

**UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR POLICY
CHRISTINE WORMUTH
SENATE COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
“U.S. MILITARY OPERATIONS TO COUNTER THE ISLAMIC STATE
IN IRAQ AND THE LEVANT”
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2015**

Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed, Members of the Committee: thank you for the opportunity to appear in front of the Committee today to provide an update on our counter-ISIL campaign.

It has been just over a year since the United States and a coalition of nations began the military campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). When we began the campaign, ISIL was pushing into Kurdish territory in northern Iraq and toward Baghdad. Over the past 12 months, ISIL has lost territory in both Syria and Iraq despite advances in Ramadi and Palmyra. Progress has been slow but steady. The 62-member international coalition to defeat ISIL in Iraq and Syria – galvanized by the threat ISIL poses to all of our nations – remains strong.

There have been setbacks along the way. While not 10 feet tall, ISIL remains an adaptive adversary that can still conduct offensive operations – as we saw in Ramadi. ISIL is a thinking enemy that adapts to evolving conditions on the battlefield. Our train and equip programs in Iraq and Syria have faced challenges – in Iraq the pace of the program has moved more slowly than we would like, and in Syria we use stringent vetting criteria that at the outset of the program have contributed to smaller numbers than we hoped for. As the campaign continues in both countries, we expect there to be continued challenges in clearing and holding territory.

We have also seen progress during the past year. You all are familiar with the successful operations to take back Kurdish territory in Iraq, defeat ISIL in Kobane, and retake Tikrit – as well as other successful engagements. On the political front, Prime Minister Abadi in Iraq continues to demonstrate the resolve necessary to confront ISIL and is striving to manage the challenging political landscape in Baghdad. In Syria, we have seen opportunities emerge that we did not envision a year ago, particularly in the northern tier of the country, where Syrian Kurds have successfully pressured ISIL along the Turkish border and, working with Syrian Arabs, have also applied pressure southward toward Raqqa.

Over a year ago the President outlined a whole of government strategy to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL, and he emphasized it would be a multi-year campaign. Secretary Carter outlined the nine lines of effort that comprise our strategy in detail for you in July, so I won't go over them again except to emphasize that it will take more than just the military campaign to be successful. We also will need to dry up ISIL's finances, stop the flows of foreign fighters into Iraq and Syria in particular, protect the United States from potential ISIL attacks, provide humanitarian assistance to rebuild areas cleared of ISIL forces, and find ways to more effectively counter ISIL's very successful messaging campaign.

As Secretary Carter told this committee in July, the Administration believes it has the right strategy in place. We are now focused on ways to improve the implementation of the strategy – this means constantly evaluating our approach and adapting it as conditions evolve, opportunities arise, and challenges emerge. This is truly an interagency effort, with increasingly better synchronization across departments and agencies to improve the execution of the strategy. Secretary Carter and Secretary Kerry have been regularly reviewing the implementation of the counter-ISIL campaign, including a meeting tomorrow with NCTC on foreign fighters.

The Department of Defense, as you know, is responsible for two lines of effort inside that strategy – denying ISIL safe haven in Iraq and Syria, and building partner capacity so that local forces can defeat ISIL on the ground. I'd like to briefly update you on our activities in both of these areas.

The coalition air campaign has degraded ISIL's military capacity, removed some key leaders, and enabled gains by local forces in Iraq and Syria. Iraqi Security Forces regained control of Tikrit from ISIL earlier this year, and Syrian Kurds and their Sunni Arab partners recently took the key border town of Tal Abyad from ISIL, severing one of its key lines of communication and supply, and putting ISIL on the defensive and its stronghold in Raqqa under pressure. Those examples demonstrate, again, that where we have had a credible ground force supported by coalition air power, ISIL has suffered.

We are also working hard to build the capacity of partner forces on the ground. Since we began our efforts, we have equipped more than six brigades and provided training to nearly 13,000 Iraqi personnel, including Kurds – with more currently in the pipeline. Training for the Iraqi Army, however, has been slowed by a lack of trainees as the Secretary of Defense made clear in his July testimony before this committee.

Over the last several weeks we have had better participation from Iraqi units at BPC sites and Iraq has expanded the training pool to a wider set of existing units. The Iraqis are also being more aggressive about planning ahead to put additional units in training, which should increase the efficiency of the training effort. Some of the units we have trained are now participating more directly in the fight in areas such as Ramadi. Initial indications are that they are performing well in combat missions, but they face a difficult fight ahead and strong leadership will be essential.

U.S. forces on the ground at al Asad and Taqaddum airbases are involved in advising and training of Sunni tribal fighters in Anbar province – both through direct training and “train-the-trainer” efforts with the Iraqi Security Forces. In terms of equipping these forces, we’ve recently delivered a battalion’s worth of equipment to Iraqi officials working with us there to distribute to Sunni tribal fighters. We are also overseeing distribution of the Government of Iraq’s equipment to tribal fighters from these bases. Through efforts like this, there are now more than four thousand equipped Sunni tribal fighters in Anbar.

We are also still in the early stages of our train-and-equip mission in Syria. This effort is just one element of our larger campaign in Syria, which includes an increasing number of airstrikes as well as efforts on the ground with the Syrian Kurds, Sunni Arab, and other local forces to put pressure on ISIL in northeastern Syria. These efforts have substantially rolled ISIL back in this area and had significant impacts on ISIL’s freedom of movement and lines of communication. As of September 15, through our T&E program we are currently training more than 100 fighters with additional recruits in the pipeline. This number is much smaller than we hoped for at this point, partly because we put our volunteers through a very vigorous screening process to meet standards very appropriately set by U.S. law. We are closely aligned with the coalition on all of these efforts. As an example, Turkey’s recent decision to provide access and basing at Incirlik has enabled us to expand our fight against ISIL and further strengthen the cohesion of our efforts in Syria.

Before turning to General Austin, I also want to address Russia’s involvement in Syria.

We are closely tracking Russia’s recent efforts to deploy additional military equipment and personnel to Syria, and we are in close touch with our allies and partners about these developments. Russian and Iranian support to Assad and his regime has prolonged the conflict in

Syria. Both have continued to support, politically and militarily, a regime that has systematically murdered its own people, creating the conditions for the current conflict and the rise of ISIL. What is needed in Syria, urgently, is a political solution to the conflict through a political transition away from Asad. Any actions that empower the regime to escalate the conflict are unwelcome, as they would be destabilizing and counterproductive.

In closing, let me state the obvious: this is a difficult problem. We will not solve it quickly, but we have the right components in place to advance our objectives, and we are dynamically adjusting our campaign to deal with a rapidly changing battlefield. Achieving a lasting defeat against ISIL is going to require continued commitment and steady leadership from the United States and the global coalition, as well as commitment and sacrifice on the part of local forces on the ground in Iraq and Syria. Thank you.