

Testimony
Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on
“Global Efforts to Defeat ISIS”
Witness Statement of
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Introduction

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, esteemed members of the committee, thank you for providing me the opportunity to update you on our global campaign to defeat ISIL.

The fight against ISIL is an unprecedented challenge. More than 40,000 foreign fighters have flowed into Syria over the past five years, swelling the ranks of violent extremist organizations, the most significant of which is ISIL. ISIL is determined to establish a state in Iraq and Syria, and instill terror around the world as part of a perverse agenda, whereby, according to their own ideology, anyone who disagrees with them should die. We have no choice but to defeat ISIL by taking away its territory in Iraq and Syria, severing its global networks, and suffocating its global affiliates.

I will describe today the progress we are making in all of these areas, but this progress does not discount the significant threat that remains, and will remain, for years to come. As an entire government, and as a country, we must remain vigilant, committed to a sustainable, global, and long-term effort to defeat ISIL, and ensure that other violent extremist groups, such as Jabhat al Nusra, al Qaida's official affiliate in Syria, cannot rise from its ashes.

The support of this Committee and the Congress will be essential to our success, and it is my honor to appear before you again for an update on our campaign.

Diagnosing the ISIL Threat

We analyze the ISIL challenge in three dimensions: the core in Iraq and Syria (its phony self-proclaimed “caliphate”); the global networks (foreign fighter, financial, and messaging networks); and the global affiliates (eight in all, with some far more serious than others). Any successful campaign must address all three, and our global effort, anchored by a coalition of 66 partners, is designed to do just that.

At the same time, the ISIL core remains its center of gravity, allowing ISIL to extract resources, recruit, and plan sophisticated external terrorist attacks, as we have seen in Paris and Brussels. Thus, we are focused first and foremost on shrinking the core, uprooting ISIL from the cities, towns, and villages under its control, and destroying its underlying infrastructure, including the human capital of its leaders, now being eliminated one-by-one.

Current Assessment

In July 2014, I testified before this committee as ISIL was expanding its territory, threatening Baghdad, and appeared unstoppable. The situation today is measurably different. ISIL has not launched a significant offensive in over a year; it is losing cities – Tikrit, Ramadi, Fallujah, Hit, Shadadi, and soon, Manbij – that were central to its rise; and the coalition-backed forces arrayed against it are increasingly confident and on offense, with our support.

I have included an annotated map as an attachment to this testimony, which points to our focus areas in the core, and demonstrates that we are now able to apply multiple points of

pressure at once, from Manbij, to Fallujah, to Mosul. ISIL is under more pressure than ever before, and we will ensure that it increases dramatically over the coming weeks.

To assess the current situation, I will briefly review eight indicators that we track week-to-week to determine where we may need more focused efforts, and how the campaign is doing overall. These indicators are not exhaustive, but provide a decent top-line overview of what remains an extraordinarily complex, dynamic, and fast-moving situation on the ground.

1. Morale

ISIL's morale is plummeting. We have seen credible reports of ISIL executing its own fighters on the battlefield. Whereas it once claimed to represent the people under its control, it is now executing anyone seeking to leave its control. Whereas it once massed and maneuvered at will across Iraq and Syria, it can no longer operate in the open, train, or communicate. Whereas it once promised lavish pay for recruits, and free services in its "caliphate," it is now slashing pay, cannot provide services, and is facing internal resistance. We know from other sources, as well, that ISIL fighters are panicking on the battlefield, foreign recruits are now looking to return home, and leaders are struggling to maintain discipline, even despite the threat of execution for disobedience.

This picture from the ground level is also apparent in ISIL's own propaganda. Whereas ISIL once promised paradise with staged and sun-drenched scenes from Raqqa and Mosul, ISIL's own leaders now acknowledge they could lose Raqqa and Mosul.

ISIL spokesman Muhammad al-Adnani, for example, has for years described ISIL as a global, historic, expanding movement. His catchphrase was "remain and expand" – describing the territory under its control – and he promised ISIL would someday dominate the Middle East and ultimately control territory in southern Europe.

Adnani's latest statement in May was quite different. No longer the confident voice of an expanding movement, he acknowledged that ISIL may lose its holdings in Iraq, Syria, and Libya, including its strongholds of Mosul, Raqqa, and Sirte. We are now working to ensure that his prediction comes true, and that Adnani himself – who also leads ISIL's external operations arm – is eliminated, and no longer able to spew his incitement.

