway. For much of the past decade, U.S. policy in the Middle East has been marked by a reactive, crisis management posture. The next year presents an opportunity to advance a more proactive agenda—one in which the question of how many U.S. troops are on the ground is an important but ultimately tactical consideration.

The coming year presents an opportunity for the Obama administration and Congress to build a new national consensus that elevates the challenges posed by ISIS to a higher priority than they have been in the past year. One possible vehicle for advancing this dialogue is a renewed focus on the authorization for the use of force measure proposed by the Obama administration.<sup>16</sup> In the wake of the Iran deal, Congress and the Obama administration should renew the discussion on developing a more sustainable legal framework for U.S. actions in the fight against ISIS and use those discussions as an opportunity to develop a stronger long-term strategy to defeat ISIS and stabilize the Middle East.

## Endnotes

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**Statement of Michael Bowers**  
**Vice President, Humanitarian Leadership and Response, Mercy Corps**

United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

**Hearing on:** The U.S. Role and Strategy in the Middle East:  
Syria, Iraq, and the Fight Against ISIS

**September 16, 2015**

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin:

Thank you for inviting me to testify before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations today about the spiraling humanitarian crisis in Syria and Iraq, and for the close attention you have paid to this complex and protracted crisis. I am here today in my capacity as Vice President of Humanitarian Leadership and Response with Mercy Corps, a global humanitarian and development non-governmental organization (NGO) that responds to emergencies and supports community-led development in more than 40 countries around the world. Mercy Corps has been working in the Middle East and North Africa for more than three decades; we currently run and manage programs in Syria and Iraq, as well as in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and now Greece.

Senators, I just returned from Lesbos, Greece, this week. This island is a waystation for many refugees in their long journey to Europe. There I saw thousands of people who have risked everything they had left to flee for their lives. They are all survivors of a violent, protracted crisis that urgently requires a political solution. What we are seeing in Europe is an emergency within a much bigger and more complex crisis.

Tragically, Syrians and Iraqis are worse off today than they were a year ago, whether they are in Syria, Iraq or living in neighboring countries. Regional host countries that are receiving the vast majority of refugees face particular strain on their resources. The longer the war drags on, the more new challenges emerge. Humanitarian aid to assist those fleeing unimaginable violence in Syria and Iraq is critical, and the U.S. government has been incredibly generous. Still, ending this crisis and its impact on the region requires more than writing checks.

**Humanitarian response efforts: reaching a breaking point**

I can say without hesitation that for Mercy Corps and other humanitarian agencies, Syria and Iraq present some of the most hostile and complex environments in which we have ever worked.

In the face of extraordinarily difficult circumstances, through our local partnerships with Syrian and Iraqi civil society groups, we have been able to respond to humanitarian needs on a large

scale.

In Syria, Mercy Corps is among the largest providers of food assistance as well as essential supplies that people need to survive and maintain a modicum of dignity and small comfort, such as blankets, toothbrushes, soap and cooking utensils. We are also working hard to strengthen access to clean water and sanitation services, as well as a means to earn income and keep local markets going. Our programs meet the needs of an estimated 500,000 vulnerable Syrian civilians every month. Over the last year in Iraq, we met the critical needs of 365,000 displaced Iraqis and 385,000 Syrians through cross-border operations providing cash assistance, support to Iraqi civil society, access to education and programs that give communities the tools to address conflicts. Funding for these programs comes from contributions of the United States Agency for International Development; the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration; and other institutional donors.

These response efforts continue to be just a drop in the bucket compared to the exponentially growing needs. The humanitarian community is struggling to assist hundreds of thousands of innocent people who need our help. To be direct – we are nearing a breaking point. The sheer number of people in need is staggering, their needs grow ever greater and more desperate by the day, and there is still no end in sight.

### **Humanitarian situation in Syria**

Let me tell you what we are seeing in Syria. At this juncture, more than 11.6 million Syrians are on the run and half of those people are children. According to the U.N., an estimated 7.6 million Syrians have fled their homes and are still trying to survive in Syria. Another 4 million have been forced to seek safety in neighboring countries. Syria's prewar population is estimated to have been 22 million. By this accounting, to date more than half of the country has been displaced by the conflict.

Protection continues to be the number one challenge facing Syrians who are still in the country. On a daily basis, civilians living outside the areas where the coalition is fighting ISIS face unrelenting aerial attacks, including the threat of barrel bombs dropped by the Syrian regime. In ISIS-held areas like Mare in Northern Syria, we heard reports from multiple sources, including medical personnel, of chemical agents being used against civilians; some of our own staff were impacted. Medical professionals throughout the country are overwhelmed and targeted. The Syrian regime continues to restrict access – in some areas, agencies wait up to eight months for permission to access people in need. On a daily basis, our partners, as a matter of common practice, painstakingly negotiate access across numerous conflict lines in order to deliver lifesaving aid.

