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REMARKS BY DEPUTY NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR TONY BLINKEN
AT THE CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE
ON THE CAMPAIGN TO COUNTER ISIL

MR. BLINKEN: Good Afternoon. It's wonderful to be here, and it's especially wonderful to be here on an extraordinary day for Carnegie. And let me start off by saying, and presumably echoing what others have said, which is, first of all, Jessica, your leadership of this institution for I believe 18 years has been extraordinary. You've turned Carnegie into a global institution, and at the very forefront of all the think tanks in Washington and all around the world.

And it's also hard to imagine finding someone to succeed Jessica in this job. But I think Carnegie has got a brilliant coup in getting Bill Burns, the former Deputy Secretary of State, to succeed Jessica. Those of you who know Bill, and that's probably most people in this audience and beyond, know him to be an absolutely extraordinary leader, someone who brings incredible intellect, wisdom and decency to everything he does. And I can only say Carnegie will be transitioning into very, very good hands.

I welcome this opportunity to spend a little bit of time walking you through the elements of our comprehensive strategy to degrade and ultimately defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or ISIL. I want to start though by trying to put ISIL in context and, indeed, I think it has to be understood in part, at least, as the product of a number of powerful regional trends, some of which I believe you discussed earlier today.

First, the challenge to domestic order within states: the questioning of the status quo; the rise of new constituencies; the empowerment of new voices. That, in many ways, of course, has been a welcome development, but it's produced a violent counter reaction from the old order, as for example in Syria with its long death-spiral of violence. And it has a dark flip side: the erosion of state authority; the emergence of

ungoverned spaces; the proliferation of weapons and technology; the surfacing of sectarianism.

The second big trend is the challenge to the regional order among states: the growth of sectarian rivalries; the intensification of the faceoff between Saudi Arabia and Iran; the spread of dangerous proxy wars.

Third, I think we've seen an intra-Sunni struggle between violent extremists and the vast majority of moderate Muslims, and a contest for leadership between establishment powers and political Islam -- often represented by the Muslim Brotherhood.

Fourth and finally, recent history -- the recent history of Iraq. The lid has been lifted from decades of dictatorship, war, and foreign dominion, allowing many of these forces to collide head on with the fragile beginnings of the more inclusive and representative governance.

One of the most poisonous products of all of this churn has been the alienation from their respective governments of large segments of the Sunni population, some 20 million of whom live between Baghdad and Damascus.

This is the vast sea in which ISIL swims, and it must inform the combination of determination, patience and humility we bring to the task of defeating it.

So how did we get here? Much has been written, much has been spoken about the relationship between our military departure from Iraq and the rise of ISIL. So permit me to spend a few minutes on a historic detour. As all of you know in negotiating the 2008 status of forces agreement, President Bush committed our forces to leave at the end of 2011. That commitment was premised on the simple, powerful idea: that we were returning to Iraq its sovereignty. We shared that commitment. We also sought to leave behind a small residual force, a counterterrorism presence to help Iraqis develop intelligence and target AQI, the predecessors to ISIL, and an F-16 squadron to protect Iraq's airspace.

As all of you know, the Council of Representatives would not give us the protection for our troops, the legal immunities that we sought. This was not as a result of a failure to negotiate, it's something we worked very hard. But what it is, and it needs to be understood this way, is really a leading indicator or a proxy for a much larger issue. Simply put, at

that point in its history, after a 10-year "occupation," the Iraqi body politic did not want us to stay in Iraq. That's what happened.

We were also to some extent the victims of success. At that point in time, the ISF, the Iraqi security forces, were more numerous and capable, Iraqi leaders were more confident, and violence overall was down significantly from its peak in 2007-2008. At every step along the way of our very, very methodical disengagement militarily from Iraq, Iraqis did not believe we would actually leave and follow through. They didn't think that we would withdraw from the cities; we did. They didn't think we would end our combat mission; we did. They didn't think we would leave all together with our military; we did. We had to demonstrate to them that we meant it.

In effect, we had to leave in order to find a way back on the security side and gradually build up our engagement.

