



January 20, 2016

# U.S. Strategy and Policy in the Middle East

Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, One Hundred  
Fourteenth Congress, Second Session

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## HEARING CONTENTS:

### Member Statements

John McCain

Chairman of Committee on Armed Services

[View Statement](#)

Jack Reed

Ranking Member of Committee on Armed Services

[View Statement](#)

### Witnesses

John M. Keane

Chairman

Institute for the Study of War

Former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army

[View Testimony](#)

Ryan C. Crocker

Dean and Executive Professor

The George Bush School of Government and Public Service

Texas A&M University

Former United States Ambassador to Afghanistan

[View Testimony](#)

Phillip H. Gordon

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[View Testimony](#)

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**Opening Statement on U.S. Policy and Strategy in the Middle East**  
**Chairman John McCain**  
**January 20, 2016**

The Senate Armed Services Committee meets this morning to continue our focus on U.S. policy and strategy in the Middle East.

I want to begin by saying that we all welcomed the news this weekend that four Americans who had been unjustly held captive in Iran were finally released. There will be plenty of time to examine the circumstances of their original detention and ultimate release. But four Americans being reunited with their families is good news. Now the United States must continue to press for the release of those Americans still missing or in prison in Iran, including Robert Levinson. And we must push for the release of thousands of Iranian political prisoners jailed by the Iranian regime, which continues to suppress dissent and undermine human rights.

A previous generation of American leaders once remembered that they were “present at the creation” of the rules-based international order that has been the source of unprecedented security and prosperity for the United States and the world. If present trends continue, we may well remember that we were present at the unraveling of this international order. And while signs of this unraveling can be seen in Europe and Asia, it is most visible, and most dangerous, in the Middle East.

All across the region, we see a dangerous breakdown of state authority and the balance of power. As Henry Kissinger testified before this Committee, “There is a struggle for power within states, a conflict between states, a conflict between ethnic and religious groups and an assault on the international system.” And as General Petraeus also told us last year, almost every Middle Eastern country is now a battleground or a combatant in one or more wars.

For the past seven years, the Obama Administration has sought to scale back America’s involvement in, and commitment to, the region, assuming that a post-American Middle East would be good for the region and for us, and that regional powers would step up to police the region themselves. The results of this massive gamble should now be clear to us all: No new order has emerged in the Middle East, only chaos. A power vacuum has opened up in the absence of America, and it has been filled by the most extreme and anti-American of forces—Sunni terrorist groups such as ISIL and al-Qaeda, or Shiite extremists such as the Islamic Republic of Iran and its proxies, and the imperial ambitions of Vladimir Putin.

These challenges were always going to be present and difficult, but it did not have to be this way, this dangerous. Instead of acknowledging its failures and changing course, as previous administrations of both parties have done, the administration has all too often doubled down on its reactive, incremental, and inadequate policies.

Now more than a year into the campaign to roll back and destroy ISIL, it is impossible to assert that ISIL is losing, or that we are winning. To be sure, there has been some tactical progress, including the recent recapture of Ramadi. This is a testament to our civilian and military leaders. But serious challenges remain.

ISIL has lost some territory on the margin, but has consolidated power in its core territories in both Iraq and Syria. It maintains control of key Iraqi cities like Mosul and Fallujah, and our military commanders estimate that this key terrain will not be retaken this year. The UN reports that since ISIL's invasion of Iraq in 2014, nearly 20,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed. Nearly 3,500 people, predominantly women and children, are estimated to be ISIL slaves in Iraq. As sectarian divisions worsen in Iraq, it is no surprise that the training of Iraqi security forces has been slow, and the building of support for Sunni tribal forces even slower.

In Syria, there is no plausible strategy to achieve ISIL's defeat on a timeline that won't result in the tragic deaths of tens of thousands of Syrians. There is still no ground force that is both willing and able to retake Raqqa, nor is there a realistic prospect of one emerging soon. In the absence of a realistic strategy to create the conditions for the achievement of U.S. goals, the administration has instead fallen back on hope—the hope that diplomacy without sufficient leverage can convince Russia and Iran to abandon Bashar Assad and join the fight against ISIL. And yet, we read just this morning that Russia's air campaign continues to target moderate opposition groups and may be gaining traction in stabilizing the Assad regime.

Meanwhile, ISIL continues to metastasize across the region in places like Afghanistan, Libya, Lebanon, Yemen, and Egypt. Its attacks are now global, as we saw in Paris, San Bernardino and most recently in Istanbul. These attacks should be a wakeup call that ISIL's threat to our homeland is real, direct, and growing, and that we need a strategy to destroy ISIL—not “ultimately,” but as quickly as possible. The Administration cannot continue to assume that time is on our side.

One element of the Administration's Middle East policy that has been clear from the beginning is its policy toward Iran. But instead of negotiating a deal to force

Iran to give up its nuclear program, the Administration signed a deal that would, as Dr. Kissinger said, merely move from preventing proliferation to managing it.

Despite all the talk of how this nuclear deal has opened a window for a new relationship with Iran, the Islamic Republic's behavior has not changed. Indeed, rather than empowering Iranian moderates, as the administration claimed, the nuclear deal appears to be doing the opposite: emboldening hard-liners. Iran has now conducted two advanced missile tests since October in violation of UN Security Council resolutions. It fired rockets within 1,500 yards of a U.S. aircraft carrier. Iran seized two U.S. Navy vessels transiting the Persian Gulf, illegally detained 10 American sailors, and propagandized the entire incident in total violation of international law and centuries of maritime tradition. And then shortly after the release of four American hostages in Iran, we learned that three Americans were kidnapped in Baghdad, apparently by an Iranian-backed Shiite militia.

