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Section 1222 Report: Strategy for the Middle East and to Counter Violent Extremism

This report responds to the requirements of section 1222 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2016, which provides that not later than February 15, 2016, the Secretaries of Defense and State shall submit to the appropriate Committees of Congress “a strategy for the Middle East and to counter violent extremism.” The strategy required by section 1222 shall include: (1) a description of the objectives and end state for the United States in the Middle East and with respect to violent extremism; (2) a description of the roles and responsibilities of the Department of State in the strategy; (3) a description of roles and responsibilities of the Department of Defense in the strategy; (4) a description of actions to prevent the weakening and failing of states in the Middle East; (5) a description of actions to counter violent extremism; (6) a description of the resources required by the Department of Defense to counter ISIL’s illicit oil revenues; (7) a list of the state and non-state actors that must be engaged to counter violent extremism; (8) a description of the coalition required to carry out the strategy and the expected lines of effort of such a coalition; (9) an assessment of United States efforts to disrupt and prevent foreign fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq and to disrupt foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq traveling to the United States.

Objectives and End States

The United States’ objectives in the Middle East are: that all countries of the region meet their international commitments on non-proliferation; that terrorist groups no longer threaten the United States, our allies, and our interests; that our allies and partners enjoy stability, prosperity, and security; that governments in the region have the strength and legitimacy to provide both security and a positive future for their people; that open lines of communication allow critical trade and natural resources to reach the global economy, including freedom of navigation in the Gulf; that governments respect the human rights of their people and address societal violence and discrimination; that women and men are able to live free from violence and participate fully in the political and economic development of their countries; that economies are open and realize their full potential; to implement the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and ensure Iran’s nuclear program remains exclusively peaceful, while also continuing to check Iran’s malign influence; to address drivers of violent extremist radicalization and recruitment while we continue to work to counter al-Qa’ida and its affiliates; and that Israel and the Palestinians resolve their conflict through the achievement of a two-state solution.

In the present context, one overarching objective is to degrade and ultimately defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Working with Coalition partners and local forces, we are taking the fight to ISIL where it holds territory, because ISIL’s control of territory enables it to sustain its fight. Addressing ISIL’s self-proclaimed “caliphate” in Iraq and Syria is essential to prevent attacks on the U.S. homeland, and on the home territories of our Coalition partners. We have sought to develop capable and motivated local ground forces to lead the ground fight, since only local forces can ensure a lasting victory. Moreover, we seek to set the conditions for a political solution to the civil war in Syria, and to work towards inclusive governance in Iraq, since these are the only durable means to prevent a future terrorist organization like ISIL from re-emerging in the region. Achieving these objectives requires leveraging the full range of U.S.

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and Coalition security and stabilization resources, including diplomatic, intelligence, law enforcement, economic, and informational resources.

Destroying ISIL in Iraq and Syria

Our first objective in the campaign against ISIL must be to defeat ISIL at its core. To achieve this objective, the United States leads a 60+ member Global Coalition to counter ISIL, which is consistent with the objectives of the September 2014 National Strategy to Counter ISIL. This coalition provides a template for identifying nations and multilateral organizations that may support broader efforts to counter violent extremism. The members of the Global Counter-ISIL Coalition have committed themselves to eliminating the specific threat posed by ISIL and have already contributed in various capacities to the effort to combat ISIL in Iraq and Syria, the Middle East region, and beyond. The breadth and diversity of partners supporting this Coalition demonstrates the global and unified nature of its endeavor.

Ending ISIL's control over territory it holds in Iraq and Syria represents a necessary, though not sufficient in and of itself, component of the worldwide campaign to defeat the group and counter its radical ideology. Control of territory provides ISIL access to considerable financial resources and manpower, heightens its ideological appeal to potential foreign adherents, and represents ISIL's military and political center of gravity. But the "state-like" attributes ISIL has sought also create opportunities to degrade its organization. In concert with Coalition partners, we have mapped and are attacking vulnerabilities in ISIL's war-fighting machine, including successful attacks on military objectives that have an impact on ISIL-controlled petroleum and financial infrastructure. ISIL has not had a significant battlefield victory since May 2015. Key Sunni-majority cities in Iraq, such as Tikrit, Bayji, and Ramadi, have been liberated, as well as Sinjar, where ISIL first gained global notoriety after murdering hundreds of Yazidis and pressing thousands more into slavery. In Syria, local forces have retaken al-Hawl and al-Shaddada, which straddle the key supply route connecting the ISIL strongholds of Raqqa and Mosul. This strategy pressures ISIL in more places than just on the battlefield. When we attack ISIL on levels beyond merely the geographic, we stress its resources, strain its ability to command its forces, weaken its capacity for effective offensive or defensive operations, challenge its narrative, and eliminate its capability to control a population. These efforts will break ISIL's image as a functioning state as well as the myth of its overwhelming battlefield prowess, thereby reducing its attractiveness to potential recruits.