It's a fair question to ask whether this modest residual force would have made a difference. And I think a fair answer to that is, in some ways yes and in some ways no.

First, it would not have had a combat mission, so it would hardly have been in a place to repel ISIL. Indeed, it might well have been caught in the middle of everything that was going on. Iraqis would have placed severe restrictions on its activities and freedom of movement. And in any event, Syria became a huge and somewhat unanticipated accelerant to ISIL's rise.

Second, it's also clear that the departure of our forces significantly decreased violence in the near term. Shiite militia stood down. Attacks against the U.S. embassy ceased. Some of you, I know, are veterans of trips to the embassy, and virtually on every trip prior to that point, you would have the privilege of getting a mortar attack or a rocket attack. That ceased. And, indeed, violent incidents in Iraq went down from about 1,600 a week at the end of 2007, early 2008 to 100 a week at that point.

But it's also fair to say that that had we been able to keep that small residual presence, that probably would have allowed us to better enable the Iraqis to deal with AQI and ultimately ISIL, and maybe helped us better shape Iraqi security policy. That's exactly why we sought to leave the limited residual force, and it's exactly why immediately upon the

withdrawal of our combat forces we tried to get our foot back in the door.

The Iraqis in early 2012 told us they were confident they could handle the problem. We said, you're wrong. If you don't constantly and proactively go at AQI, they will rise up again. I had these conversations with my Iraqi interlocutors, and so did many of our seniors officials, including Vice President Biden: You need to keep AQI on its heels and off its toes.

In early 2012, along with David Petraeus, who was then head of the CIA, several of us sought an agreement to constitute with the Iraqis, in effect, a joint fusion cell in Iraq to help them target AQI. It's too soon, they said. Eventually we'll get there, but you need to prove that you're not actually returning in force.

Then, the Arab League Summit came around in March of 2012. We thought, why not provide the Iraqis with drones, unarmed intelligence drones, ISR, to safeguard the summit. They thought that was a great idea. They had Arab leaders coming in from around the region. It represented a real security challenge, and they welcomed this possibility. And we thought this is a good way to get our foot back inside the door and to help develop more intelligence against AQI.

Unfortunately, the story leaked to the press and it became a political hot potato and ultimately the Iraqis said no. So there was an exercise in frustration throughout 2012 as we sought to work our way back in.

All of that began to change in 2013. AQI became ISIL, fueled by the conflict in Syria. In Iraq, in early 2012, at the time that we left, there were about five suicide bombers a month. By early 2013, it was up to 50 a month, and this was the hallmark of AQI and then ISIL, which, by the way, was not initially predominantly an indigenous force in Iraq; it was mostly at that point a foreign force.

Iraqis suddenly became much more open to, and indeed desirous of, aid -- but quietly. In the spring of 2013, we began a systematic effort to ramp up our counterterrorism assistance to the Iraqis. We used the Foreign Military Sales Program to try and get to them more Apaches, F-16s, missiles, small arms and ammunition. This of course required working with our Congress, and there was a certain amount of reluctance,

which is not hard to understand because of concerns about the leadership of Prime Minister Maliki. We resumed, in very small numbers, ISR flights in late 2013. We stood up a targeting cell in 2013, and that helped the Iraqis capture about 200 ISIL fighters. And we put in a small number at our embassy, a small number of special operators and CT trainers.

Throughout the year, and then well into 2013 and then the beginning of 2014, the committee that I chair, the Deputies Committee, met more than a dozen times on the question of increasing support to Iraq to deal with AQI and then ISIL. The Principals Committee, the National Security Council met multiple times on the same issue. It was something with which we were deeply engaged.

When President Obama met with Prime Minister Maliki in November 2013, ISIL was at the top of the agenda. The President told the Prime Minister, you need a comprehensive approach to this problem. There's a military piece to it, we're working hard to help you with it, but it has to be comprehensive. And in particular, you have to pursue political reforms to address the legitimate grievances of Iraqis who otherwise might see ISIL as a savior. Two months later, ISIL streamed into Ramadi and Fallujah with the ISF laying siege.

