



AmericanRhetoric.com

Ashton Carter

Senate Armed Services Committee Statement on Counter-ISIL Campaign

delivered 28 October 2015, Washington, D.C.



AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Ranking Member Reed, Members of the Committee: Thanks for inviting us to come here today before you to discuss the counter-ISIL campaign in Iraq and Syria, and along the way to address some of the concerns, Mr. Chairman, that you -- you raised and to share with you, Senator Reed, some of the plans and initiatives that the Chairman [of the Joint Chiefs of Staff] and I are formulating for our campaign in both Iraq and Syria.

This is the first time for me appearing before this Committee alongside Chairman Joe Dunford, who was just in the region last week, as was noted. I'm grateful to Joe for answering my and the President's call to step down from what every Marine knows is a higher position -- namely Commandant to the Marine Corps -- to become Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff -- and to this Committee for confirming Joe. Thank you. I'm glad to have you here with me today.

Before I turn to the subject of today's hearing, I want to reiterate -- as I've said consistently since March and continue to believe -- that Washington needs to come together behind a multi-year budget deal that supports our defense strategy, the troops and their families, and all elements of American's national security and strength. I understand significant progress was made on this overnight and I'm looking forward to reviewing the details, but I welcome this major positive development and applaud the members of this Committee for what you're doing to help us get there.



AmericanRhetoric.com

The Middle East presents a kaleidoscope of challenges, but there, as everywhere, our actions and strong military posture are guided by what's in America's interests. That's our North Star. And amid this region's complexity and uncertainty, those interests are to deter aggression; to bolster the security of our friends and allies, especially Israel; to ensure freedom of navigation in the Gulf; to check Iran's malign influence even as we monitor the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action; and, to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL. This last one, ISIL, poses a threat to our people and to friendly countries not only in the Middle East but around the world.

Today, I will first outline the changes in the execution of our strategy that we have considered, and are now pursuing militarily, to gather battlefield momentum in the fight against ISIL. Then I'll address what Russia is doing in Syria, and why we won't let it interfere with our campaign against ISIL.

When I last spoke to this committee about our counter-ISIL campaign and its nine lines of essential military and non-military effort,¹ I made three things clear about the military aspects: first, that we will deliver ISIL a lasting defeat; second, that truly lasting success would require enabling capable, motivated local forces on the ground, recognizing that this will take time and new diplomatic energy; and third, that our strategy's execution can and must and will be strengthened.

All that's still true. Our determination is unchanged, even as the situation continues to evolve, and we continue to adapt to execute our campaign more effectively. And today I'd like to elaborate on the third point and explain how we're adapting our campaign to do more -- reinforcing what we know works.

The changes we're pursuing can be described what I -- by what I call the "three R's" -- Raqqa, Ramadi, and Raids. Before I explain what they mean, let me also note that I took actions to streamline command-and-control of the counter-ISIL military campaign by assigning the -- the entire effort to a single general officer, Lieutenant General Sean MacFarland, where in the urgency of the early phase of the campaign last year several layers were added to the general officer already present in Iraq.

The first "R" is Raqqa, ISIL's stronghold and administrative capital. We've been clear for some time that we need to keep up pressure on Raqqa, and that to that end we will support moderate Syrian forces fighting ISIL that have made territorial gains near Raqqa. Indeed, some of them are within 30 miles of Raqqa today. The "Syrian Arab Coalition", which we plan to strengthen through our new equipping approach -- more on that in a moment -- will work over time with other Syrian anti-ISIL forces to push towards Raqqa. To the south, we plan to further strengthen our partner, Jordan. And from the skies above, we expect to intensify our air campaign, including with additional U.S. and coalition aircraft, to target ISIL with a higher and heavier rate of strikes. This will include more strikes against ISIL high-value targets as our intelligence improves; also its oil enterprise, which is a critical pillar of ISIL's financial infrastructure. As I said last Friday, we've already begun to ramp up these deliberate strikes.



AmericanRhetoric.com

Part of this pressure includes our new approach to the Syria Train-and- Equip Program. I, like President Obama and members of this committee, was disappointed with that program's results. We accordingly examined the program this summer, and have since changed it. I use the word "change" -- not "end" -- change the program.

While the old approach was to train and equip completely new forces outside of Syria before sending them into the fight, the new approach is to work with vetted leaders of groups that are already fighting ISIL, and provide equipment and some training to them and support their operations with airpower. This approach builds on successes that local Syrian Arab and Syrian Kurdish forces have made along Syria's northern border to retake and hold ground from ISIL with the help of U.S. airstrikes and equipment resupplies.

If done in concert as we intend, all these actions on the ground and from the air should help shrink ISIL's territory into a smaller and smaller area and create new opportunities for targeting ISIL -- ultimately denying this evil movement any safe haven in its supposed heartland.