2. Territory

Territory is not the only indicator that matters, but it significant for three reasons:

First, territory, with millions of people under ISIL control, allows ISIL to extract resources, fund external operations, and embed its violent and genocidal system of control, raping women, murdering LGBT individuals, indoctrinating children, and brutally executing anyone who resists.

Second, territory allows ISIL to proclaim itself as vanguard of a historic "caliphate," which more than anything else we have seen, drives recruiting from around the world.

Third, and most important, territory and safe haven allow ISIL to plan future operations against our partners, and our own homeland, such as the suicide attacks in Paris, Brussels, and Ankara, which were planned in Raqqa with the support of logistics nodes in and around Manbij.

For all of these reasons, we must pressure ISIL in the areas it controls, and then take those areas away from ISIL altogether. I have included an attached map to guide the briefing on how and where we are comprehensively shrinking ISIL's territory.

The trajectory is positive. ISIL has not had a major battlefield victory in over a year. It has lost 47 percent of its territory in Iraq, and 20 percent in Syria. More important than percentages, however, is the strategic nature of the territory that ISIL has lost: nearly the entire border between Syria and Turkey, iconic cities like Ramadi, Tikrit, and Fallujah, and all the major transit points between Raqqa and Mosul, such as Sinjar, Hawl and Shahdadi (number three and four on the attached map), are no longer controlled by ISIL.

We are now working with local partners to shrink this territory further, through a combination of military, political, and security measures. I will highlight three areas where active ISIL offensives are now underway:

Manbij Pocket

First, is the "Manbij Pocket," labeled number one on the map. This has long been the last stretch of territory with access to an international border, allowing foreign fighters to transit in and out of Syria. We commend Turkey for taking measures to tighten the border on the north side, but the threat will not reduce until the territory inside Syria is taken away from ISIL. That is what we are now doing.

Three weeks ago, the Syrian Democratic Forces – a mix of Syrian Kurds, Arabs, Syriac Christians, and Turkmen – launched a surprise attack from the east, crossing the Euphrates River and then rapidly enveloping Manbij city. As we speak, these fighters are now entering the city limits, under cover of coalition air support. ISIL has threatened to kill civilians leaving the city, and ordered a fight to the death. This has only reaffirmed the importance of this operation, which is on track to succeed.

This operation against Manbij was planned for months with military and political components. In my visits to Kobani, Erbil, and Sulaimaniya, I met the leaders of the military alliance now leading the offensive. Named the Manbij Military Council, it is 3,500 strong, over 80 percent Arab, mostly from the local area, fighting to free their own hometowns. This is a core premise of our strategy for liberating territory: we want local people, with local knowledge, in the operations to free their communities from ISIL, and stabilize the areas after ISIL is gone.

It took time to build this inclusive alliance, but the results on the ground, thus far, are promising, and provide a model as we look to isolate Raqqa – likely the next phase of operations after Manbij – with a predominantly Arab and locally-grown force.

The Manbij operation is also proving what we knew going in: that this area was a locus of ISIL’s foreign fighter and external plotting network. Of the more than 1,000 ISIL fighters killed in this operation thus far, we believe nearly half are foreign fighters, and we are collecting information along the way on how ISIL’s foreign fighter networks are organized and led.

From the other end of the Manbij pocket, we are working with moderate opposition groups to push east across what is known as the “Mari Line” (the extent of ISIL’s westward advance). This effort had struggled – ISIL had the area heavily defended – before we launched the second front across the Euphrates, which pulled ISIL fighters away and allowed our moderate partners to advance.

We will continue to resource both offensives, and we are committed to collapsing ISIL within this pocket, an objective that is central to our own national security. We are also working, in coordination with Turkey, to ensure that local mistrust between elements in both offensives can be overcome, and humanitarian aid can flow into these areas as soon as they are liberated.

Anbar Province

Second, in Iraq’s Anbar province, parts of which had been dominated by ISIL for nearly two years, Iraqi security forces and local tribes have recently liberated Ramadi, Hit, central Fallujah, Rutbah, and broke the siege of Haditha, where Sunni tribes held out heroically against ISIL since the summer of 2014. Adnani, the ISIL spokesman, once boasted that Haditha tribes would be wiped off the map, and that fathers would bring their sons to Haditha and say “this is where the Jughayfa (a leading tribe) once stood.” In fact, Haditha, like Kobani in Syria, broke the back of ISIL and sparked the momentum we are now seeing across Anbar province.