In short, we were focused and acting on ISIL and the threat that it posed more than a year before the fall of Mosul. But the problem began to outrun the solution, fueled by the conflict in Syria, Iraqi reluctance, and a renewed sectarianism in Iraq in advance of its elections with politicians on all sides playing to their bases.

That brings us to almost the present, to this summer, with the fall of Mosul and the erasure of the border between Iraq and Syria. When that happened, the President acted decisively as well as deliberately. Our immediate focus was on protecting Americans. We rapidly deployed military personnel to further secure our embassy and the international airport. We put in more ISR to develop a clearer picture of what was happening on the ground. And we sent in small military teams to assess the viability of the Iraqi security forces and the status of the threat. Then, as all of you know, we initiated limited military action to protect U.S. personnel, protect strategic sites, and prevent large-scale humanitarian catastrophes.

Those initial airstrikes stopped the ISIL advance on Erbil. It allowed the Iraqis to control the Mosul and Haditha dams.

Airpower helped provide relief to thousands of Iraqis trapped on Sinjar Mountain and in the town of Amerli, and to break the ISIL siege of both of those places.

These actions also had the benefit of blunting ISIL's momentum, buying time and space to put in place pillars of a comprehensive strategy to roll back ISIL.

The first pillar is a new, inclusive Iraqi government. We put particular emphasis on its formation. And, indeed, we leveraged the promise of greater U.S. assistance accordingly because we could not expect Iraqi Kurds or Sunnis or the various neighboring states to join forces to counter ISIL with an Iraqi government pursuing a blatantly sectarian agenda.

Indeed, we resisted a more expansive military effort until change was well in train, lest we be perceived as the air force of the outgoing Prime Minister, Mr. Maliki, perpetuating his hold on power, alienating Sunnis in Iraq and in the region. Instead, we focused our initial diplomacy on creating conditions for Maliki to step aside and completing government formation in record time.

Now we have a government committed to reforming the military, giving us a more effective Iraqi partner, and addressing the legitimate grievances of the Sunnis, and so dilute their support for or acquiescence to ISIL. And I'll come back to that at the end.

The second pillar that the President wanted to have in place before embarking fully on the comprehensive strategy was a broad regional and international coalition. We were very deliberate in building that coalition before taking sustained action. We could not make it look like the United States was acting against ISIL, or Islam, or the Christian West was opposed to the Muslim Middle East. That's just what ISIL would have wanted.

Instead, we kept the focus on a global challenge in which regional states, which have the most immediately at stake, play leading roles. Now more than 60 countries around the world have signed on to this coalition. And when we took our first airstrikes in Syria, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, Bahrain, and Qatar flew with us.

With these pillars and partners coming into place, we began to implement the comprehensive strategy to go from blunting

ISIL's advances, to starting to roll it back. The objective -- and the President has been very clear about it -- is to disrupt, degrade, and ultimately defeat ISIL so that it no longer poses a threat to Iraq or Syria, to our people, partners or interests in the region, or ultimately to the United States itself.

The defeat of ISIL will not happen easily. It will not happen quickly. It will not happen through exclusively military means, or by U.S. efforts alone. To the contrary, to succeed our strategy had to be comprehensive, broad-based, and it must be sustained.

So in concert with our coalition partners, we are leveraging all elements of our national power in four basic ways.

First, we're working to destroy -- starting with degrading it and then ultimately destroying ISIL's warfighting capacity -- its command and control, its leadership, its supply lines, its logistics, its ability to mass force and overrun local populations. And we're doing that through a combination of military and counterterrorism means.

Second, we're working to uproot its central nervous system -- the financing, the foreign fighters, the religious legitimacy, and the recruitment that are its lifeblood. And we're doing that by bringing to bear intelligence platforms and sharing, national and international laws, cooperation among enforcement officials, sanctions, counter-legitimacy campaigns, enhanced transportation security, increased efforts to counter violent extremism within partner countries and, indeed, here in the United States.

Third, we're working to dilute local support or accommodation to ISIL through tribal engagement, pressing for the resolution of legitimate grievances, regional diplomacy, shifting momentum against ISIL on the ground, and squeezing the space within which it operates.

