United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 8, 2015

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

In the wake of the recent wave of devastating terrorist attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) on Paris, Beirut, and the Russian airliner flying over Egypt, as well as last week's attack in San Bernardino that appears to have been inspired by ISIS, we write today to both express support for your stated objective to "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIS and to urge you to employ more effective means to accomplish that worthy goal.

ISIS poses a direct threat to our country, and the magnitude of that threat is growing as a result of this terrorist army's expanded operational reach. The recent attacks prove that ISIS now has the ability to carry out mass-casualty terrorist attacks well beyond its self-proclaimed "caliphate" in Syria and Iraq. The Director of the Central Intelligence Agency recently warned that ISIS likely has additional attacks planned, and the group has publicly declared its intention to strike the mainland United States. We also know that ISIS is aggressively pursuing a more robust chemical weapons capability and, to that end, has recruited scientists and other technical experts.

The American people are understandably concerned in the aftermath of the horrific attack in San Bernardino and increasingly apprehensive about the prospect of another terrorist attack on American soil. Over the past couple of years, as ISIS has murdered and raped its way across the Syrian and Iraqi countryside, it has also succeeded in reenergizing the global jihadi movement, driven by its evil ideology and fueled by its hateful propaganda. The King of Jordan has described the struggle against ISIS in stark terms, calling it a "third world war against humanity." Likewise, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter testified recently that "We're at war" against ISIS. The group's ranks in Syria and Iraq have swelled to as many as 30,000 jihadists, due in part to its leveraging of social media platforms and dark corners of the Internet to recruit from all over the world. Even more alarming is the threat that ISIS and its adherents now pose to us here at home, in the form of a jihadist already living on U.S. soil and planning the next deadly attack.

As a nation, we have a clear and vital interest at stake in Syria and Iraq – preventing terrorist attacks against America and our allies – and that obligates us to intensify the effort to destroy ISIS. That vital interest can only be safeguarded through the elimination of the sanctuary that ISIS has carved out for itself in Iraq and Syria. We believe we are at a strategic inflection point in the fight against ISIS and that, without a well-informed strategy change to arrest this group's momentum, the task of defeating it will multiply in its difficulty and complexity. We listened carefully to your Oval Office address on Sunday but were disappointed to learn that the same ineffective approach will continue to be implemented.

In September, the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, characterized the fight against ISIS as "tactically stalemated," an assessment that we believe still holds true. To break this stalemate, we ask you to formulate a comprehensive military strategy against ISIS and bring to bear additional military means. In the near term, our principal strategic goal must be to shatter the ISIS narrative of invincibility, in order to stem this group's ability to recruit or inspire additional jihadists, both those who would physically travel to Syria or Iraq to join ISIS and those who would remain outside its sanctuary and conduct attacks on their home nations or neighboring ones, including the United States.

In order to effectively undermine the ISIS narrative, the coalition must inflict upon it highly visible territorial losses, starting with Iraq, including the recapture of Ramadi, Fallujah, and Mosul. To that end, we recommend that you pursue, at a minimum, several additional military options:

- U.S. military advisors. To bolster the Iraqi Security Forces, the Kurdish Peshmerga, and Sunni tribal forces, we should embed U.S. military advisors to serve alongside them in combat units down to the battalion level, including those on the front lines. We must work more closely with our local ground partners. Without effective ground forces, ISIS cannot be dislodged from the territory it now holds in Syria and Iraq.

- Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs). We should deploy and embed additional U.S. troops to serve as JTACs, embedded with our local ground partners, in order to make our airstrikes against ISIS more precise and more lethal.

- Close air support. We should deploy and utilize additional close air support platforms, including Apache attack helicopters, to provide more effective support to our ground partners who are in close contact with ISIS, in coordination with the embedded JTACs.

- Airstrike approval process. We should review the current approval process for coalition airstrikes, which we understand is unwieldy, and consider removing barriers that inhibit our pilots from attacking ISIS targets that are both timely and strategically significant.

In addition, we ask you to consider two more far-reaching courses of action:

- Safe zones. We should establish one or more safe zones inside Syria, primarily for the protection of Syrian refugees. Creating and maintaining these so-called no-fly and no-drive zones would be a substantial military and humanitarian undertaking, but in so doing we would help safeguard innocent men, women, and children not just from Bashar al-Assad's aircraft and barrel bombs, but also from ground attacks by Assad's forces and ISIS. We would also help avert the mass exodus of Syrian refugees fleeing their own homeland for other countries in the region and in Europe.

- NATO role. In light of the continuing threat posed to multiple member-nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), we should consider pursuing a robust and central NATO role in combating ISIS, as recently proposed by former NATO Supreme Allied Commander, Admiral (Ret.) James Stavridis. Leading the planning, implementation, and

command-and-control of a mission to establish safe zones in Syria may be an appropriate mission for NATO.

This list of potential courses of action is not an exhaustive one, but we believe that pursuing even some of these would represent a needed boost in the fight against ISIS. Further, a number of these options or related ones have been proposed by two of your former Secretaries of Defense, Robert Gates and Leon Panetta, and we agree that they are worthy of serious consideration. A more robust U.S. military effort is also likely to attract greater contributions from both NATO allies and, more importantly, regional partners.

We recognize that credible military action is necessarily only one element of any sound strategy to defeat ISIS. In addition, we know that the effort to dislodge ISIS from the territory it currently holds must be undergirded by a political framework that will sustain a lasting rejection of ISIS's bankrupt ideology, which will itself require significant Sunni participation in Iraqi national governance. We also recognize that the threat of ISIS cannot be divorced from the overall conflict in Syria, which continues to rage, fueled further by Russian and Iranian interference. To safeguard our own national security, we must step up the military fight against ISIS as soon as possible, but it will require sustained, long-term American engagement to resolve the deeper problems that have allowed ISIS to incubate and gather strength in Syria and Iraq.

Success will not come easily or cheaply, but we urge you as our commander-in-chief to do whatever it takes to defeat ISIS and keep the American citizenry safe from harm.

Sincerely,

John Cornyn

John Thune

Orrin Hatch

Jim Risch

Cory Gardner

Thom Tillis

Pat Roberts

M. Michael Rounds

David Vitter

David A. Perdue