This would not have been possible without local support, and we commend the Government of Iraq and Prime Minister Haidar al Abadi for supporting a program of tribal mobilization in Anbar province. There are now 20,000 Sunni tribal fighters working with Iraqi forces to clear and hold territory, in addition to over 14,000 local police across the province. We have been proud to support this program, together with our coalition partners, at two facilities in Anbar, one on Al Asad airbase near Haditha, and one at Taqadum airbase between Ramadi and Fallujah.

The results are impressive and now must be sustained. We have worked closely with the Government of Iraq to ensure that tribal fighters are embedded into the state security structure, thereby correcting a defect in the Anbar “awakening” model from 2007 and 2008, which was hugely successful, but more ad hoc and sustained with U.S. support. The Iraqis have allocated resources to these new fighters, and woven

their ongoing support into their national budget, passed by the Iraqi parliament, thereby helping to ensure ongoing and long-term support.¹

In Fallujah, Iraqi forces broke through the crust of ISIL's defenses last week and on Sunday announced the full liberation of the city. I was in Iraq last week and met with Anbar's governor, and two months ago met with the most prominent Fallujah sheikhs, all of whom pleaded with us to support their city's liberation. We have been proud to do so, not only with military support, but also with an Italian-led training program for local police to secure the city when military operations cease, a \$100 million nationwide coalition-funded stabilization program to help return people to their homes, a \$20 million allocation in humanitarian aid to reinforce the UN-led effort to manage the flow of Fallujah residents escaping ISIL's brutality, and a comprehensive mine clearance program.

The Fallujah operation has not been perfect. This is among the toughest places to fight in all of Iraq, and ISIL had controlled the city for over 2.5 years. There were concerning reports of abuses against civilians in the early stages of the operation, and the outflow of people initially overwhelmed the UN and humanitarian organizations. This was a primary focus of my visit to Iraq last week, and while we are encouraged by the immediate response to reports of abuse, and the infusion of resources to support IDPs, more must be done, and we have called on all of our coalition partners to help.

Stabilizing areas after ISIL can be even more important than clearing areas from ISIL. We are encouraged that, thus far in the campaign, no significant territory liberated by coalition-backed forces has been reclaimed by ISIL. Anbar is case-in-point: we have focused from the beginning, even when the situation seemed nearly hopeless, on investing local people in their own liberation, pooling coalition resources on stabilization needs, and working with the Government of Iraq to invest local leaders with authority to revitalize populated areas that had been devastated by ISIL.

We are focused now on reopening the Baghdad-Amman highway through Rutbah and the Trebil crossing (number eight on the attached map). This was a key topic of discussion in my meetings last week with Prime Minister Abadi in Baghdad, and then King Abdullah II in Amman. This highway before ISIL contributed to 20 percent of Jordan's exports and nearly \$100 million per month in trade; thus, reopening it is a main priority to help economically shore up some of our main allies in the region.

We are also working to return people to their homes in Ramadi, a process that has been slowed by ISIL's planting booby traps and improvised explosive devices (IEDs)

¹ Article 40 of the 2016 Iraqi Budget Law guarantees that a minimum of thirty percent of the "Popular Mobilization Forces" must be comprised of locals from the provinces where the GOI is fighting ISIL. As a result, the GOI has enrolled, and continues to pay and equip, over 30,000 Sunni Arab volunteers across Iraq with the number likely to grow to 45,000. In this regard, the Iraqi mobilization program takes ownership over enlisting local Sunnis into the fight against ISIL – a principle we must ensure is sustained long after the battles against ISIL are won.

in civilian homes as well as considerable damage to infrastructure in the city as a result of ISIL's occupation. Tragically, of 60,000 initial returnees, nearly 100 were killed due to bombs planted in their homes, a tactic that once again reveals the lie that ISIL claims to represent the Sunnis of Anbar. In reality, ISIL has been focused on killing Sunnis to gain power, but lost the battle, and littered homes with bombs to keep life from returning to places like Ramadi.