An entire generation of Syrian children and youth are growing up in a war zone. Instead of worrying about their schoolwork, they worry whether they or their family might be killed. They are frustrated and isolated – young women in particular rarely leave their homes. Young men and women both experience a sense of powerlessness and humiliation.

For the first time since we started delivering aid into the Aleppo governorate three years ago, families we spoke to this week said that they depend on our food aid to survive; their personal

resources are now completely exhausted. Without this aid they would go hungry. A mother of 10 in Aleppo told us that she has no money left to buy groceries, but with the monthly food basket her children will not go hungry. During August alone, we responded to the needs of more than 400,000, delivering 2,600 tons of food. We are observing a new trend in our northern operating area: When fighting with ISIS threatens towns and villages, people are moving closer to the border with Turkey so they can cross if things get too bad. Everyone is on the phone with relatives, many already outside of the country, so they can make a decision in real time.

### **Humanitarian situation in Iraq**

In Iraq, we are witnessing displacement of massive proportions with more than 3 million internally displaced Iraqis. People are moving around the country because they do not feel safe. Importantly, while needs cross ethnic and sectarian lines, most of those displaced are Sunni Arabs. People are fleeing violence and repression from ISIS, as well as the conflict generated by the Iraqi Security Forces' counter-offensives, and need protection. Underlying this, unresolved ethnic divisions continue to fester.

The humanitarian crisis *within* Iraq risks becoming something of a “forgotten” crisis – overshadowed by, and conflated with, the war in Syria. The Iraqi crisis has its own roots and its own nuances. The humanitarian response in Iraq should not be seen as another dimension of response to the wider Syrian regional crisis.

Although currently overshadowed by the dangers of ISIS, weak governance driven by sectarian divisions threatens to magnify the scale of the crisis in Iraq, and over the longer term poses a threat to stability. The displacement crisis compounds existing fragility, accentuates the risk of fragmentation and amplifies human suffering. Moreover, the conflict overlays Iraq's vulnerability to other man-made and natural disasters – like the continued structural vulnerability of the Mosul Dam. While it is unknown just how fragile the dam is, recent Iraqi Security Forces' activity urging people to relocate from villages nearby the dam in Nineweh governorate does prompt renewed concern. Imagine the humanitarian consequences of a serious dam breach: more than a million displaced; flooding that would overwhelm the city of Mosul and even put the U.S. embassy in Baghdad under several feet of water; and untold implications for an already tense and violent society and for a humanitarian response that is already stretched beyond capacity.

A proactive strategy is essential now to address the root causes of violence in Iraq and to prepare Iraq for the protracted challenges that will no doubt remain even after ISIS is defeated. Iraqis are concerned about the protection issues and human rights abuses taking place now, but are even more concerned about what will happen after the current fighting ends. If history is any guide, communities will face violent retribution and collective justice in the aftermath, and we need to act now to prevent atrocities. We also need to support the work of grassroots organizations that are leading response efforts – including in areas where needs are great but access is increasingly difficult for international actors – and avoid segmenting aid or favoring particular regions or demographics in Iraq, which in some cases inadvertently fuels sectarianism.

If the Obama administration and the U.S. Congress continue to take a narrow and predominantly short-term approach to addressing humanitarian needs in Iraq, the cycle of violence will surely continue and most likely escalate. Interventions that only address the symptoms of the conflict

have the real potential to do more harm than good by creating dependencies and sidelining the voices of Iraq's fledgling civil society and government stakeholders, both local and central. This includes government bodies like the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Directorate, Reconciliation Committee at the Prime Minister's office, provincial councils and the Iraqi Civil Society Committee, which are seeking to lead reconciliation efforts and address the underlying drivers of the conflict: poor governance and political grievances. Some notable progress has been made on this front with dedicated funding from the Department of State for peace building and reconciliation efforts, with Iraqi civil society in the lead, but this work needs greater attention.

### **Challenges of humanitarian assistance in ISIS-controlled areas**

In both Syria and Iraq, aid agencies like Mercy Corps are increasingly walking a fine line between the humanitarian imperative to respond to the tremendous human suffering in areas under the control of sanctioned terrorist groups such as ISIS, and the need to protect U.S. taxpayer-funded aid from falling into the hands of such groups.

This is a tough challenge to navigate. Aid agencies are conducting operations where the need is greatest – inevitably high-risk areas – yet we lack adequate legal protections. The result is a chilling effect on our operations: Banks are terrified of doing business with Syrian humanitarian aid groups because they fear that the U.S. government will crack down on them. Humanitarian actors are reticent to work in areas of real need due to fears that any diversion of aid – no matter how small – will cost them their reputation or shut down their ability to provide aid elsewhere. This leaves innocent civilians trapped in besieged areas, left to fend for themselves.

