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TERRORISM AND IRAN: DEFENSE CHALLENGES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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ONE HUNDRED FIFTEENTH CONGRESS

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TERRORISM AND IRAN: DEFENSE CHALLENGES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES,
Washington, DC, Tuesday, February 27, 2018.

The committee met, pursuant to call, at 10:00 a.m., in room 2118, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. William M. "Mac" Thornberry (chairman of the committee) presiding.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. WILLIAM M. "MAC" THORNBERRY, A REPRESENTATIVE FROM TEXAS, CHAIRMAN, COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

The CHAIRMAN. The committee will come to order.

We welcome back to the committee the commander of the U.S. Central Command, General Joseph Votel. We are particularly interested in hearing General Votel's views on the changes that the new National Defense Strategy brings to his area of responsibility.

The strategy's emphasis on strategic competition has implications for a region where Russian influence and presence is much greater now than it was before the Syrian conflict began, a region that is one of the targets of the Chinese whole-of-nation effort to increase its sway, and a region where the Iranians are aggressively expanding its wide arc of control to the detriment of its neighbors.

These developments and the continuing threat of terrorism in and emanating from the CENTCOM [U.S. Central Command] region, suggests that the United States cannot afford to remove our attention or our presence from this vital area. Fortunately, we have a number of strong allies and partners that are able and willing to actively defend our joint interests, but as we have painfully learned in recent years, there is simply no substitute for the United States.

When we withdraw prematurely, the world, including the threats to our homeland, can rapidly grow more dangerous. The challenge, however, is that CENTCOM has received the lion's share of military resources for some time. And while it is important to remain, we have to be more active in other vital areas of the world at the same time. The recent budget agreement helps, but it will take time to rebuild and field needed capability. In these circumstances, General Votel has his hands full in making sure that U.S. national security is protected.

Let me yield to the acting ranking member, the gentlelady from California, Mrs. Davis.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Thornberry can be found in the Appendix on page 47.]

STATEMENT OF HON. SUSAN A. DAVIS, A REPRESENTATIVE FROM CALIFORNIA, COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

Mrs. DAVIS. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I ask unanimous consent that the ranking member's statement be entered into the record.

The CHAIRMAN. Without objection.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Smith can be found in the Appendix on page 48.]

Mrs. DAVIS. Thank you.

And I would also like to welcome General Votel and thank him for appearing today.

The Central Command area of responsibility remains critical to our national interests, and we have to maintain a focus on security in the region. Reports of continuing military progress in the counter-ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] campaign are encouraging, but military achievements alone, as I think we all know, will not guarantee long-term success. We must work with the international community and employ a whole-of-government approach to foster and to sustain political, economic, and social conditions to ensure long-term stability. We cannot allow the region to fall into violent extremism again. To truly defeat ISIS, we must be just as determined to secure a durable peace as we have been to achieve a decisive military victory.

We have long sought a stable end state in Afghanistan. For more than 16 years, the United States has concentrated on eliminating terrorist threats while working closely with our allies and our partners to train, advise, and assist Afghan forces to secure the country. Despite significant progress, Afghan forces are still in need of assistance, so where are we headed?

Although our commitments to oppose violent extremism in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan are consuming, we must also remain alert to other regional security challenges. Despite an agreement regarding its nuclear program, Iran remains a designated state sponsor of terrorism, and it exerts destabilizing influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. We must deter Iran from precipitating conflict and dissuade it from engaging in malign activities. And we must also deter Russia that is increasingly involved in the region as well.

Certainly a complex set of issues, General, and I look forward to your testimony. Thank you very much for joining us.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. General, without objection, your full written statement will be made part of the record. Welcome back. The floor is yours.

STATEMENT OF GEN JOSEPH L. VOTEL, USA, COMMANDER, U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND

General VOTEL. Chairman Thornberry, Congresswoman Davis, distinguished members of the committee, good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to appear today to discuss the current posture and state of readiness of the United States Central Command.