I have no doubt that the Obama Administration has pursued a new relationship with Iran because it believed doing so would diminish sectarian tensions in the region. But the reality is that the Administration's overtures to Iran have only exacerbated those tensions and deepened feelings of suspicion and alienation among our traditional Sunni partners and our allies such as Israel and Turkey. This dynamic has only grown worse because the Administration has been so slow to offer support to those allies and partners, as we have recently seen with delayed fighter aircraft sales to Qatar and Kuwait.

For decades, America's role in the Middle East has been to suppress security competition between states with long histories of mistrust and to prevent that competition from breaking down into open war. This is the responsibility that we are now abdicating, and we are paying a very heavy price for doing so that is only growing. I hope that our witnesses today can help us better understand the costs of our current course and contemplate a better alternative.

**Opening Statement of U.S. Senator Jack Reed  
Ranking Member, Senate Armed Services Committee**

**SH-216  
Hart Senate Office Building  
Wednesday, January 20, 2016**

**Hearing on U.S. strategy and policy in the Middle East**  
*(As prepared for delivery)*

Let me join the Chairman in welcoming back our witnesses today for a timely hearing on our nation's policy in the Middle East. We have before us a distinguished panel of military and civilian witnesses with great experience in implementing our foreign policy. I look forward to their testimony.

This past weekend we saw a number of significant developments in the Middle East, most notably implementation day of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA; an exchange of prisoners between the United States and Iran; and the settlement of a 35-year old legal dispute between the U.S. and Iran. Individually, these are notable developments, but combined they have the potential to represent an inflection point and an opportunity to shift the course and U.S.-Iranian relations. As the President stated this weekend, the opportunity for these kinds of changes are rare.

While I share the President's hope for new opportunities, I also share concerns about Iran's destabilizing actions in the Middle East. In order for improved relations to materialize, Iran will need to faithfully implement the terms of the JCPOA; change its course on its destabilizing actions in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq; and its provocative actions with respect to its missile program. I hope the witnesses will provide of their assessment of these events and what opportunities and cautionary notes they would present for consideration.

I recently returned from a visit to Iraq where I had the opportunity to meet with some of the country's political leadership, our nation's diplomatic representatives, and our military commanders on the ground. My visit came on the heels of the successful operations by the Iraq Security Forces to retake Ramadi. This success, which was enabled by Coalition air power, gave a significant confidence boost to the Iraqi Security Forces. I am hope this momentum will continue.

In Syria, as a result of the violent agendas of both the Assad regime and ISIL, the humanitarian situation is increasingly dire and the human cost of this conflict is staggering. With

regard to ISIL, our military has embarked on a campaign to ensure that ISIL is under increasing pressure. The deployment of additional special operations forces and other critical enabling capabilities are important developments. With respect to the overall conflict in Syria, Secretary Kerry is pursuing an ambitious agenda to facilitate a diplomatic pathway to end the conflict and should be recognized for his persistence. I look forward to hearing the views of our witnesses on their assessment of whether the current peace talks might bear fruit.

One other issue that struck me during my visit to the region was our government's efforts to counter-ISIL in the information environment. This is an area where the Administration is appropriately trying to breathe new life into interagency efforts on this front through the creation of the Global Engagement Center. This is a well-intended effort, but we must ensure that it is adequately resourced and empowered with necessary authorities if it is to be successful. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on what they hope to see from this Center.

Given that Ambassador Crocker is here, I'm also going to take the opportunity to briefly mention Afghanistan, which I also had the opportunity to visit during the recent recess. The security situation is challenging, but the Afghan National Security Forces remained coherent and responsive through the first year in which they had sole responsibility for conventional ground combat operations. Further complicating the security situation has been the emergence of the so-called "Islamic State in the Khorasan Province" or ISKP. Given the increasing threat posed by ISKP to the United States and regional security, I support the reported recent approval by the White House of targeted strikes against the group. Ensuring our commanders on the ground have the proper authorities will be critical to the future success of our broader efforts to support the Afghan National Security Forces.

From a political standpoint, the National Unity Government led by President Ghani and CEO Abdullah has held together through a difficult year, providing an opportunity for progress on key reform issues, including governance and corruption. An evaluation of the lessons learned from this past year may yield new ways in which the U.S. and our coalition partners can improve our support to security operations and political progress by the Afghans going forward. I would be interested in the thoughts of our witnesses, and especially Ambassador Crocker, on these issues.

Thank you. I look forward to the testimony today.

**Testimony**

**United States Senate Committee on Armed Services**

**By**

**General John M. Keane, USA (Ret)**

**on**

**U.S. Strategy and Policy in the Middle East**

**0930 hours, 20 January 2016**

**Hart Senate Office Building**

**Room SH-216**

Thank you Chairman McCain, ranking member Reed, distinguished members of the committee, am honored to be back to provide testimony again on the challenges of the Middle East. This committee's persistence in keeping its focus on the unparalleled upheaval in the Middle East is commendable. I am honored to be part of this distinguished panel, particularly, to be reunited with Ambassador Crocker who remains today America's most successful and preeminent diplomat whose extensive service throughout the Middle East is legendary. I was privileged to work with Ambassador Crocker during the Iraq and Afghanistan surges while I was assisting General Petraeus. I have provided two maps which I will reference in testimony.