Thanks to coalition contributions, a U.S. company, JANUS, is now overseeing the painstaking work of clearing Ramadi of booby traps, and preparing the ground for stabilization projects. We are aiming to repeat in Ramadi and then in Fallujah what we ultimately saw in Tikrit, where 95 percent of the population has returned to their homes after ISIL. Life there is returning to the streets, with local police in charge, businesses restarting, the university open, and Iraqi-led rebuilding projects underway.

Ninewa and Mosul

All of this sets the stage for what will be the greatest challenge to ISIL as we know it: the liberation of Mosul. For the past six months we have been working with local forces in Iraq and Syria to isolate Mosul from its supply routes in Syria. Operations in Hawl, Shahdadi, and Sinjar, helped cut roadways between Raqqa and Mosul, forcing ISIL leaders onto back roads, where they are easily targeted.

Last week, Iraqi forces began an operation from the south to cut ISIL's access points and sever the connections with areas ISIL still controls, such as the small towns of Hawija and Sharqat in Kirkuk and Salah Ad Din provinces. This operation is now underway and making considerable progress, enabled by Apache helicopters and other accelerants authorized by the President in April.

But Mosul is not simply a military challenge. It is a political, economic, diplomatic, and humanitarian challenge that, if not done right, may well outstrip the capacity of the Iraqi government, and the Kurdistan Regional Government, to manage alone. The only way it can succeed is if everybody – Iraqi forces, Kurdish Peshmerga, and local fighters from Ninewa – work together as part of a coordinated political-military plan.

I am pleased to report that this is now coming together. Late last year, the Iraqis established a joint headquarters facility at Makhmour, to the southeast of Mosul (near number five on the map). U.S. Marines arrived to support this joint operations center in February, and we tragically lost one of our Marines there in March. These heroic Marines together with our Special Forces advisors have helped Iraqi and Kurdish Peshmerga forces begin to turn the tide south of Mosul, enabling successful operations to seize villages and strategic territory held by ISIL since 2014.

The military advances have finally enabled the political planning that is essential to getting ISIL out of Mosul and stabilizing Mosul after ISIL. Last week, President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, Masoud Barzani, held a historic meeting with Iraq's National Security Advisor, Faleh Fayyad, to discuss all aspects of the Mosul

campaign. Barzani and Fayyad invited the U.S. to attend, and I was pleased to represent the United States, together with our terrific ambassador, Stu Jones.

This meeting began to solidify planning, to include authorization and funding for 15,000 local fighters from Ninewa to take part in the operation – building on the model that has worked in Anbar – as well as the political arrangements after ISIL.

We are also working through the coalition to ensure resources are ready to support internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Mosul and lay the groundwork for their return and stabilization after ISIL. Next month at the State Department, we will co-host with Canada, Germany, and Japan, a pledging conference to support specific humanitarian and stabilization needs in this regard.

There is a great deal of work left to do, and we will not put a timeline on the Mosul operation. But with momentum now on our side, it is safer to say that ISIL's days in Mosul – where it proclaimed its phony caliphate to the world – are numbered.

Southern Syria

As we squeeze ISIL out of its strongholds in Iraq and Syria, we must remain focused on southern Syria, where it may attempt to fill empty spaces and threaten our partner Jordan. I was in Amman last week, meeting with His Majesty King Abdullah II and his national security team, the day after an ISIL attack killed seven Jordanian soldiers on their border. I expressed our profound condolences for those lost in this attack, and pledged unwavering support for Jordan and its Armed Forces.

Jordan has done its part in housing nearly 630,000 UN-registered refugees and their capacity has reached a limit. Near the site of the attack last week, approximately 60-100,000 Syrians are located in a tent city inside Syria across a berm from the Jordanian border. This is not Jordan's problem alone; it is an international problem, and one the international community must work with Jordan urgently to resolve.

We are supporting moderate opposition fighters in this region of southern Syria (number nine on the map) to pressure ISIL and help the defense in-depth of Jordan. These brave fighters have suffered ISIL vehicle bomb attacks, and last week, Russian jets bombed the camp, claiming not to know who was there. We have found Russian explanations of this attack to lack merit, and while there is now a "no strike" box over the area, the episode once again called into question Russian intentions in Syria.