And finally, we're working to build partner capacity so that local forces can take the fight to ISIL and retake the ground that's been lost through train, advise and assist programs, through the provision of weapons, ammunition and equipment, and through direct military action to enable partner success. The people we are helping will do the fighting on the ground to retake their countries.

The strategy recognizes that the situation we face in Syria is more complex even than the one we face in Iraq. Unlike in Baghdad where we have a viable local partner and ground forces to leverage, Assad remains in Damascus, a magnet for the extremism that we seek to defeat. For more than two years working with and supporting the moderate opposition, we've made some gains in making it more effective and trying to position it as a counterweight to Assad. Now we're intensifying that support, including through an overt train-and-equip program under so-called Title X, which the Saudis and Turks have offered to host.

This will give the moderate opposition more effective tools to help them and us counter ISIL, to protect its own communities, and over time to demonstrate to Assad and his patrons that he will not prevail militarily, creating the conditions for a negotiated settlement.

This train-and-equip program is not a silver bullet. It's going to take time to train recruits and produce results. The forces arrayed against the moderate opposition are powerful. The Syrian Army, backed by Hezbollah and Iran and Russia, on the one hand; ISIL, Nusra and other extremist groups, battle-hardened extremist groups, on the other. But the program is critical to eventual success. The coalition can do real damage to ISIL through the air. But without forces on the ground to hold territory from which ISIL has been removed, we will not be able to shrink and eventually eliminate the safe haven.

Meanwhile, we are taking action every day to degrade ISIL's capacity to project power into Iraq, to resource and sustain its forces. We're going at its command and control, its headquarters, its training centers, its arms depots, its oil refineries. And to cite just one example, we're seeing significant results. Take, for example, the oil refineries, storage tanks, pump stations. The International Energy Agency reported just this past week that it's clearly affecting ISIL's ability to fuel its vehicles and derive revenue from the sales of diesel and gasoline.

Let me conclude with this. I spent about a week in Iraq a couple of weeks ago, and I wanted to give you a report card on what I found because I think it's illustrative of both the challenges we face, but also some of the promise that is before us in terms of success.

First, if you look at the political situation, Iraqis are dealing now with a legacy of mistrust, of suspicion, of grievance. And they also face an incredibly difficult economic situation. Oil prices are down. War and expenditures on internally displaced persons are up. Investment is on the fence. This makes for a very complicated situation.

But I was struck in meeting with virtually the entire senior Iraqi leadership across parties and ethnic groups in Baghdad, and then up in Erbil and Dohuk, that there was a clear commitment and desire to work together across sectarian lines, a clear willingness to give the other the benefit of the doubt for now. And the reason was simple: Virtually every group on Iraq has been looking into the abyss. And they've seen what is before them if they don't manage to work together to take on ISIL.

We've already seen the Prime Minister, Abadi, say and do significant things in terms of reaching out to other communities. He disbanded the infamous Office of the Commander-in-Chief, which was an office that his predecessor, Prime Minister Maliki, established to have the military report directly to the Prime Minister's office. He removed some of the more difficult and challenging generals. He pushed through, at some political expense, a Sunni defense minister. The post had been vacant for four years. And he is now pressing with pretty much the entire body politic for the creation of a national guard that offers the best prospect of bringing Sunnis into the fight. And I'll come back to that at the very end.

And he's leaning forward in engaging the Kurds on oil revenues and back pay for the Peshmerga. And together, the Iraqi political leadership is trying to advance a national program that can address the interests, desires and grievances of all the communities. So there is promise there. They're off to a good start, but it's against the backdrop of significant challenge.

Then there's the military piece. And the Iraqis face two very significant deficits. First, the previous Prime Minister had, in effect, hollowed out big chunks of the Iraqi military. He de-professionalized it, moving out some of the competent leadership, moving in people loyal to him who didn't necessarily know what they were doing. He cut the normal chain of command and made sure, as I mentioned a moment ago, that some of the senior leadership reported directly to his office. But that's not any way to run a war.