The Middle East is experiencing one of the most tumultuous periods in its history with the old order challenged by the aspirational goals of the Arab Spring, radicalized Islamists taking advantage of the political and social upheaval and the Islamic state of Iran using proxies to achieve regional influence and control. Some issues in the Middle East have been simmering for some time and are certainly underlying factors; such as historical sectarianism, repressive regimes, political and social injustice and the lack of economic opportunity. One cannot simply blame these "larger forces operating in the region" and absolve the U.S. of specific policy decisions that has unintended adverse consequences:

- EGYPT: In 2010 the Arab Spring begins, and in looking back while most Arab countries were in some form of a pre-revolutionary phase, it is a strategic surprise. The U.S., in the face of major civil unrest in Cairo abandons Mubarak, a multi decade ally of the U.S. and an ally of the Arab states in the region. The result is the Muslim Brotherhood who are elected, move quickly without any U.S. opposition to transition Egypt, a secular state, to an Islamic state. Iran supports the

Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood, as we know, loses support of the people and are deposed in a military coup.

- LIBYA: In 2011 after Qadaffi is deposed and killed, a newly elected moderate Islamic regime requests support to train a national security force to repress the radical militants. The U.S. refuses. Some of the same militants, Ansar al-Sharia burn down the U.S. consulate, kill the U.S. Ambassador and 3 others, force the evacuation of a covert CIA base and the following year force a U.S. retreat from Libya with the closing of the U.S. Embassy. Libya is now a failed state, a breeding ground for radical Islamists and the largest ISIS presence outside of Syria and Iraq.

- IRAQ: Whether the 2003 invasion was misguided or righteous, it ushered in the first Arab democracy in the Middle East, while also giving rise to Al Qaeda in Iraq, who was defeated in 2008. In 2009 the new U.S. administration began to distance itself politically from Iraq, providing the entrée for greater Iranian influence and culminating in a total military pullout from Iraq in 2011. PM Maliki immediately begins a purge of political opponents and military leaders and Al Qaeda reemerges that same year.

- SYRIA: Syria's civil war growing out of the Arab Spring in 2011 is stalemated because the rebels initial gains are thwarted by Iranian proxies, the Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militias plus the Quods force and much needed supplies and equipment from Russia and Iran. The rebels in 2011 and 2012 seek assistance from the U.S. which is recommended by Secretaries Clinton and Panetta, General Dempsey and Director Petraeus. The U.S. refuses. AQ in Iraq is incentivized by the protracted civil war in Syria, moves out of Iraq with several hundred Iraqi fighters, establishes a sanctuary in north eastern Syria , and grows a terrorist army

of some 30 to 40K. Two years later ISIS invades Iraq and expands its territory in Syria. ISIS as we know it today would not exist without the opportunity that Syria provided. In 2013 the CW redline is crossed, the U.S. does not respond as promised. Arab allies are dismayed. Assad continues to conduct a comprehensive depopulation campaign, killing 250k plus civilians, displacing 11 million people, 4 million outside of Syria, resulting in thousands of Syrians joining tidal waves of others in the region to migrate to Europe.

- YEMEN: Iranian backed Houthis in 2014 force the U.S. backed Yemen government to topple and the much touted U.S. counter terrorism operation is in full retreat with the closing of U.S. military operations and the U.S. Embassy in Yemen.

This is an extraordinary chronology of events where U.S. policy, while not necessarily the primary cause of these disturbing events, was at least a factor in further destabilizing the Middle East, and losing the confidence and trust of our allies in the region. However, the most critical policy failures are essentially strategic and therefore have the most profound impact. Simply stated, they are the U.S. and allies strategic failure to defeat radical Islam and to successfully counter Iranian regional hegemony.

## 1. RADICAL ISLAM

Twenty three years after the first World Trade Center bombing and fourteen plus years after 9/11 we still have no comprehensive strategy to defeat radical Islam. Radical Islam is morphing into a global Jihad with the expansion of Al Qaeda and the extraordinary success of ISIS which has rapidly become the most successful terrorist organization in history still growing at 1.5 to 2K per month and expanding into affiliate organizations throughout the Middle East, Africa,

South and South East Asia and developing a worldwide following where believers are willing to kill their fellow citizens, foment terror and unrest and polarize the population between Muslims and non Muslims. See the map provided by the Institute for the Study of War which depicts ISIS's desire to expand into affiliates in the "near abroad" in orange and the "far abroad" in yellow with the number of current affiliates as represented by the black stars and affiliates that are in process of approval in blue stars. Most of the "far abroad" will not have affiliates but rather radicalized followers who are inspired by ISIS to act either as individuals or small cells.