Our key military efforts in the near-term will focus on completion of operations to secure and stabilize Ramadi, Iraq, and then building on success there to progress toward Hit and Rutbah, before ultimately stabilizing Anbar Province, and then moving to isolate, pressure, and eventually clear Mosul. The Coalition will continue to intensify air strikes and raids against ISIL targets prior to and during the course of clearance operations. The Coalition will also continue to train, advise, and assist Iraqi forces, including Kurdish forces, while exploiting unconventional opportunities to instigate dissension against ISIL governance in Mosul. In addition, the Coalition will increase training of local police and volunteer forces to hold liberated territory. The Coalition is also supporting efforts by the Iraqi government to restore essential services and create conditions that will enable displaced populations to return and revive their communities. Protecting liberated territories from instability or outright recapture is a key medium-term

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objective; fostering political processes to make liberation sustainable is a central long-term objective, one requiring support from well outside the security sector.

In Syria, our near-term efforts against ISIL in 2016 are focused on expanding relationships and operational opportunities with appropriately-vetted local forces that are motivated to fight ISIL, and on undermining ISIL's control of Raqqa, the capital of ISIL's self-declared caliphate. To that end, our near-term efforts will focus on exploiting recent successes at Al Hawl, the Tishrin Dam, and Shadadi by enabling moderate Syrian opposition elements to move south to isolate ISIL in Raqqa and undermine its control over the city. The Coalition has intensified raids against ISIL targets across the Syrian battlespace and will utilize a full range of military and related options to increase pressure on ISIL, its resources, and its leadership. Further, the Coalition will continue pursuing relationships with moderate Syrian opposition groups where they can be counted on to participate in specific operations against ISIL. In particular, we are pursuing relationships with groups in southern Syria with an eye toward enabling them to mount unconventional operations to improve our visibility and understanding in the area, to deny ISIL operational freedom, to force ISIL to divert remaining combat power from external operations to internal security, and to weaken ISIL's territorial control. Coalition partners will assist in the training, munitions, and equipment supply for these groups.

In both Iraq and Syria, the Coalition continues its campaign to degrade ISIL's ability to fund its activities, including through attacks on military objectives that have an impact on ISIL controlled petroleum and financial infrastructure. Recent Coalition operations in support of these efforts include Operation TIDAL WAVE II, which began in early November 2015, and which has destroyed roughly 400 oil trucks, disrupting ISIL fuel supply lines that the terrorists use across Syria and Iraq. We assess that TIDAL WAVE II has reduced ISIL's revenue by approximately 30%. These strikes included hitting an "ISIL bank" in Mosul, a key site for collection, storage, and distribution of ISIL revenues.

We were assisted in these efforts by successful intelligence exploitation. A raid last spring captured over seven terabytes of data – digital media, flash drives, CDs, and papers – belonging to "Abu Sayyaf," ISIL's "financial emir." This material provided broad insight into ISIL's financial situation and its vulnerabilities, which we have been able to exploit. ISIL maintains a highly-centralized management of its energy program, which is overseen by nearly 100 members. It also vets some 1,600 energy-related personnel, many of whom are foreign fighters, to maintain tight control over revenue and its distribution. At this point, the network is no longer able to operate openly as it once did, and many of these personnel have been killed.

The destruction of ISIL in Iraq and Syria will help create the conditions necessary to promote more durable stability in both nations. Ensuring stability will require a whole of government approach, in which the U.S. will work closely with local governments as well as in close coordination with our coalition partners. Encouraging increased legitimacy of the national and local governments by encouraging them to be accountable to their citizens and respect citizens' basic human rights are the core of durable stability. It will also require competent police and other local forces that can hold liberated terrain. We are working closely with our Coalition partners to prepare a push for institutional and political reform that will begin as soon as the security situation permits. In Iraq, we are pressing the Government of Iraq regularly to institute

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political reforms that promote reconciliation and inclusive governance. We are also working with the Government of Iraq to assist with stabilization and reconstruction in liberated areas. Finally, we are also leading an effort to organize financial support for Iraq, so that Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) can continue operations against ISIL notwithstanding depressed oil prices.