And, of course, the force itself became more sectarian in nature. And so when you had the Iraqi military deployed into Anbar, a predominantly Shia force deployed into a Sunni region, despite the fact that it was there to help the communities protect themselves against ISIL, it was working in a community that didn't trust it and it asked itself what it was doing there. And then it ended up being cut off from the supply lines, isolated without effective leadership. And that's been going on since January of this year. And that's the very difficult situation we inherited in Anbar.

But we've also seen something very positive. When the efforts of the Iraqi security forces are planned and coordinated with the coalition backing them, they can be very effective. And the same thing for the Kurdish Peshmerga. We've seen that, as I noted before, at the Mosul and Haditha dams. We saw it outside of Erbil. We've seen it more recently at the Rabiya border crossing and in Ameriyah. And as we speak, we're seeing it in Zumar in the north, where the Peshmerga have retaken the town. And we're seeing it as we speak in Baiji, where the Iraqi security forces are moving to take the area around the oil refinery that Iraqi forces have held very valiantly since June.

So what this means is this -- and this our approach: We are working with the Iraqis to establish a campaign plan that is planned, coordinated and methodical, to begin over the next months to take back site by site and town by town territory that has been lost to ISIL. At the same time -- and this is where you have to do some building of the plane at 60,000 feet -- we did an assessment of the Iraqi security forces and we found that about half of the forces we were able to inspect in effect were not competent. Now, the glass half full version of that is that half of the forces were. So there's a good foundation to work with.

But the Iraqis are engaged in a significant retraining effort, about six brigades that are retraining. And the coalition in the weeks and months ahead will begin to take part in that effort. And then, as I mentioned earlier, there's the national guard. Iraqis are bought into this concept; it's a way to bring local forces in to protect their own communities but have them tethered to the state, which provides the equipment and the salaries. This is a very significant development. The challenge, of course, is it will take time to stand up. And so what we're working on now with the Iraqis is, in effect, a

bridge to get to that national guard so that we can take advantage now of the increasingly significant number of tribes who want to get in on the fight against ISIL, who recognize that their future is better off with Iraq than with ISIL, but who need help -- who need supplies, who need equipment, who need support.

As the Iraqis and the Peshmerga in the north go on the offensive, as they move from their heels to their toes, this has very beneficial impacts. First, it changes the dynamic. It demonstrates that ISIL is not 10 feet tall, that it's not invincible. One of the reasons so many foreign fighters have flooded to Iraq and to Syria is precisely because of this perception that ISIL has the momentum, it's the place to be, it's the winner. As you start to go on the offensive and put them on the defensive, that dynamic changes.

Second, ISIL has changed some of its tactics since our initial military strikes. In many places it is not massing its forces. It's moving around in smaller groups. It's taken refuge in cities and in buildings. It's even taken down its infamous black flag so as to be less visible. As the campaign begins, and as the Iraqis start piece by piece to go at them, ISIL will have to make a choice. It will have to stand and fight -- and so be very visible to the coalition and our airpower; it will have to flee; or it will hunker down, and instead of the Iraqis being besieged by ISIL, ISIL will be under siege from the Iraqis.

As we're doing this, we're aggressively working the other lines of effort I mentioned before, internationally, around the world, to stem the flow of foreign fighters, to interrupt the financing, to undermine the legitimacy, and to deal with the humanitarian challenge.

So having reviewed what the strategy is, let me conclude with a very brief word about what it is not. It is not Iraq or Afghanistan redux. It will not involve deploying tens of thousands, or hundreds of thousands of American troops. It will not involve the expenditure of trillions of American dollars. It will not require the United States to go it virtually alone. The Iraqis don't need, and indeed they don't want, foreign forces in combat in Iraq. As the Prime Minister said on national television just last night, that would be divisive, it would distract from the mission, and indeed it would also probably endanger our own forces. And more to the point, we will not fall into the trap that ISIL would want to

set of drawing us in in large numbers, bogging us down and bleeding us. That's exactly what they want and that's exactly what we will not do.

For these reasons, too, we believe the strategy that we have - while difficult, challenging, time-consuming - it's sustainable and ultimately will be successful.

Thank you.

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