U.S. strategic failure derives from not understanding the nature of the conflict. The Bush war on terror and the Obama counter terrorism war are simply tactics. The battle is within Islam itself where in the Arab world this battle is intersecting with authoritarian regimes and family monarchies failure to politically reform and to adjust to the needs of their societies. Therefore, we are fighting a political and religious ideology which draws its origin from the very strict interpretation of the Quran and Hadith as well as the intolerance of Wahhabism and Salafism . Political leaders such as al-Sisi and King Abdullah have referred to it as a "religious revolution." Yet the current U.S. administration fails to define radical Islam, or explain it nor understand it. How can we possibly defeat radical Islam if we don't understand it? Knowing the kind of war you are fighting is the first priority of a national or military leader. Given this purposeful misunderstanding or self deception at best by not acknowledging this narrowly focused Islamic ideology it creates an unnecessary condition where all Muslims are brought under suspicion. Law abiding, faith based, traditional or modern Muslims who would do no harm to their fellow man and resent any association with radical Islam, deserve better treatment than that.

This is a 21<sup>st</sup> century generational, ideological struggle similar to the 20<sup>th</sup> century multi generational struggle with communist ideology. The 9/11 Commission recommended a global alliance to design a strategy and to work together to defeat radical Islam. King Salman of Saudi Arabia is organizing a 34 member alliance to combat radical Islam and it remains to be seen if it amounts to anything substantive. I do know it begs for the U.S. to play a leadership role. The next President of the U.S. will likely defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria but ISIS and radical Islam is a global movement. It is not a question of whether we want to fight radical Islam. It's unavoidable. The only question is how?

While I believe global alliance members should design a strategy and not the U.S., there are some elements that are obvious and critical:

- National leaders and Muslim clerics must undermine the political and religious ideology with not just what is wrong but what is the right thinking and ideology.
- Arab Muslim countries must change the levels of intolerance and the influence of Wahhabism.
- Financial and economic support must be countered and countries permitting such behavior by their citizens should be held accountable.
- Intelligence, technology, and selected equipment should be shared.
- Partnering for training and military education is essential to raise the level of operational competence. There is no substitute for an effective ground force supported by air power. Air power is an enabler not a defeat mechanism.

- Enemy combatants should be pursued aggressively and ruthlessly.
- Destroy and defeat radical Islamist sanctuaries. Sanctuaries or safe havens by themselves protract the conflict and drive up the casualties. Syria is a sanctuary, Libya is rapidly becoming one and Pakistan for 14 years has provided two sanctuaries for the Taliban.

## 2. IRAN

In 1980 Iran declared the U.S. as a strategic enemy and its goal is to drive the U.S. out of the region, achieve regional hegemony and destroy the state of Israel. It uses proxies, primarily, as the world's number one state sponsoring terrorism and to fight proxy wars. Beginning in the early 1980's it began jihad against the U.S. by bombing the Marine barracks, the U.S. Embassy and the Annex in Lebanon, the U.S. Embassy in Kuwait, the AF barracks, Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia and attacking the U.S. military in Iraq using Shia militias trained in Iran with advanced IEDs developed by Iranian engineers. During the 80's Iran began an aggressive kidnapping and assassination campaign which resulted in the death of CIA station chief Buckley and numerous American hostages. A policy of hostage taking for political gain continues to this day.

To date, the result is, U.S. troops left Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and initially Iraq while Iran as you can see on the "Changing Middle East Map" in red has direct influence and some control over Lebanon, Gaza, Syria, Iraq and Yemen while strategically desiring to influence not only the major shipping in the Gulf but the shipping entering and departing the Suez Canal. Is there any doubt that Iran, is on the march and is systematically moving toward their regional hegemonic

objective? Some suggest that Iran in agreeing to a delay in acquiring a threshold capability toward a nuclear weapon is a transforming event that may lead to Iran joining the community of nations seeking stability and security. Given a return of 100B in sanction relief funds and a proven track record of belligerence and armed violence to pursue its goals, a tough minded skepticism is in order, to force compliance on the nuclear deal and finally, once and for all, the first development of a regional strategy to counter Iran. A remarkable fact is that since the killing of Americans and hostage taking by Iran and its proxies began, in the 1980's, no American president, Democrat or Republican, has ever countered Iran's regional strategy. Now more than ever with Iran developing a ballistic missile capability and likely to cheat on the conditions of the nuclear deal, because it can, it is an imperative to join with Israel, our Arab and European allies, to counter Iran's strategy of regional hegemony.

As part of that strategy concrete steps should be taken:

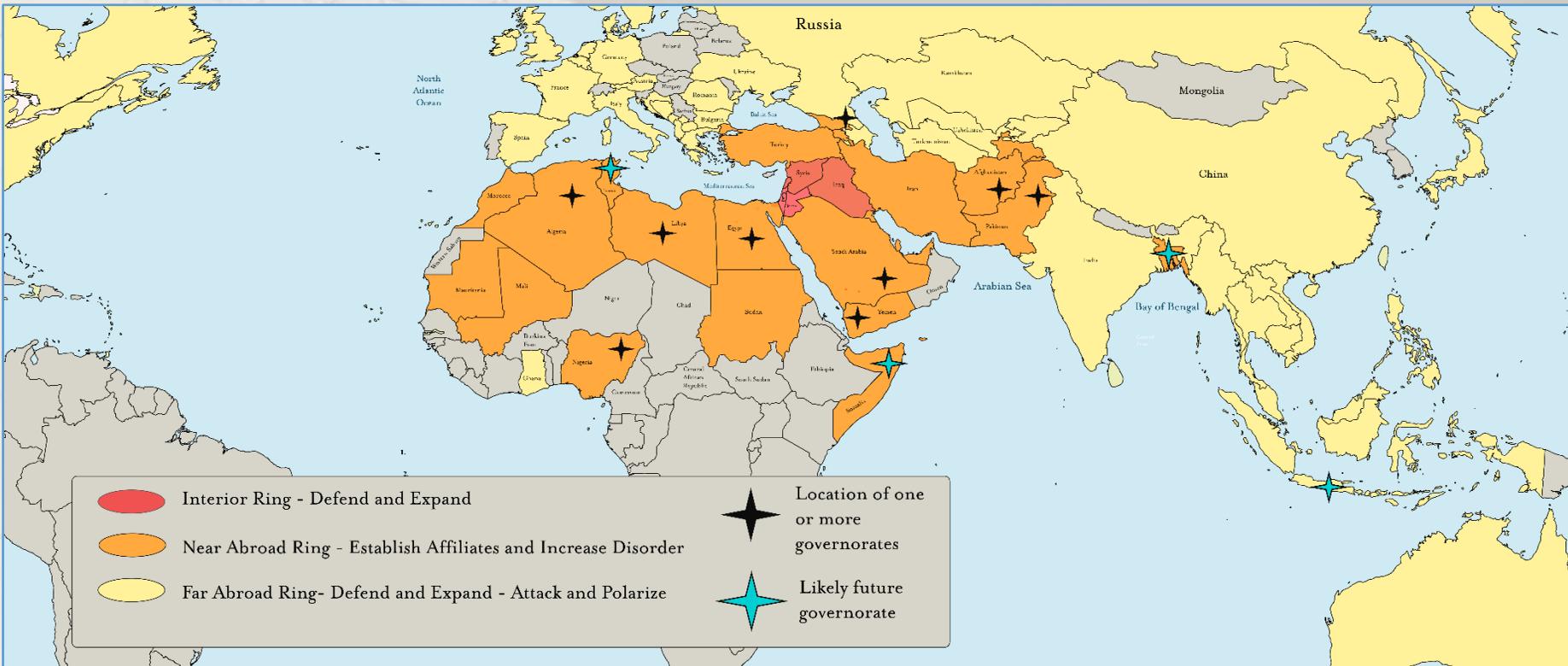
- 1) In Syria to reverse the decision that Assad can stay, which guarantees there will never be a negotiated peace. Establish safe zones and no fly zones in Syria to change the momentum against the Assad regime and protect the Syrian people. Move to a transition government and eventual independently observed national elections.
- 2) In Iraq establish a key political objective to reduce Iranian influence and to gain PM Abadi's strong political, military and economic support for the Sunni tribes and the Kurds. Dispatch Ambassador Crocker to Iraq to once again assist an Iraq government in achieving political unity.
- 3) In Yemen assist KSA and the Gulf states in pushing back against the Houthis with intelligence, targeting and striking targets if necessary.

- 4) Ballistic missile testing, malign proxy regional behavior, hostage taking, and, of course, any nuclear deal violation should all be met with tough, unrelenting economic sanctions.

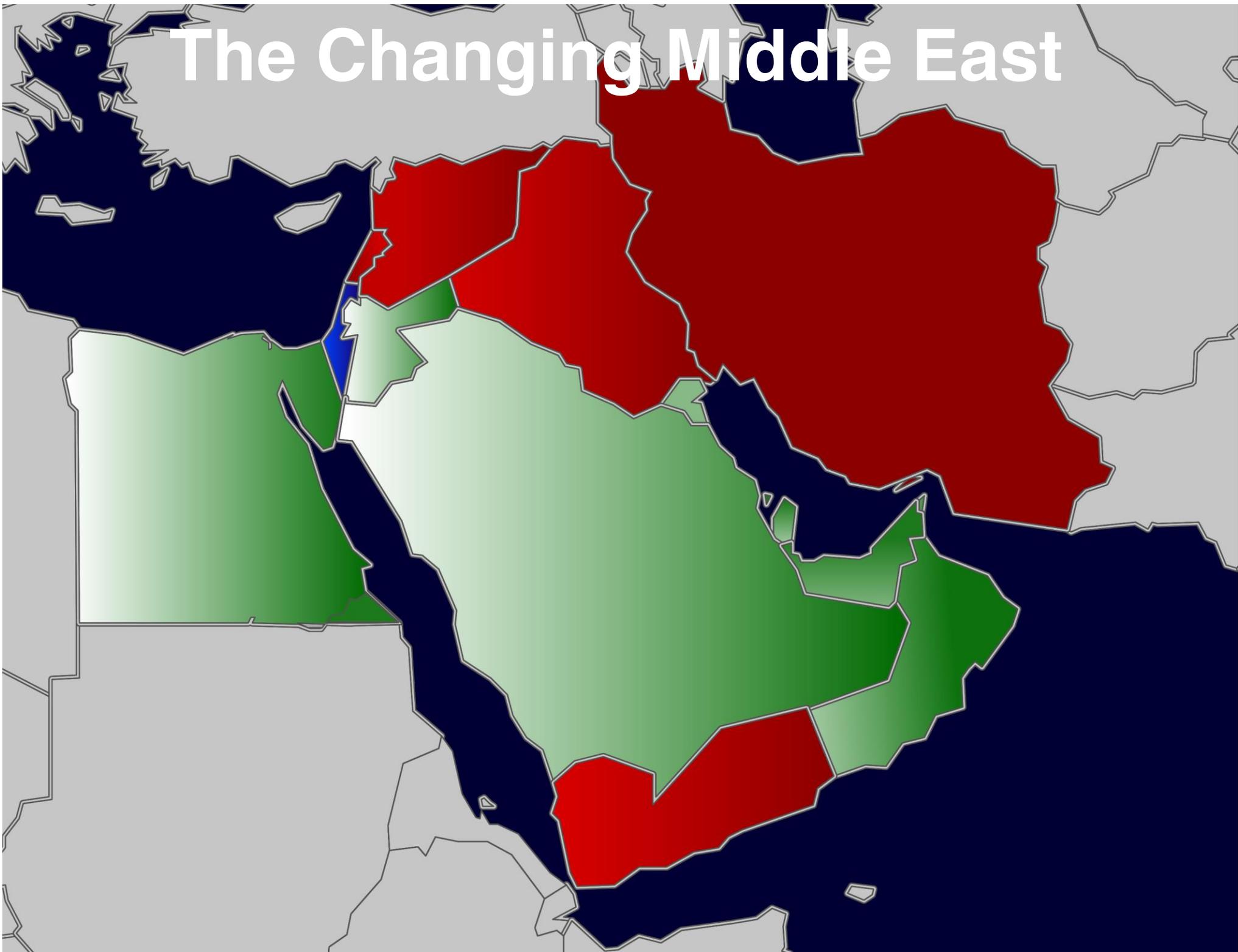
Failure to counter Iran's malign influence has encouraged their aggressive and destructive behavior for 36 years.