I come before you today on behalf of the over 80,000 members of the command. It is a dedicated team of military service members and civilians, along with our coalition partners, representing 70 na-

tions and 4 international organizations, many of whom are forward-deployed across some of the most dangerous areas in the world. They sacrifice and risk on a daily basis, in many cases for the benefit of not only American strategic interests, but also the world's.

Our people are the very best at what they do, and they, and especially their families, deserve our admiration and gratitude. It is my sincere honor to lead and be a member of such a fine team of dedicated professionals.

I am approaching the 2-year mark of my time in command. This period has been both incredibly challenging and immensely rewarding during what has arguably been one of the most volatile times in this complex region's history.

It has been 11 months since I last appeared before this committee, and since then, we have made considerable military progress in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan, Egypt, Lebanon, and the maritime environment. However, we remain very clear-eyed regarding both the permanence of that progress and the challenges that we face in the future.

In the past year, we have achieved incredible success against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The Iraqi security forces and Syrian Democratic Forces are operating at their most effective levels since Operation Inherent Resolve began, and now, over 98 percent of the territory previously held by ISIS in Iraq and Syria is no longer under their control. The destruction of the ISIS physical caliphate is imminent, and millions of displaced persons are returning home and beginning the long process of rebuilding. Now we must consolidate our gains by investing in the security forces' relationships and capabilities that will hold the territory and keep ISIS from returning.

Based upon that progress, CENTCOM is conducting an operational alignment and rebalancing effort to achieve three specific goals. The first goal is to complete major combat operations in Iraq and Syria and bring the defeat-ISIS campaign to a responsible close. Military success in the campaign up to this point presents us an opportunity to reposition some of our resources from Iraq and Syria to Afghanistan in a manner that keeps the pressure on ISIS, but also sets us up to break the stalemate in Afghanistan.

We retain sufficient capability to continue our efforts against ISIS despite the increasingly complex situation across Syria and especially in the northwest province of Afrin. We are fully engaged with our mission partners and the Department of State to carefully balance our objectives. Our partners on the ground in Syria have advanced us a long way towards our objectives, and we will stick with them through the completion of this fight. In Iraq, the Iraqi security forces are rapidly consolidating gains and preparing to support elections later this spring.

The second goal is to prioritize the implementation of the South Asia strategy in Afghanistan. This strategy reaffirms the U.S. Government's enduring commitment to Afghanistan by reinforcing the two complementary military missions: The NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization]-led train, advise, and assist mission, and the U.S. counterterrorism mission. We are making sure that, with our support, the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces are well-

postured to begin operations to seize the initiative, expand population control, and secure credible elections.

Part and parcel of this effort is our regionalized approach to engage all countries with a stake in Afghanistan's stability, especially Pakistan. Our goal here is to develop a productive and trustful relationship that benefits both of our militaries and supports our objectives in the region.

The third goal is to ensure that we have aligned our military efforts with our broader interagency and international efforts to neutralize, counterbalance, and shape the destabilizing impact that Iran has across the region. Make no mistake, while we continue to confront the scourge of terrorism, Iran's malign activities across the region pose a long-term threat to stability in this part of the world.

We view ourselves, the military, as supporting the many other and more effective resources and capabilities of the U.S. Government and its partners in this endeavor. The recently published National Defense Strategy rightly identifies the resurgence of great power competition as our principal national security challenge, and we in CENTCOM see the effects of that competition throughout the region.

Russia's support of the Assad regime has not only propped him up, but has also added complexity to the defeat-ISIS campaign. Diplomatically and militarily, Moscow plays both arsonist and firefighter, fueling tensions among all parties in Syria, the Syrian regime, Iran, Turkey, the Syrian Democratic Forces, the United States, and other coalition partners, then serving as an arbiter to resolve disputes attempting to undermine and weaken each party's bargaining positions.

Despite the key role that our partners on the ground, the Syrian Democratic Forces, and the coalition have played in dealing defeat to ISIS, Russia has placed this progress at risk with their activities, which are not focused on defeating ISIS but, rather, on preserving their own influence and control over the outcome of the situation. It is clear that Russia's interests in Syria are Russia's interests, and not those of the wider international community.

