



Assessing the Anti-ISIS Campaign After the First Year

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Hearing on Syria, Iraq, and the Fight Against ISIS

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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

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.¹ 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.² 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.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.

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.⁷

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.

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:⁸

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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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 Afghanistan¹¹—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.

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.¹²

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,¹³ 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.

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.¹⁴

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 regime¹⁵ 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.

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.¹⁶ 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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