Finally, we are working to root out an ISIL presence in the SW tri-border region of Syria adjacent to Jordan and the Golan Heights (number ten on the map). ISIL's media statements in recent months, as they suffer losses on the battlefield, have focused on Israel as a target, clearly hoping to generate international headlines to compensate for its defeats. We must not allow this to happen. Last week, I stood at the border, where ISIL positions and training facilities were visible in the distance.

The State Department earlier this month designated the ISIL affiliate in this area, formally known as Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade, as a specially designated global terrorist entity, and we are now working with moderate opposition groups to free Syrians under its grip from their barbaric rule.

We cannot permit ISIL to re-establish a presence anywhere in Syria, let alone on the borders of our closest friends.

3. Combat-Ready Fighters

ISIL's access to fighters has steadily diminished, now at the lowest point we have seen since the summer of 2014. We currently estimate that ISIL fields 18-22,000 overall fighters in Iraq and Syria, the lowest assessed range since we began conducting rigorous reviews of its manpower. This is down from a high-end estimate of 33,000 ISIL fighters in 2014. We are also seeing significant reduction in the flow of foreign fighters entering Syria and Iraq each month, and we are working through our coalition to identify and ensure that ISIL affiliated fighters cannot travel across borders. In short, we are making it harder for them to travel into Syria, and once there, making sure they can never leave.

This is painstaking work, requiring coordination across borders, and between executive and legislative branches. In September 2014, the President chaired a UN Security Council meeting to adopt the Chapter VII Resolution 2178, which calls on all states to take measures to deter travel of foreign fighters. Since then, our engagement with Middle Eastern and European partners has achieved results through increased information-sharing, better border security, improved counter-terrorism laws, counter-messaging, and improved cooperation between law enforcement and intelligence services.

Since the adoption of UNSCR 2178, more than 40 at risk countries have enacted laws or amendments to enhance obstacles for foreign terrorist fighters traveling into Iraq and Syria. At least 38 countries have reported arresting foreign terrorist fighters or aspirants, and 30 countries have successfully prosecuted foreign terrorist fighters, including the United States. In the United States, my colleagues at Department of Homeland Security and the FBI assess that over 250 U.S. citizens have joined or tried to join ISIL.

We must remain vigilant, here at home, and around the world. The United States now has information-sharing agreements with 55 international partners to assist efforts to identify, track, and deter the travel of suspected terrorists. Equally important, 58 countries, plus the United Nations, now contribute foreign fighter profiles to INTERPOL, and there has been a 500-percent increase in suspected foreign fighter identities in the INTERPOL database. Through our global coalition, we are discussing with INTERPOL how to appropriately incorporate foreign fighter data from the battlefield, ensuring that terrorists who manage to leave Syria can be identified in a routine traffic stop or at border entry, or those who die in Syria can be identified to map domestic contacts.

In addition, The European Union parliament in April issued an EU-wide directive to expand the Passenger Name Record (PNR) database, which would require more

systematic collection, use, and retention of data on international airline passengers. This is an important step to ensure the interoperability of data systems across the EU so foreign fighters and terrorists can be tracked in real time, allowing law enforcement, intelligence agencies, and border security to foil ISIL attacks.

4. Access to Revenue

ISIL's revenues are overwhelmingly generated from the territory it controls, primarily from oil extraction and taxation/extortion of local citizens. This picture was not clear when we began the campaign in 2014, but through raids by our Special Operators inside Syria, and incredible work by our unsung intelligence analysts, the U.S. Government has been able to map ISIL's resource stream, and then, systematically, destroy it.

Under Operation Tidal Wave II – which aims to degrade and destroy ISIL's energy assets – the Coalition has carried out precision strikes against oil fields, infrastructure, oil-tanker trucks, banks, and cash storage sites that sustain ISIL's war effort. This phase of the campaign was preceded by many months of planning from across the U.S. Government. We sometimes hear that we just need to “bomb the oil fields” as if there is a simple military solution to this challenge; in fact, the military effort is the sharp end of the spear, and its success depends on hard-earned intelligence, careful analysis, and target development.

Because we took a systematic approach to this problem, the operations against ISIL's economic infrastructure have been quite successful to date. ISIL was forced to halve fighter salaries in Raqqa and is detaining its own senior officials for trying to steal cash and gold. This has created a virtuous cycle: terrorist fighters are not paid, their supplies run low, they have less will to fight, and they are more easily defeated. Since the strikes against cash storage sites in Mosul, we have seen fighters thin out, with fewer checkpoints, and increasing reports of ISIL leaders executing their own rank-and-file for poor discipline.