China is pursuing long-term, steady economic growth in the region through its One Belt, One Road policy, but it is also improving its military posture by connecting ports, such as Gwadar in Pakistan, with its first overseas military base in Djibouti, adjacent to the critical Bab-el-Mandeb. While Beijing claims both locations support peacekeeping and humanitarian operations, the new military base and port bolsters China's force projection into the region.

Both China and Russia seek to fill in perceived gaps in U.S. interests by increasing defense cooperation and sales of their equipment to our regional partners. They both are also cultivating multidimensional ties to Iran. The lifting of U.N. [United Nations] sanctions under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action [JCPOA] open the path for Iran to resume membership application to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

In addition, Russia, supported by Iran, continues to bolster a friendly regime in Syria, attempt to limit our U.S. military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, and creates friction among NATO partners. Against this backdrop of increasing great power interaction are the enduring issues of the region: social, economic, and

political challenges; high unemployment; falling oil prices; a youth bulge; large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons; and long-standing border conflicts.

We in CENTCOM stand ready with all of our partners to defend U.S. interests against these and other threats. Our strategic approach of preparing the environment, pursuing opportunities, and working to prevail wherever we can is working. We are postured for purpose, proactive in pursuing opportunities, and resolve to win.

I would like to close by sharing three dynamics that we assess are essential to prevailing in this region. First, as I have previously testified, in the conduct of our campaigns in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, as well as our operations in places like Yemen, Lebanon, and Egypt, we have adopted a by, with, and through approach that places a heavy reliance on indigenous partner nation forces. Our partners do not always want us to solve their problems for them, so we enable them to stand on their own. And while this approach does present its own challenges and can be more time consuming, it provides local solutions to local problems. This approach is not without risk, as we are seeing unfold in Syria today. But in general, it is proving very effective and will likely pay significant dividends going forward.

Secondly, successful pursuit of U.S. objectives in this region only comes from an integrated approach aligned with interorganizational partners. Defense of the Nation is a team sport. This applies not just within the command, but with our fellow combatant commands, our component commands, our established combined and joint task forces, the Central Region's 18 country teams, and other departments, agencies, and organizations of the U.S. Government who have provided unwavering support over almost two decades of persistent conflict.

Our allies in the region and the wider international community are equally as critical to supporting our mission. They directly support the CENTCOM headquarters with more than 200 foreign military officers from 49 nations, all of whom are part of the success of CENTCOM, and we are grateful for and largely depend upon their partnership. As the National Defense Strategy captures clearly, strengthening existing relationships and building new ones will be key to our future success. We are doing this in CENTCOM every day.

Finally, we could not do what we do on a daily basis without the support of Congress, and by extension, the American people. We sincerely appreciate this committee's continued strong support for our operations, authorities, and resources, and especially the same to the services, Special Operations Command, and other defense agencies that we rely upon for our military wherewithal.

Your support will remain important as we contend with what potentially are generational struggles to defend our homeland from the threats outlined in our National Defense Strategy. U.S. Government commitment to the CENTCOM area of responsibility [AOR] is more important now than ever. For our part, we will support the third pillar of the National Defense Strategy, business reform, by continuing to be good stewards of the resources and authorities that Congress provides us.

To close, I want to once again thank the outstanding men and women who comprise the United States Central Command, easily our finest and most precious resource. They continue to make great sacrifices and contributions to ensure the command meets our strategic objectives and protects our Nation's interests. We must ensure they have everything they need to do their jobs as effectively and efficiently as possible.

We are also keenly aware and grateful for the sacrifices made by our families. They are vital members of the team, and we could not accomplish our mission without them. They, too, make important contributions and tremendous sacrifices every day to support us. I thank them on behalf of the command and a grateful Nation.

Thank you again, and I look forward to answering your questions.

[The prepared statement of General Votel can be found in the Appendix on page 50.]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, General.