In conclusion the U.S. major policy challenges in the Middle East surround the development of comprehensive strategies to defeat radical Islam and to counter Iranian aggression and malign behavior. If these competencies are not addressed the Middle East will continue to be in freefall as the Middle East problems become the world's problems in confronting global jihad, a conventional Middle East war between KSA and Iran supported by their allies and nuclear Middle East proliferation leading to the horror of the world's first nuclear exchange. The risk has always been high in the Middle East and the challenges certainly complex but now inadequate strategies and misguided policies are driving up that risk exponentially.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.



# The Changing Middle East



**Testimony for the Senate Committee on Armed Services**  
**U.S. Strategy and Policy in the Middle East**  
**Wednesday, January 20, 2016**

Mr. Chairman, Senator Reed, Members of the Committee, I am honored to have the opportunity today to discuss U.S. policy and regional dynamics in the Middle East. I am especially pleased to do so in the company of such distinguished Americans as General Keane and Secretary Gordon. The modern Middle East took shape in the aftermath of World War I, some one hundred years ago. The region has seen much tumult over the past century, but there has never been a time of such turbulence and upheaval as we are witnessing now. Almost every state in the region has been touched with conflict. Syria, Libya, and Yemen are completely failed states. Iraq is on the edge if not over it, and Afghanistan is threatened. And as bad as things are today, the trend lines all point down – it will be worse tomorrow.

As states fail, non-state actors emerge. Islamic State and the various franchises of al-Qaida are present through much of the region and beyond – Boko Haram and al-Shabab in Africa, affiliates in Indonesia and elsewhere. Violent Shia militias are operating in Iraq and in Syria. Unlike Sunni terror groups, the Shia have a state sponsor – Iran.

These developments have implications for global as well as regional security. As my friend and former wingman Dave Petraeus has said, what happens in the Middle East does not stay in the Middle East. Islamic State terror attacks in November in Paris are a horrific illustration. The worst refugee crisis since World War II affects more than the millions of refugees themselves. It has weakened the leader of one of our best NATO allies, Germany.

The committee's invitation to testify noted a number of important topics. I will try to provide some perspectives on them.

IRAN: This past week has been an extraordinary one for the U.S. and Iran. We witnessed the capture and release of American sailors, the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and an exchange of prisoners. There is speculation that after more than 35 years of hostility, our two countries might be moving toward a rapprochement that could reshape the Middle East. We are not.

I support the JCPOA. It is not a perfect agreement, but a good one. The first steps have been taken; now we must turn to rigorous verification of continued Iranian compliance. At the same time, we need to bear in mind that it is a multilateral arms control agreement, not a treaty of friendship. I am reminded of the arms control agreements we negotiated with the Soviets in the 1980s. They made the world a safer place, but they had no impact on the broader confrontation between the free world and the Soviet Union – the evil empire.

Similarly, we welcome the release of the American hostages and their return to their families. They never should have been held in the first place. In the early 1990s, I was the American ambassador to Lebanon when our hostages there came home. The Syrian government played a significant role in their release, for which it was thanked. However, the Syrian government,

along with Iran and Hizballah, also had a significant role in their detention, and the releases did not transform the relationship. Syria remained on the list of state sponsors of terror.

This is a transactional relationship, not a transformational one. As a former diplomat, I think it's good to have a number to call at critical moments. But we have to be clear eyed about Iran's role in the region.

We must vigorously confront malign Iranian activity in the region. In Iraq, Iranian support for vicious Shia militias, some of them commanded by individuals implicated in the murder of American servicemen, has weakened Prime Minister Abadi and deepened sectarian divisions. This has allowed Islamic State to take root and brought the Iraqi state to the point of failure. In Syria, Iran's Revolutionary Guards are fighting alongside Hizballah and Assad's forces as they murder Syrian civilians under Russian air cover and force millions from their homes. Nor should we think of Iran as an ally against Islamic State. Iran and its proxies along with Russia are in Syria to bolster Assad, not fight Islamic State. They are in Iraq to weaken the state and assert their own direct and indirect control. Islamic State is an excuse for the Iranians, not an enemy.