In Syria, such stability will require completion of the peace process envisioned in the Geneva Communiqué and currently being led by the International Syrian Support Group (ISSG) and the United Nations. We have led an international effort to address the Syrian civil war, including negotiating international arrangements, such as the Syrian Cessation of Hostilities and the ISSG process to facilitate an agreement between the Syrian parties to transition away from the current Syrian regime. The political transition envisaged moves beyond the al-Assad-led government regime toward a more representative form allows the rebuilding of Syrian state's key institutions.

Beyond Iraq and Syria, we continue to augment our regular diplomatic, economic, development, law enforcement, and intelligence efforts with our partner nations to enable them to combat ISIL. The United States supports less secure regional partners that are under threat from ISIL, a threat that may be compounded by other pressures such as refugee flows. We generally pursue five broad types of activities with these regional partners: (1) humanitarian assistance to provide immediate assistance for refugees; (2) economic assistance; (3) security assistance reform; (4) military contingency planning; and (5) institutional capacity building. Our humanitarian assistance has helped relieve the tremendous strain placed on regional partners as they provide for refugees and ensures that refugees have basic needs met. Our economic assistance ensures that fragile economies remain resilient and are able to provide needed jobs. Security assistance reform has helped partner nations overcome systemic or structural barriers to procuring defense items that meet their high priority capability requirements. We have also implemented a variety of new mechanisms to improve interaction with partners on security assistance. Key among these is improved long-term planning processes for security assistance intended to align U.S. support with mutually-prioritized partner capacity gaps. We have sought to focus partners' military leadership on the military *capabilities* they seek to create, not merely on military platforms available for purchase. Where appropriate these activities are complemented by joint contingency planning, as well as by support from U.S. special operations training personnel to improve local capabilities. We are also working to help our partners develop complementary law enforcement and criminal justice sector capabilities to handle terrorism in a rule of law framework.

Rolling Back ISIL Expansion in Other Parts of the Globe

To defeat ISIL worldwide, we must counter the extremist ideology that has drawn fighters and affiliates from around the region and the world. The military campaign in 2016 will focus predominantly on destroying ISIL in Iraq and Syria, but the United States will simultaneously work with partners to pursue diplomatic, intelligence and military efforts against ISIL adherents and continue to partner with key regional actors confronting ISIL affiliates – particularly those in Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen, Sinai, and Nigeria – that threaten partner nations or U.S. interests.

To achieve these goals, we will continue and expand efforts to build the security sector capacity of nations where ISIL operates and to strengthen border-states and other nations committed to confronting ISIL. Where necessary, we will also take unilateral or partnered action to disrupt

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emerging ISIL nodes directly. We will continue to seek additional contributions from partner nations to these efforts.

Coalition forces play a critical, but far from exclusive, role in countering ISIL's global expansion. Here, as elsewhere, intensive interagency and international participation will be essential. Intelligence, diplomacy and communication, development and law enforcement efforts are all vital to understanding, responding to, and ultimately reversing ISIL's expansion beyond Iraq and Syria. There may be instances in which the Coalition and/or partner nations can undertake operations for which others lack authorities, can contribute key capabilities, or have knowledge relevant to the fight.

Countering violent extremism (CVE) is a critical part of preventing new ISIL affiliates and branches from emerging. DOS and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have developed a forthcoming joint strategy on countering violent extremism (CVE) to guide these efforts. Under this joint strategy, we will seek to focus and expand diplomatic efforts with governmental, multilateral, and non-governmental actors to promote CVE cooperation. We will expand and elevate CVE within our counterterrorism and broader diplomatic engagement with relevant partners in the Middle East. DOS and USAID are also expanding and targeting rule of law, development, and other foreign assistance programs to help partner nations address specific drivers of violent extremism and enhance CVE partnerships.

Defeating the communications network that supports ISIL's narrative is a central element of CVE and our approach to counter ISIL's expansion. With the transition of the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications to the Global Engagement Center, (GEC), we will expand strategic communications efforts to counter violent extremist messaging and promote alternative voices. The GEC will coordinate and synchronize U.S. Government messaging efforts against ISIL, leverage third-party communicators to deliver credible and effective messages at the local level, and integrate advanced data analytics to improve our understanding of the adversary's message. It will also study the effect of the enemy's message on audiences, as well as provide better assessment of our own messaging efforts. We will also work through our public affairs networks to promote CVE strategic communications. We are retargeting certain Foreign Assistance programs to advance CVE, and will expand and target rule of law, development, and other foreign assistance programs to address specific drivers of violent extremism and enhance CVE partnerships, including through the use of the Counterterrorism Partnership Fund. We are working with national and regional hubs, like the Sawab Center in the United Arab Emirates, to counter online and off-line messaging by violent extremist actors, especially ISIL.