Let me remind members that immediately upon conclusion of this open hearing, we will regather with General Votel upstairs in a classified session. So be in touch to know exactly when this open hearing ends.

Since General Votel and I have had a chance to visit recently, I am going to yield 5 minutes, initially, to the gentlelady from Wyoming, Ms. Cheney.

Ms. CHENEY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, General Votel, for your service and for being here today.

I wanted to ask you to elaborate in particular on the threat from Iran. And, you know, one of the many grave flaws of the JCPOA is the fact that it failed to deal with Iran's ballistic missile threat. And we are now seeing across the region increasingly evidence that Iran is transferring ballistic missiles and other conventional equipment to its allies in the region. Can you talk about exactly what you are seeing in this regard and what the Department of Defense [DOD] is in a position to be able to do to defend us and our allies against that threat?

General VOTEL. Thank you, Congresswoman. I think you have highlighted one of the principal concerns that we have, the increasing, not just quantity, but quality of their ballistic missiles, and the export and movement of those capabilities to other groups and locations around the region. Certainly, as we have seen with Ambassador Haley in her demonstration most recently with some of the items recovered from Saudi Arabia, these weapons pose the threat of widening the conflict out of Yemen, and, frankly, put our forces, our embassy in Riyadh, our forces in the United Arab Emirates, at risk, as well as our partners. So I think first and foremost about their threat is the quality and the quantity that they have been pursuing over the last several years, particularly with respect to this.

Their direct introduction of asymmetric capabilities concerns me as we look at places like the Bab-el-Mandeb where we see the introduction of coastal defense cruise missiles, some that have been modified. We know these are not capabilities that the Houthis had, so they have been provided to them by someone. That someone is Iran. The presence of explosive boats, the increased presence of

mines in this area are all very similar to the layered threat that Iran has posed in the Straits of Hormuz, and we hold them accountable for that. So that is a second aspect of this.

The third, of course, is their continually changing power projection model, not only their own forces, but their proxies and the partners that they are attempting to create around the region. I think these all give us very significant concerns.

With respect to your question about what we are doing, we are working with Saudi Arabia and some of our partners to ensure that they are optimizing their capabilities that they have, many of them U.S.-provided capabilities, to ensure that they can defend themselves. And I would report to you in this session that we are seeing some progress in that regard.

Ms. CHENEY. Thank you, General. And in respect to Syria, could you talk a little bit about, there have been reports that we have seen facilities, for example, being built in Syria, reports in open source, Iranian missile facilities. Obviously, the threat there is significant, not just to U.S. interests, but also to allies like Israel. And could you talk more about what we might be able to do, particularly on the ground in Syria, as we see the challenge of—we have been very effective against ISIS there, but, obviously, our interests are still significantly threatened given the failed state situation we are facing.

General VOTEL. Thank you, Congresswoman. As you know, countering Iran is not one of the coalition missions in Syria. That said, I think one of the most effective things that we can do in this particular area is build strong relationships.

Ms. CHENEY. General, I am sorry, could you just—I understand it is not potentially formally part of the mission, but it seems to me if we are focused on countering Iran, we need to be doing it every place our interests are threatened.

General VOTEL. Absolutely. And one of the key ways that we are doing that is through our strong relationships that we are building with the Government of Iraq military forces, that include, not only forces that are in the interior, but certainly along their border. Our strong relationship with the Syrian Democratic Forces in the east and in the northern part of the country puts us in a position where we can impede Iran's objectives of establishing lines of communication through these critical areas and trying to connect Tehran to Beirut, for example.

So I think, first and foremost, some of these indirect things we are doing are very, very important to that. I think beyond that, I think also continuing to highlight and illuminate their activities is extraordinarily important so that they can be addressed, not just with military means, but certainly with the other means that are available to us across government.

Ms. CHENEY. Thank you very much.

I will yield back the balance of my time and look forward to discussing this further in the closed session.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mrs. Davis.

Mrs. DAVIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And General Votel, again, thank you for joining us.