There is a deeper issue at stake here. Overarching the many hot wars in the region is a Middle East cold war that pits Iran against Saudi Arabia. It is denominated in sectarian terms, Sunni versus Shia, but is also Arab versus Persian. I was recently in the Middle East and was struck by the extent to which many Arab friends perceive not only a Damascus – Tehran – Moscow axis that is anti-Sunni and anti-Arab, but also that the U.S. has tilted away from its traditional Arab allies in favor of Iran. We are absent in Iraq. We deconflict air space in Syria with the Russians. We bomb Islamic State targets in Sunni areas while doing nothing to prevent Assad from using his bombs to kill Sunni civilians. Perceptions are their own reality, and these perceptions are becoming dangerous for our broader interests.

So in a chaotic Middle East that Iran has done much to make so, this is a time to make clear that we stand with our friends – Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, Israel, Turkey, Jordan, and Egypt. All have important concerns over Iran and its behavior. We have differences with some, especially over Yemen, but this is a moment to forge a common cause. Iran has been pushing very hard in the region to advance its violent agenda. We need to push back. We have managed some important transactions with Iran, but it is not a transformation.

**ISLAMIC STATE, SYRIA AND IRAQ:** Over 18 months after Islamic State fighters swept through much of Iraq and 15 months after the U.S. and others began launching airstrikes against them, Islamic State is certainly not defeated. It is barely degraded. It has lost some ground in Iraq but gained in Syria, including the city of Palmyra. 50 Special Operations advisors working with predominantly Kurdish forces will not turn the tide.

So what do we do? First, we must significantly ramp up coalition airstrikes against Islamic State. Recent targeting of Islamic State oil network is a good step, and it should be expanded. Simply put, we need to be all in with an air campaign that goes after their command and control and ability to conduct offensive operations. In short, to actually degrade the organization. But to ultimately defeat Islamic State and end this terrible conflict, we need to change the political

context and to understand that for many Syrian Sunnis, Assad is a far worse enemy than Islamic State. In Syria, I have argued for a no-fly zone in the north and south. It would be a clear message that we stand with Syrian civilians against the savage bombings by Assad of his own population and against those who back him in Moscow and Tehran. Depriving Assad of the ability to murder his own people from the air would not mean his defeat, but it could change his calculations as well as those of Russia and Iran, finally enabling a political process. It is an axiom that there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict. But military actions can shape the political environment. The Russian intervention did so negatively. A no-fly zone could reshape the context more favorably. According to the Institute for the Study of War, zones could be enforced without putting U.S. aircraft in Syrian airspace by a combination of Patriot and Cruise missiles and aircraft operating in Turkish and Jordanian airspace. With cooperation from these countries, no-fly zones could cover safe zones for civilians and serve as areas where face-to-face coordination with non-jihad opposition elements would be possible. Other measures would be to make the anti-Islamic State envoy a presidential envoy. This would demonstrate a seriousness of purpose on the part of the White House and give the envoy authorities he currently lacks. Re-establishing a deputy national security advisor to coordinate the anti-Islamic State campaign in Washington would serve the same end.

I applaud the UN led effort to launch a political dialogue among Syrian factions. But it will go nowhere as long as Assad and his outside backers think he is winning. For there to be any chance of a serious negotiation, conditions on the ground must shift.

IRAQ: When I left Iraq in 2009, I could never have imagined how it looks today, even in my worst nightmares. During three decades in the Middle East, I learned two things. The first is be careful what you get into. Military interventions set in motion consequences to the 30th and 40th order that can't be predicted, let alone planned for. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the rise of militant Islam, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the rise of Hizballah, the American invasion of Iraq and the birth of al-Qaida in Iraq. The second thing I learned is to be just as careful over what you get out of. Disengagement can have consequences as great or greater than those of the original intervention. In Iraq, we were not careful about either. Withdrawal of our forces and a virtual end to sustained political engagement in Iraq after 2010 did not end the war. It simply left the field to our enemies: Iran, its proxy Shia militias, and Islamic State. It is the coalition from hell: Iran and Islamic State do not seek each other's destruction; both seek the disintegration of a unitary Iraqi state into a Jihadistan, run by Islamic State, an Iranian dominated Shiastan, and a Kurdistan heavily influenced by Iran. This is a threat to U.S. national security.

In Iraq as in Syria, there is no military solution to Islamic State threat. The political chasm between Sunni and Shia have given Islamic State the space to fester. Iran has worked to sharpen those divides; and virtual U.S. absence over the last four years has given Iran, its proxies, and Islamic State the scope to act, and they have. The U.S. needs to reengage, not with military force but with sustained, high-level diplomacy led by the President and the Secretary of State. For many reasons, Iraqi leaders find it extraordinarily difficult to make the political compromises necessary to foster a broad sense of inclusion among all of Iraq's communities. Iraqis cannot make the necessary deals on their own, but the U.S. can serve as an effective broker. We have done it before. Only when Iraqi Sunnis feel they have a secure and equitable place in the Iraqi state will the ultimate defeat of Islamic State be possible.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the most chaotic period in the history of the modern Middle East is also a time of the greatest U.S. disengagement since we stepped onto the regional stage after World War II. We certainly cannot fix all the problems of the Middle East. But U.S. leadership can make a difference. Our friends in the area are looking for us to lead and bear the consequences of our perceived lack of involvement. Without a larger U.S. role, an already impossible situation will only get worse. And it will come home to us.