The second "R" is Ramadi, the capital of Iraq's Anbar province, which serves as a critical example of the Abadi government's commitment to work with local Sunni communities with our help to retake and hold ground from ISIL and in turn to build momentum to eventually go northward to Mosul.

Under Prime Minister Abadi's leadership, the Iraqis have begun to use American-made F-16s to support counter-ISIL operations, and have empowered capable battlefield commanders to step forward. As we see more progress towards assembling capable and motivated Iraqi forces under Baghdad's control and including Sunni elements, we're willing to continue to provide more enabling capabilities and fire support to help them succeed. However, the Iraqi government and security forces will have to take certain steps militarily to make sure our progress sticks.

We need to see more in the direction of multi-sectarian governance and defense leadership. For example, we've given the Iraqi government two battalions' worth of equipment for mobilizing Sunni tribal forces; as we continue to provide this support, the Iraqi government must ensure it is distributed effectively. If local Sunni forces aren't sufficiently equipped, regularly paid, and empowered as co-equal members of the Iraqi Security Forces, ISIL's defeats in Anbar will only be temporary.

The third and final "R" is raids, signal -- signaling that we won't hold back from supporting capable partners in opportunistic attacks against ISIL, or conducting such missions directly, whether by strikes from the air or direct action on the ground. Last week's rescue operation was led by Iraqi Kurdish forces, with U.S. advisers in support. One of those accompanying advisors, Master Sergeant Joshua Wheeler, heroically acted to ensure the overall success of the mission and lost his life in the process.



AmericanRhetoric.com



The death of any service member is a tragedy, and as I told his family and teammates this weekend, we offer our condolences to Master Sergeant Wheeler's loved ones for their loss. While our mission in Iraq is to train, advise, and assist our Iraqi partners, in situations such as that operation -- where we have actionable intelligence and a capable partner force -- we want to support our partners and we will.

At the same time, the raid on Abu Syyaf's home, the strikes against Junaid Hussain and most recently Sanafi al-Nasr, should all serve notice to ISIL and other terrorist leaders that once we locate them, no target is beyond our reach.

As we've looked at how to gather momentum and adapt to the changing battlefield, some have discussed putting in a buffer zone, humanitarian zone, or no-fly zone in Syria. We have analyzed various options and the political and military requirements of each. These options are complex and raise some challenges, which I'm prepared to discuss in answer to your questions.

Let me now turn to Russia's involvement in Syria. To be clear, we are not cooperating with Russia, and we're not letting Russia impact the pace or scope of our campaign against ISIL in Iraq and Syria. While we negotiated a document on safety of flight with the Russian Minister of Defense, we do not align ourselves more broadly with their military actions, because instead of singularly attacking ISIL, as they said they were going to do, they are primarily attacking the Syrian opposition, as the Chairman has noted, which further fuels the tragic civil war there. Their actions suggest a doubling-down on their longstanding relationship with Assad -- sending advisers, artillery, and aviation to enable and support the Assad regime and Iranian forces in attacking moderates who oppose the regime and are essential to Syria's political transition. And it appears the vast majority of their strikes -- by some estimates as high as 85 to 90 percent -- use dumb bombs, which obviously increases the possibility of civilian casualties.

So, as Russia acts in a coalition of two with Iran at its side, the United States will continue to strengthen our 65-nation global coalition. Even as we've reached an understanding with the Russians on safety protocols for coalition pilots over Syria, we will keep prosecuting our counter-ISIL campaign unabated. We will keep supporting the moderate Syrian opposition, along with our other commitments to friends and allies in the region.



AmericanRhetoric.com

And, consistent with our strong and balanced approach towards Russian aggression elsewhere in the world, including NATO and Ukraine, we will keep the door open for Russia to contribute to efforts toward a political solution, in which -- which in the final answer -- analysis -- is the only answer to the Syrian conflict.

I have discussed the military strategy and accompanying campaign, but before I conclude, I remind the Committee that defeating ISIL and protecting America requires coordinated efforts across all of the so-called nine lines of effort -- to include supporting effective governance in Iraq, enhancing intelligence collection, disrupting ISIL's financing, countering ISIL's messaging, stopping the flow of foreign fighters, providing humanitarian support, and protecting our homeland -- where other departments and agencies of our government have the lead.

Thank you.

¹ The nine lines (quoted more or less verbatim from Carter's July 2015 testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee): 1) building a more effective, inclusive, and multi-sectarian governance in Iraq (and to some extent Syria); 2) denying ISIL safe haven; 3) building partner capacity in Iraq and Syria; 4) enhancing intelligence collection on ISIL; 5) disrupting ISIL's finances; 6) counter ISIL's messaging; 7) disrupting the flow of foreign fighters to and from ISIL; 8) providing humanitarian support to those affected by the conflicts in Iraq and Syria; 9) disrupting terrorist threats (Source: <http://www.defense.gov>)