These international CVE efforts are being coordinated closely with domestic CVE efforts led by the new CVE Task Force co-led by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Justice. The CVE Task Force will: (1) synchronize and integrate whole-of-government counter violent extremism (CVE) programs and activities; (2) leverage new CVE efforts, including those of the DHS Office of Community Partnerships; (3) conduct ongoing strategic planning; and (4) assess and evaluate CVE programs and activities.

Protecting the Homeland and Countering Foreign Terrorist Fighters

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We are working closely with foreign partners to address the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) through improved information-sharing, better aviation and border security measures, improved counterterrorism legislation and prosecutions, and more effective CVE efforts in known source communities. The United States is providing significant capacity-building assistance to encourage greater action by partner countries in all of these areas and working to expand law enforcement cooperation and information-sharing.

We have begun to deploy “Foreign Fighter Surge Teams” to European countries with critical FTF and Visa Waiver Program vulnerabilities. These teams deepen bilateral cooperation on information sharing, traveler screening, border security, and law enforcement investigations. We continue to monitor networks and travel patterns with information shared among Coalition governments. Thanks to intensive diplomatic outreach, the U.S. now has agreements with 50 governments to share information on terrorist identities to better identify, track and deter their travel. Since the passage of UNSCR 2178 in September 2014, over 45 countries have passed or updated their laws to more effectively identify and prosecute FTFs.

We are also seeking to disrupt FTF networks through military efforts in Iraq and Syria. Multiple high-profile FTFs have been killed during the course of the counter-ISIL campaign, including Muhammad Emwazi (so-called “Jihadi John”) and Junaid Hussain. In December, Coalition airstrikes killed 10 ISIL leaders, including Charaffe al-Mouadan, an external plotter with direct links to Abdelhamid Abaoud, the mastermind of the Paris attacks. The external plotting network remains a core priority for our information gathering and targeting. The death of Jihadi John and other ISIL leaders also helped degrade the external plotting cells, and will help deter individuals who are not yet fully radicalized or recruited by ISIL. Ground operations and other activities also often yield valuable information on FTFs, all of which is catalogued and shared among U.S. departments and agencies and with foreign partners (through military, diplomatic, law enforcement, and/or intelligence channels).

We are providing a separate report to Congress detailing these efforts, as required by Section 7073 of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act of 2016.

Coalition Activities

The President’s Special Envoy to the Counter ISIL Coalition leads a whole of government approach coordinating our efforts with our coalition partners. The Secretaries of State and Defense have each helped secure additional contributions from Coalition partners since a wave of ISIL terrorist attacks in 2015. Leading Coalition members increased their already significant contributions. Others announced expansions of their commitments, including several that expand air operations to include Syria, in addition to Iraq. The Coalition’s regional partners also have expressed a willingness to deepen cooperation on counter-ISIL activities. More than one-half of the present 66 Coalition partners have made additional contributions since the fall of 2015.

Catalyzing greater Coalition and international support for the campaign will be a matter of priority in 2016 for the Coalition, but it is one that requires concerted efforts from numerous government ministries, departments, and agencies. This includes ensuring that regional partners do more to secure their borders and disrupt the networks that enable foreign fighters and

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materials to move in and out of Iraq and Syria. Additional nations can join those already striking in Iraq and Syria, can send conventional and SOF to Syria and Iraq, and can provide police trainers – contributions that we are pressing them to make. These nations and others with significant Muslim populations – from Europe, the broader Middle East, and Southeast Asia -- can also contribute by denying ISIL any religious legitimacy and advancing a persuasive counter-narrative. We expect more counter-ISIL ministerial meetings to be held in 2016. Finally, countries such as Iran and Russia can contribute by withholding their support for Bashar al-Assad, who is the chief instigator of radicalism and terrorism in Syria.

Beyond the Counter-ISIL Coalition, the United States is also utilizing other mechanisms to promote international cooperation and burden-sharing to counter terrorism and violent extremism, such as the Global Counterterrorism Forum. Effectively preventing and countering the spread of violent extremism requires a broad-based, international coalition of government and non-governmental actors. The White House CVE Summit and its follow-on process, which culminated with the September 2015 Leaders' Summit to Counter ISIL and Counter Violent Extremism, brought together leaders from over 100 countries and more than 300 civil society actors to support CVE efforts. We are continuing to expand partnerships with local government authorities, civil society, and the private sector to enhance our CVE efforts.