As you just mentioned, and certainly in your written statement, the National Defense Strategy stated that great power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of U.S. national security. Could you elaborate for us on those comments, and also talk about the shift in this national strategy? How exactly will it impact CENTCOM? And what, if any, significant changes will actually materialize as a result of the shift? And how will Central Command's capacity to perform its mission be affected?

General VOTEL. Well, thanks, Congresswoman. I think that, you know, the shifts that are outlined in the National Defense Strategy are things that will take place over time. And so, you know, one of the principal ways that we are trying to manage that, of course, is through the development of and continued relationship building that we have in place with partners in the region and continuing to strengthen those relationships.

One of the things that we have learned through this by, with, and through approach is that we can do a lot through our partners by providing advice, by providing expertise in areas where we have experience, and we can do that with the smaller footprint and with the, you know, correspondingly smaller investment. So I think one of the principal ways that we will address this going forward is continuing to build on these relationships and continuing to empower our partners in the region.

Mrs. DAVIS. Can you just speak to the key challenges in doing that?

General VOTEL. Well, you know, I think, certainly, one of the key challenges will be making sure that we don't create the impression that we are abandoning CENTCOM. And this, of course, is a key talking—or the region. And so this, of course, is a key talking point, not only for me, but for all leaders that come in there. We recognize that the interest that we have, the national interest that we have in this region for preventing attacks on the homeland, for preventing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, for ensuring freedom of navigation and commerce through the critical straits, for ensuring other countries can't destabilize, those are enduring interests that we will always have. And so this will always require us to continue to be engaged there to some aspect. But, of course, the Secretary will make decisions on shifting resources in accordance with the National Defense Strategy.

Mrs. DAVIS. Thank you. You also talked about local solutions, and we know how critical that is, as you have just mentioned. I am wondering if you could also talk about the inclusion of women as a critical strategy that advances countering terrorism, national security, and democratization and economic and social development. Some of those programs have been successful, but there certainly is more to be done. How can we increase the effectiveness of these programs?

General VOTEL. Well, I think the best way we can do it is by sharing our experiences with this. We learned by our inability to include women into many of our counterterrorism operations back in the beginning of these fights that we have been involved in, that we are missing 50 percent of the population in doing that. And when we began to introduce them into positions where they could have influence, we learned a lot from that. So I think one of the

key things that we can do is continue to lead by example in this area and demonstrate how this is valued by us.

We do see partners in the region doing this. The Afghans are doing this. The Iraqis are doing this. We certainly see this with the Syrian Democratic Forces that we are working with in Syria. And I would highlight to you that one of the principal commanders that they have, a very successful commander, is a female. And so it is very much recognized that contributions come from the entirety of the force.

Mrs. DAVIS. Thank you. I appreciate that. I think that a number of us have participated in those efforts, and I hope that we can continue to do more of that. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Wilson.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Votel, recently, the United Nations released a remarkably gruesome report outlining North Korea's ongoing efforts to assist Syria building chemical weapons. This report states that North Korea has been shipping supplies to the Syrian Government, including acid-resistant tiles, valves, and thermometers. Additionally, North Korean missile technicians have been observed working at chemical weapons and missile facilities in Syria.

Are you able to comment on the U.N. report? And if not, could you describe the malign and disruptive role North Korea currently plays in Syria and whether or not you see their role expanding in the coming years? Additionally, what is being done to disrupt this cooperation between the dictatorships of North Korea and the Syrian Government?

General VOTEL. Congressman, I admit, I have not seen that report, so I can't comment specifically on it. Obviously, we are concerned about the proliferation of these type of weapons in Syria with a country that has demonstrated the intent to use them. So this will be an area that we will continue to pay close attention to.

Mr. WILSON. And it is so important. I was actually pleasantly surprised that The New York Times covered it today. My experience with that newspaper is they frequently overlook threats to stability in the world, but I urge your consideration.