Mercy Corps – like other professional humanitarian organizations – brings decades of global experience, rigorously tested standards and robust rules of engagement, which we clearly communicate to armed actors in our areas of operation. Where red lines are crossed, we will not hesitate to suspend operations. Where aid is captured, we do not hesitate to hold those responsible to account and seek to regain that aid. The humanitarian community has developed operating protocols that have proven effective in countering aid diversion and opening up access in non-ISIS areas. We want to roll these out further in ISIS areas, too. But, to do that with any measure of confidence, we urgently need clarity on U.S. government policy toward humanitarian negotiations with groups such as ISIS, as well as a crisper delineation of the space we have to operate.

### **Efforts to Counter Violent Extremism**

While speaking to the destruction caused by ISIS, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight the administration's strategic leadership in advancing a new global policy framework on countering violent extremism focused on mitigating and preventing violent extremism.

The February White House Summit on CVE – Countering Violent Extremism – has truly helped to usher in a new global dialogue on how to strengthen civilian efforts to mitigate the grievances and root causes that fuel cycles of violence and lure communities into joining or supporting violent groups.

On September 29, President Obama will lead a high level leader's summit in New York focused on advancing this framework. We urge congressional attention and support to advance this emerging, but potentially pivotal, policy framework.

### **Recommendations for Congress**

While the situation is bleak, there are a number of concrete steps that Congress can take now to help the people of Syria and Iraq. I would like to leave the Committee with the following four key recommendations:

#### **First, provide adequate funding for humanitarian assistance and longer-term needs.**

As of this month, the joint U.N. and NGO funding appeals for Syria and Iraq are funded at barely 30 percent and 46 percent, respectively. This week, the World Food Program cut food assistance for one-third of Syrian refugees, including 229,000 people in Jordan.

It is more important than ever to shore up funding for the various humanitarian accounts in the FY16 budget – Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA), International Disaster Assistance (IDA), Food for Peace (FFP), and Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance (ERMA). Specifically, we urge that these accounts be funded at no less than the following levels – \$3.059 billion for MRA, \$1.895 billion for IDA, \$1.466 billion for FFP, and \$50 million for ERMA.

We also need funding for programs that address root causes underlying the Syrian crisis among others. We urge you to support funding levels of \$6.1 billion for Economic Support Funds (ESF), including no less than \$72.5 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF), both base and Overseas Contingency Funds (OCO), in Iraq to help local governments and service ministries respond to citizens' needs and rebuild trust and legitimacy in communities in areas throughout the country. Continue to support allocation of \$25 million in Iraq for conflict response programming, as directed in the FY15 omnibus spending bill in FY16, and consider expanding to cover civil society support efforts.

Finally, support funding of no less than \$100 million for the Complex Crisis Fund (CCF), a crucial flexible account that enables civilian agencies around the world to undertake rapid stabilization, prevention and crisis response activities.

**Second, support programs that address the underlying causes of conflict, build resilience and promote social cohesion.** After four-plus years of war, families are tired of dependency. Despite the risks, they want to rebuild and repair schools, clinics and water systems. They want to address the underlying conflicts that fuel cycles of violence. And the people we work with want opportunities to earn a living. But because of the way assistance is compartmentalized, humanitarian aid does not fully allow for these types of programs.

An overreliance on emergency response – without simultaneous support to programs that seek to address the underlying causes of crises – is unsustainable. In Syria and Iraq, we need more multiyear, multi-sector programs that integrate “humanitarian” and “development” and that support local and national actors – including the private sector, local government and civil society – who usually have the greatest knowledge and capacity to operate effectively.

**Third, re-balance risk and operations in high-risk environments by providing reasonable legal protections for humanitarian actors.** The U.S. and other major donors do not have adequate legal frameworks to protect humanitarian actors from criminal prosecution against overly aggressive counter-terrorism legislation. We have worked with the administration toward a solution on this issue for years, to unsatisfactory outcomes. We urgently need the Senate to accelerate efforts to reform U.S. counterterrorism frameworks and laws that slow or impede effective humanitarian operations or access.

**Finally, humanitarians are not the solution to these crises. I urge you work with the Obama administration to urgently seek a political solution to the war in Syria and support the growth of a more accountable government in Iraq.** Our world leaders must take decisive action and push for a lasting peace. Humanitarians are being hung out to dry, left to address the Syria crisis by themselves. Where is the diplomatic push? The moment for this push is now. With the U.N. General Assembly and G-20 coming up in quick succession, Congress needs to urge the Obama Administration to work with other P-5 governments, among others, to invest the diplomatic energy necessary to end the war in Syria. In Iraq, the escalating violence of recent months reminds us that the international community needs to aggressively invest in conflict mitigation, reconciliation and good governance as part of a long-term vision for Iraq's stability. Following the establishment of a new government in Baghdad in September 2014, this is an especially critical time for the central government to respond positively to demands for political inclusivity.

In conclusion, I would like to say that through our work and partnerships in the region, we have been humbled and touched by the grace and dignity of Syrians and Iraqis, as well as by the generosity of their hosts, despite the many profound challenges they face.

I wish to sincerely thank the Committee for its focus on this tremendously important issue, and for extending me the privilege of testifying today.