# U.S. Strategy and Policy in the Middle East

Prepared statement by

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Reed, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today about U.S. strategy and policy in the greater Middle East. I shared in advance with the Committee several recent articles that address some of these issues in some detail and respectfully request that they be submitted for the record. In my opening statement I would simply like to make three broad points about the region.

First, *the Middle East today is going through a period of powerful, tectonic change* that the United States did not create and cannot fully control. In the wake of the “Arab Spring” in 2011, state institutions have crumbled in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere, and those institutions will not be put back together again. In addition, sectarian tensions across the region are now deeper than they have been for decades. Just last month, these tensions were enflamed by Saudi Arabia’s execution of a prominent Shi’a cleric and Iran’s violent response. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is a geopolitical conflict on top of a sectarian conflict, and as long as it persists, the biggest conflicts in the region—In Syria, Iraq, and Yemen—will be enormously difficult to resolve. We should also remember that the Sunni population across the Middle East is itself deeply divided. Sunni terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS are aligned against Sunni regimes, and the Sunni regimes themselves are deeply divided between those who embrace political Islam such as Turkey and Qatar, and those threatened by it, such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt under President al-Sisi. Thus even though most Sunni majority states stand together in sectarian conflicts such as Iraq, Syria,

and Yemen, they are at loggerheads in Sunni-majority countries such as Libya and Egypt.

I mention all these points at the start not to suggest that the region is so complex and unstable that there is nothing we can do, but to underscore the enormity of the challenge we face and the need for humility as we consider our policy options. We should be extraordinarily careful about assuming there are any quick fixes to the region's problems, and very cognizant of the potential for unintended consequences of any actions that we do take.

My second main point is that in this context of regional turmoil, *the implementation of the Iran nuclear deal last week buys valuable time and presents a real opportunity if that time is used wisely.*

When the United States initiated the secret nuclear talks with Iran in early 2013, Iran was essentially on the threshold of a nuclear weapons capability. Now, with the mothballing of two-thirds of its centrifuges, the shipping out of 97 percent of its low-enriched uranium stockpile, the wholesale redesign of its heavy-water reactor (that could have produced enough weapon-grade plutonium for one to two bombs per year), and the setting-up of an unprecedented inspections regime, we are no longer faced with the terrible choice between using military force to set back the program for a couple of years or effectively acquiescing to its further development.

This is certainly not to say that the nuclear deal somehow “solves” the Iran problem, and even proponents should admit that in some ways it makes that problem worse. An Iran that gains access to more than \$50 billion of its frozen assets abroad and starts to increase oil sales will be an Iran that can devote more resources to nefarious activities in the region. But the right response to this reality is not to scrap the nuclear deal—which would only isolate the United States, impede our ability to apply effective sanctions, and leave us with no good options for stopping the Iranian nuclear program (much like the situation with North Korea)—but instead to rigorously enforce that deal, use all the tools at our disposal to confront and contain Iran in the region, and use the valuable time bought by the nuclear deal to cautiously explore whether a better relationship with Iran is possible over the longer term.

My third and final point concerns the war in Syria. And the bottom line is that we have an enormous national interest in prioritizing a de-escalation of the conflict. The conflict in Syria is killing or maiming hundreds of thousands of innocents, forcing millions of Syrians to flee their homes, destabilizing neighboring states, radicalizing an entire generation of young Muslims, provoking a far-right backlash in Europe, and fostering religious intolerance in the United States and elsewhere. Given these enormous costs, almost any peace in Syria would be better than the current war.

To reach this objective, I believe it is necessary to de-couple our attempts to reach a comprehensive political settlement in Syria—one that includes Assad's departure—from our objective of negotiating a nation-wide ceasefire. While we would all like to see the immediate departure of Assad and his cronies, who should face justice for their atrocities, and the installation of an inclusive, moderate regime, there is almost no prospect for near-term agreement on new detailed institutional arrangements in Syria, let alone new leadership. The cancellation of the planned Syria talks later this week was thus disappointing, but not surprising.

I know many, including some members of this committee, argue that we can produce that political transition in Syria by providing more military support to the opposition, or even by intervening militarily ourselves. However, given the strong commitments by Russia and Iran to support the regime, which also maintains significant support among Syria's minorities and even many majority Sunnis, I fear such an escalation would not lead to the regime's capitulation but rather a new counter-escalation, which, after all, has been the pattern for the past nearly five years.

As an alternative, I have put forward a plan along with two colleagues from the RAND Corporation, Jim Dobbins and Jeff Martini, to seek a negotiated, nation-wide ceasefire-in-place that would include deferring the ultimate disposition of political power in Syria, including the question of Assad's fate, and the creation of regional safe zones based roughly on current areas of control within the country, the resumption of humanitarian deliveries, prisoner releases, and a collective focus on destroying ISIS. I'll be the first to admit that even this outcome would be enormously difficult to negotiate and not without downsides and risks. But I believe it is far more realistic than the current objective of a comprehensive political agreement, far better than the status quo, and more practical than any of the available alternatives.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these ideas with you and I look forward to the discussion.