This pressure will only increase. Just a couple of weeks ago outside Mosul, coalition strikes destroyed 600 oil transport trucks. Since these strikes began, trucks no longer line up at oil fields, and truck drivers are demanding higher pay to take on the risk of transporting ISIL oil, thereby increasing costs, reducing revenues, and making it even more difficult for ISIL to generate revenue from, or to use, energy resources.

At the same time, we continue to take out ISIL's cash storage sites, destroying their ability to pay fighters and sustain operations. In total, we have conducted more than 120 strikes on ISIL cash centers and oil infrastructure, and this number will continue to rise. We have also worked closely with Coalition partners in the region, particularly the Government of Iraq, to cut off ISIL's access to the international financial system and to disrupt its ability to move and store funds.

ISIL is an adaptive organization, however, and it is working to adapt to this pressure. It is our mission to adapt faster than they do, and continue the relentless pressure across the

breadth and width of their operations. We are currently undergoing a careful assessment of ISIL's adaptation to our campaign, and as they adapt, we will respond aggressively.

5. Access to Borders

As noted above, ISIL now controls only a 98-kilometer strip of an international border in Syria, and it is shrinking. The loss of access to this border will deprive ISIL of its only route for material and foreign fighters, as well as degrade its ability to plan and launch external attacks. We know that many of the Paris attackers, for example, entered Turkey from this strip of border, and later flowed northward to Europe. This is unacceptable, and we must make every effort to shut it down these areas entirely to ISIL.

We are also supporting our NATO-ally Turkey on their side of the border to enhance border defense, utilize technology for monitoring, and implement effective systems to eliminate the flow of foreign fighters. It is impossible to seal the border entirely, but we have seen a marked increase in Turkish defenses, and ISIL propaganda has even appealed to its recruits not to travel into Syria, but instead, head to Libya.

They will find an inhospitable welcome in Libya. The Libyans are rejecting ISIL en masse, and what Adnani promised would be another citadel of his self-proclaimed caliphate is facing resistance from GNA-aligned Libyan forces and is now an isolated and shrinking piece of one city on the central coast, Sirte. In the last two weeks alone, multiple offensives by forces aligned with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) advanced rapidly towards Sirte and now have the city surrounded. These fighters have suffered casualties, but they have kept moving forward. If the GNA and Prime Minister Sarraj request support from the international community, and the counter-ISIL coalition, it will find many willing partners. The international community and our global coalition have united in support of the GNA.

6. Capable and Confident Leadership

Two years ago, around this time, I was in Iraq when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi pronounced the establishment of a "caliphate" from the largest mosque in Mosul. It was Ramadan, and the announcement, despite being denounced by thousands of Muslim leaders and scholars from around the world, spiked ISIL recruiting and the confidence of its adherents as a historic movement on the march. Baghdadi and other leaders throughout the summer of 2014 were appearing in the open, speaking, and recruiting.

I just returned from another trip to Iraq. It is Ramadan once again. Yet, we have not heard from the so-called "Caliph" in more than six months. This Ramadan is being celebrated not by Baghdadi, but by millions of Iraqis taking the streets each night as ISIL and its leaders have retreated to the shadows.

We have no evidence that Baghdadi is dead, but many of his deputies are. We have killed more than 100 mid-to-senior level ISIL leaders in the past few months alone, and

the key deputies for Baghdadi in 2014, terrorists known as Abu Sayaf and Hajji Iman, have been killed by U.S. military forces. Baghdadi is not far behind.

In short, whereas ISIL once had leaders exhorting fighters in the open, making public addresses, and mocking the civilized world, its leaders are now dead, or in hiding, and issuing written orders for inexperienced fighters to launch desperate missions against the increasingly confident and capable forces arrayed against them. We will work to make sure these trends continue.

7. Media

As ISIL loses leaders, territory, and resources, its message appears to be having less resonance online. We are countering its message 24/7, with coalition efforts led by UK, UAE, and Malaysia, providing counter-content with localized focus for different regions of the world. I have visited the Sawab (“Right Path”) Center in UAE, which is led by smart and energetic young people determined to defeat ISIL in cyberspace, and they are succeeding, with innovative media campaigns focused on ISIL defectors, and the truth behind what ISIL promises versus what it delivers on the ground, especially for women.

