

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

**SH-216
Hart Senate Office Building
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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.