

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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**REP. STEPHEN F. LYNCH**

Ranking Member

Subcommittee on National Security

*“Battlefield Successes and Challenges: Recent Efforts to Win the War Against ISIS”*

Opening Statement

January 17, 2018 at 10:00am; 2154RHOB

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to thank you for holding this hearing to examine the progress of efforts to combat the terrorist group known as the Islamic State – or ISIS. I'd also like to thank today's witnesses for their willingness to help this Subcommittee with its work.

As reported last month by *Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve*: “ISIS has no capital...no physical caliphate...and across Iraq and Syria, has lost nearly all of the territory they once held.” Since the establishment of the U.S.-led coalition to combat ISIS by President Obama in 2014, the terrorist group has lost nearly 40,000 square miles of its claimed territory and currently holds approximately 2,000 square miles. ISIS has also been reduced in deployed force strength from peak estimates of tens of thousands of insurgent fighters to less than 1,000. The liberated territory includes the former ISIS stronghold of Mosul, Iraq – recaptured by U.S.-backed Iraqi Security and Kurdish Peshmerga forces last July following a nine-month effort that began in October of 2016. The self-declared ISIS capital of Raqqa, Syria also fell in October of 2017 to the U.S.-supported Syrian Democratic Forces .

However, the decimation of ISIS' territorial control does not signify the outright defeat of a terrorist organization whose motto is “*remaining and expanding.*” In a statement submitted for the record, former Acting Director of the C.I.A. Michael Morell, who served under both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations, notes that the elimination of the so-called caliphate cannot be confused with the elimination of ISIS itself. In the wake of surmounting battlefield losses, insurgent fighters have moved underground to perpetrate traditional and destabilizing terrorist attacks in the region while continuing to rely on affiliate organizations and social media to direct or inspire terrorist attacks globally. I ask for unanimous consent to enter Director Morell's statement into the official hearing record.

The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point similarly reports that following the fall of Mosul, ISIS leadership made a calculated decision to withdraw its fighters from further sustained clashes with regional security and coalition forces in the city of Tal Afar and town of Hawija in Iraq, in contested areas along the Euphrates River Valley, and even in the battle for Raqqa. Their sole purpose was to preserve manpower for a pivot to an all-out insurgency and the use of guerilla tactics including hit-and-run attacks on secure areas by small units, the assassination of security personnel, and the recruitment of new members among displaced civilians for suicide bombings.

We have continued to witness this marked shift to guerilla warfare in the form of coordinated terrorist attacks committed by ISIS operatives in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and other regional countries. Just this week, two suicide bombers reportedly associated with ISIS sleeper cells killed nearly 40 people at an open-air market located in Baghdad's Tayaran Square – marking the first major attack in the Iraqi capital since Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared victory over ISIS. This attack came on the heels of an ISIS suicide bombing detonated at a market in Kabul, Afghanistan on January 4<sup>th</sup> that killed at least 20 people and another at a Shia cultural center in Kabul on December 28<sup>th</sup> that killed more than 40 people.

The persistent threat of ISIS-directed or inspired attacks in the West also remains. Just last week, the Department of Justice announced the indictment of Akayed Ullah on terrorism and explosives charges for his detonation of a bomb in a subway station near the Port Authority bus terminal in New York City in December of 2017. Ullah stated in his initial law enforcement interview that “*I did it for the Islamic State.*” This attack followed an ISIS-inspired truck attack in November of 2017 along the Hudson River bike path in New York that killed eight people.

Clearly, our national security strategy must adapt to combat a terrorist group that the Commander of U.S. Central Command, Joseph Votel, recently deemed a “*different kind of organization that has been very adaptive.*” We should all be concerned that at this point we lack a fully articulated and detailed plan to address the remaining pockets of the ISIS insurgency in Iraq and Syria or implement a full spectrum response to combat the rise of affiliate organizations in Libya, the Philippines, Sinai, and other areas – which will require close collaboration with our international partners. President Trump has proposed cutting 32%, or nearly \$19 billion dollars, from the State Department budget and has left vacant U.S. ambassadorships in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other key nations in the fight against ISIS. We simply cannot combat ISIS by neglecting the long-term security and political stability of the region.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to discussing these and other issues with today's witnesses and I yield back the balance of my time.