In the United States, the Global Engagement Center (GEC) coordinates, integrates, and synchronizes government-wide communications activities to counter ISIL’s messaging. The GEC also help provide assistance with content development platforms, and amplifying effective voices against the perverse ISIL narrative.

Twitter recently announced that it has eliminated nearly 125,000 ISIL-related or ISIL-affiliated “handles,” and that number is growing. Facebook and YouTube are similarly removing ISIL-related content from their platforms. Within the coalition, we have widely publicized how anyone can report ISIL content on-line, so that platforms can remove it if the content violates a platform’s terms of service, which it often does.

These efforts are having an impact. Pro-ISIL content is down and anti-ISIL content is up. Whereas ISIL two years ago had nearly free rein in cyberspace, today, there are reportedly six people opposing ISIL’s message online for each person supporting it. We need these numbers to increase, and recognize that the most effective voices are not governments, but individuals, with their own first-hand accounts of the horror under ISIL rule. As these stories increase, ISIL’s message is on defense, and it is our job to help keep it that way.

The Muslim world is also fighting the ideological battle. Shortly after Baghdadi declared himself “caliph,” 120 Muslim scholars from around the world released an open letter challenging and denouncing ISIL’s philosophy. The scholars took ISIL’s false claims one-by-one, using evidence directly from the Quran to illustrate how Baghdadi’s whims run counter to the teachings of Islam. More and more Muslims are taking to the Internet and public spaces to counter ISIL’s brand of hate and take back their faith.

8. Global Branches

From its core in Iraq and Syria, ISIL has declared eight global branches: Libya, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Sinai, Nigeria, Algeria, the Caucasus, and Afghanistan-Pakistan. We have carefully studied the situation in all of these locations, and in most, a pre-existing terrorist organization, such as Boko Haram, chose to wave the black flag of ISIL. In other cases, such as Yemen, or Afghanistan, small ISIL affiliates have broken off from larger al Qaida movements. We have been actively engaged in these regions, against existing threats, such as AQAP in Yemen, and we should not alter course just because a terrorist group chooses to fly an ISIL flag. Changing flags does not fundamentally change the nature of what – in most cases – was a pre-existing problem, or threat.

Where, however, we see threats emerge anew, or resources directed from the core in Syria to a global branch, it is a concern and we must determine how to act, and act effectively. Libya has been the best example, with ISIL capitalizing on a security vacuum and sending some of its most experienced operators to establish ISIL-Libya. One was named Abu Nabil, a Baghdadi acolyte and experienced terrorist. When we see a leader like this emigrating from the ISIL core to a global branch, we act. Accordingly, Nabil is now dead, targeted with precision in a U.S. airstrike. We have also taken military action to degrade the ISIL network in Libya responsible for launching external attacks in Tunisia.

To root out ISIL-Libya, however, we are building a robust partnership with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA). ISIL's growth in Libya appears to have plateaued in its recruitment of 5,000-8,000 fighters, most from within Africa. Its recruiting drive for European fighters has not succeeded, with numbers in the low hundreds; and for those who made their way to Libya, they may soon lose their stronghold in Sirte.

ISIL-Libya is now under significant pressure. It has been largely expelled from Derna and we have increased engagement with our North African partners to further mitigate the threat, while supporting the UN-led political process in support of the GNA.

Just a few months ago there was no government on the ground. Today, the GNA is on the ground in Tripoli, and has aligned forces east and west of Sirte, which are making gains, isolating the city, and forcing many ISIL terrorists to flee. These GNA-aligned forces have demonstrated they are willing and able to fight ISIL, and we are working with Prime Minister Sarraj on an arms embargo exemption request to further support the GNA and our local partners on the ground.

The second branch of concern is Sinai, which we assess was responsible for destroying the civilian Metrojet airliner nine months ago, killing 224 people. I was in Cairo last week discussing the Sinai situation, on the heels of visits by Chairman Dunford and CENTCOM commander General Votel. We are determined to support our Egyptian partners in degrading and ultimately defeating the ISIL branch in Sinai.

The Sinai branch is comprised from a pre-existing violent extremist group, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis. We estimate its manpower to be from several hundred up to 1,000, with some estimates far less than that, and some slightly more. The current situation in Sinai is a low-grade conflict combining links to the ISIL core with violent extremist ideology drawn from Salafist beliefs and long-standing local grievances. The Egyptian Army has increased combat operations and closed almost all the tunnels that facilitated arms smuggling along the Gaza border.

