

Opening Statement on U.S. Military Strategy in the Middle East
Chairman John McCain
Tuesday, October 27, 2015

The Committee meets today to receive testimony on U.S. strategy in the Middle East. I want to thank our distinguished witnesses for appearing this morning and for their service to our nation.

Before I proceed, I must remind our witnesses that this Committee's rules require written testimony to be submitted 24 hours in advance of a hearing. Failure to do so harms the ability of our Committee members to adequately prepare to conduct oversight. I hope this is the last time we have to address this with the Department.

The tragic loss last week of Master Sergeant Joshua Wheeler, a veteran of 14 combat deployments, reminds us of the high stakes of our mission in the Middle East, and how grateful we are to those brave Americans serving there. We need a strategy worthy of those who carry it out, and unfortunately, we do not have that.

What's worse, it appears the Administration has not even defined the problem correctly. A policy of "ISIL first" fails to understand that ISIL, for all of the threat it poses, is actually just a symptom of a deeper problem—the struggle for power and sectarian identity now raging across the Middle East, the epicenter of which is Iraq and Syria. That is why ISIL exists today with the strength that it does, and this problem will only get worse the longer this conflict rages on.

We hear it said all the time that there is no military solution to this problem, which is a truism. But that, too, is misleading. The real problem is that there can be no diplomatic solution without leverage, and there is a clear military dimension to this problem. Secretary Kerry can take all the trips he wants to Geneva, but unless the military balance of power changes on the ground, diplomacy will achieve nothing.

Changing those conditions is what the Administration has consistently failed to do. Instead, it has assumed our nation could withdraw from the Middle East and avoid the conflict at its heart. Moreover, on those occasions when the Administration has felt compelled to respond—after the use of chemical weapons, for example, or with the rise of ISIL, or now amid the worst refugee crisis in Europe since World War II—the Administration has merely addressed the symptoms of the underlying problem, rather than the problem itself, and all too often made that problem worse.

There is no clearer example of this than the Syria train and equip program. From the start, the Administration said the fighters in this program could only fight ISIL, not Assad's forces, which have slaughtered and displaced exponentially more Syrians than ISIL has. In addition, the Administration made no commitment, until only recently, to provide these forces with any meaningful military support once they returned to Syria. After millions of dollars and months of effort, the program failed to come anywhere close to the Department's original expectations.

The President has expressed surprise about this failure. It was not a surprise. It was completely predictable, and many of us here did predict it. Only someone who does not understand the real problem, which is the underlying conflict in Syria and Iraq—or does not care to—could think that we could effectively recruit and train large numbers of Sunni Syrians to fight only against ISIL, with no promise of coalition assistance if they came under fire from Assad's forces.

Rather than fixing the program, the President suspended it. But this is tantamount to killing the program, because it is destroying what little trust our Syrian partners have left in us—to say nothing of allies like Turkey and Jordan, which invested their own money and prestige in this program. The President now says the failure of this program, his program, actually proves he was right for not wanting to do it in the first place. If there is an opposite for commander-in-chief, this is it.

The training effort in Iraq has its own challenges. Indeed, it is déjà vu all over again. We do not have enough U.S. forces to train and advise Iraqi units at the right levels. We are still not providing sufficient support to Sunni tribes, which are the center of gravity in this fight against ISIL. We are looking the other way as Shia militias go on the offensive in the Sunni heartland. We hear complaints that Iraqis have no will to fight, but we are prohibiting U.S. forces from bolstering their will to fight by advising them in combat or calling in air strikes. We learned all of these lessons in Iraq just a few years ago. Do we really have to relive these failures now?

For nearly seven years, the Administration has tried to extract America from the Middle East. Instead, we have created a massive power vacuum that has been filled by ISIL, al-Qaeda, and its affiliates on the one hand—and Iran and its proxies on the other. And now, into this vacuum has stepped Vladimir Putin.

Putin's intervention in Syria really began in Ukraine. The Administration's failure to impose greater costs on Russia, particularly by providing defensive arms to Ukrainian forces, allowed Putin to annex Crimea, dictate the terms of a frozen

conflict in eastern Ukraine, and then pivot to Syria. It also confirmed Putin's belief that the Administration is weak, and to Putin, weakness is provocative.

The Administration's response thus far to Russia's intervention in Syria has only made this problem worse. First, it urged Russia not to build up its forces in Syria. Putin ignored these warnings. The Administration then tried to deny Russia the airspace to move into Syria—and failed. Putin responded by bombing moderate Syrian forces, many of whom are allied with the United States. And what has been the result? The number of U.S. airstrikes in Syria has dropped. The train and equip program in Syria was halted just as it was starting to show some battlefield results. And the Administration scrambled to pen a so-called “de-confliction” agreement with the Russians that spells out even more of what we will not do in Syria.

Indeed, this agreement means the United States is now moving out of the way and watching as Russian aircraft, together with Iranian, Hezbollah, and Assad's ground forces, attack and kill brave Syrians, many of whom our nation has supported and encouraged. This is not only harmful to our interests – it is immoral.

What we must do is hasten the end of the conflict in Syria and Iraq. In particular, we must stop Assad's use of air power and his horrific barrel bombs, which are the major killer of Syrians and driver of refugees out of the region. We must establish areas in Syria where civilians can be safe, and do what is necessary to protect these areas in the air and on the ground. We must recognize that Putin is not interested in a negotiated solution in Syria that favors U.S. interests, so we should instead impose real costs on Russia, not just in Syria but everywhere we have leverage to do so. Finally, as General David Petraeus has recently, we must devise a strategy to confront Iranian power and designs in the region, rather than acquiescing to them.

Some will object, at they have for years, that we cannot bear the costs of these actions. But consider the costs of our current inaction and half-measures. Mass atrocities in Syria will continue. Our allies and partners in the Middle East will be put at greater risk of existential danger. Europe will continue to be destabilized and consumed by the internal challenge of managing the refugee challenge. The cancer of ISIL will grow more potent and spread across more of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, posing a greater threat to our national security. Iran will be emboldened in its pursuit of its malign regional ambitions. Putin will establish Russia as a dominant military power in the Middle East for the first time in four decades. And all the while, America's credibility and influence will continue to erode.

Make no mistake: This is the course we are now on. This will be the consequence of our current policy. No one believes there are easy answers to the underlying problems in the Middle East. But this much should be clear: We cannot go on pretending that we can somehow avoid these problems—or that the current approach of trying to treat the symptoms of the disease, rather than its cause, will work if only we give it more time. It will not. Policies of gradual escalation never do.