

Opening Statement on U.S. Policy and Strategy in the Middle East
Chairman John McCain
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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.