The United States strongly supports Egypt's efforts to combat ISIL-Sinai, a message I conveyed in Cairo last week. We are providing Apache helicopters, MRAPs, counter-IED training and border security programs, and have intensified military-to-military discussions on how we can help Egypt adopt the counter-insurgency doctrine and tactics it needs to deal ISIL-Sinai a lasting and permanent defeat.

The Sinai security situation also impacts the Multi-National Force and Observers (MFO) mission. The U.S. is firmly committed to supporting the Treaty of Peace and MFO operations. Accordingly, we support the MFO's decisions to both modernize operations and implement force reductions that mitigate risk and enable continuation of its mission.

Beyond the Sinai and Libya branches, we continue to monitor ISIL's attempts to establish additional ones, such as in the Philippines, Bangladesh and Somalia. We are engaging partners and host nations in a whole-of-government approach to ensure that ISIL cannot grow roots in any of these locations.

Accordingly, while we focus on the core in Iraq and Syria, and cannot be distracted every time a pre-existing terror group waves a black flag, we are working to enhance the capacity of local partners to identify and eliminate emerging threats before they can materialize. This is part of a comprehensive and globally integrated campaign plan to contest ISIL in all dimensions, and stay attuned and ahead of emerging threats.

Looking Ahead

Defeating ISIL in Syria and Iraq (measured by its inability to control significant territory and threaten the viability of the Iraqi state), suffocating its global affiliates, and drying up its global networks, are all achievable objectives. Our strategy is making progress. However, ISIL as a threat, its existence as a cellular terrorist organization, or an appealing banner for disturbed individuals searching for meaning in their lives, will be with us for many years.

To further mitigate the threat, we are focused as much on what comes after ISIL, as we are on defeating ISIL. In Iraq, the coalition is providing resources to alleviate human suffering and help return people to their homes (over 725,000 to date), strengthen inclusive local governance, address macro-economic risks, and stabilize local communities through an innovative funding mechanism that is delivering results. Ultimately, however, long-term stability in Iraq rests on the Iraqis, and the center of all communities, Sunni, Shia, and Kurd, must hold against extremes working to pull the country – and their communities – apart.

That center is stronger now than it has been in two years, but the situation remains fragile and volatile. U.S. engagement remains vital.

It will also be important to support the Government of Iraq in reforming security institutions after ISIL, managing the de-mobilization of volunteer forces, and ensuring that the state has full control over armed groups, which must operate under an agreed legal framework.

In Syria, as ISIL is losing territory in the east, its terrorist rival – Jabhat al-Nusra – is gaining ground in the west, putting down roots in Idlib province along the Turkish border. Nusra is establishing schools and training camps, recruiting from abroad, launching major military operations, and enjoying a sophisticated on-line presence, all the while providing safe haven for some of al Qaida’s most experienced terrorists. With direct ties to Ayman al Zawahiri, Osama Bin Laden’s successor, Nusra is now al Qaida largest formal affiliate in history.

This is a serious concern, and where we see Nusra planning external attacks, we will not hesitate to act. To end Nusra as a threat, however, we must find a mechanism to de-escalate and end the Syrian civil war, thereby allowing the moderate opposition to take charge of its own territory, without threat of Asad’s barrel bombs overhead, or terrorists down the street. As the war goes on, the opposition is increasingly interwoven with Nusra, which provides pretext for the criminal Asad regime to target anyone it wants, on grounds that it is targeting terrorists. Nobody is fooled by this argument.

At bottom, the Syrian civil war remains an incubator for violent extremism, and to defeat the threats against our homeland over the long-term, we must find a diplomatic mechanism to enforce a nationwide cessation of hostilities, thereby isolating Nusra from the opposition, concentrating efforts on ISIL, ending bombardments by the Asad regime, and, ultimately, facilitating the political transition called for in UNSCR 2254 and the International Syria Support Group.

Conclusion

It is once again an honor to appear before this Committee. Our global campaign against ISIL is making progress and will accelerate over the coming weeks. This does not, however, mean the threat of terrorism will end. It will require constant collaboration with Congress to stay ahead of this most dynamic and complex challenge. I look forward to your questions.