Also, a primary concern for the long-term stability of the Middle East surrounds a return of defeated Islamic State fighters who are returning home from fighting in Iraq and Syria. An estimate from The Soufan Center and The Global Strategy Network have tracked 5,600 fighters who have returned to their home countries. Specifically, sadly, Turkey has 900 returning and Saudi Arabia has 760 returning.

Could you explain what threat the return of the defeated Islamic State fighters to their home country represents to the long-term stability in the region? And can you explain the proposed or ongoing efforts to work with ally nations in dealing with this flow of fighters?

General VOTEL. Thank you, Congressman. Well, certainly, these fighters that are able to depart these war zones are able to take with them experiences and tactics that could potentially be applied to other places. Additionally, they are radicalized so they have the ability to bring others onboard with this. These, I think, are the

principal concerns. This has been at the forefront of our efforts from the very beginning. As you have heard the Secretary talk about our strategy of annihilation, in the conduct of our operations, we have always attempted to isolate these areas and prevent the escape of these fighters so that they are either killed or captured where we take them on, and I think we have been successful in that. Certainly, there are some that have gotten away.

We have, with the support of some of the authorities that have been provided to us by Congress, we do have an effective program to interdict foreign fighters as they attempt to depart the area. And we are now working with the Department of State and the Department of Justice to ensure that these hundreds that are in the control of our partners in both Iraq and Syria are moving into a judicial process that holds them accountable and, ultimately, returns them to the countries from which they came.

Mr. WILSON. And what a challenge that is. The detainees you are speaking of, not just fighters, but their families. And this has just got to be addressed, and I appreciate you bringing that issue up.

Additionally, Turkey has been a valued ally, for nearly a century, of the United States. A member of NATO, beginning with the Korean War, they have been fighting side by side with Americans for freedom. What is being done to continue our important alliance?

General VOTEL. Thank you, and I would just echo your comments. Turkey has been absolutely vital throughout the entire campaign plan. They certainly have serious concerns of PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party] terrorism. Of course, this has created some tension with some of the partners we have on the ground.

The principal way that we are addressing this, Congressman, is by being transparent and clear and candid with Turkey about the things that we are doing on a day-to-day basis with our partners. Just this morning, I had a conversation with my counterpart in Turkey, again, sharing information back and forth, keeping the communication channels professional and open as we discuss this very, very difficult challenge that we are working through.

Mr. WILSON. And with the multitude of issues you have to face, Yemen, what is the latest on efforts to provide security in working with Saudi Arabia?

General VOTEL. I would say, you know, our effort in this setting is principally to help them defend themselves, and I think we have made some very good progress in this area. And I look forward, in the closed session, to sharing with you some examples.

Mr. WILSON. We appreciate your service. Thank you.

General VOTEL. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Veasey.

Mr. VEASEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I wanted to ask you, there was a column in The Wall Street Journal, I believe in their opinion section maybe about 4 days ago, that talked about where they allege that there was a Russian attack on U.S. special operation forces on the evening of February the 7th and 8th. And I specifically wanted to ask you what you know about that, and how can CENTCOM prioritize U.S. counterterrorism objectives while trying to avoid any sort of dangerous escalation with Russia?

General VOTEL. Thank you, Congressman. You know, I think we have kind of characterized that as pro-regime forces. You know, we are certainly aware of the amount of media that is out there talking about this. But in this particular instance, this was a very clear case of self-defense on our part. And so I, frankly, am quite proud of the way the force responded to this: quickly identified it, immediately got on the net to our Russian—our channel here to talk with them about this—we were talking with them before, during, and after this—and very effectively brought together the right capabilities to address this self-defense threat. And so they have continued to do that.

So, you know, I think what I would just tell you is that we retain sufficient capability to protect ourselves at the same time that we are pursuing our counterterrorism objectives in Syria.

Mr. VEASEY. Do you think that Russia is going to want to try to have more influence or diminish our influence in the region once we push ISIS out of there, or how do you see that relationship, you know, playing out long term?

General VOTEL. Well, I think what I would say, Congressman, is what we see is Russia has failed to follow through on delivering the regime in a number of different areas. As we look at the U.N. sanctions, cease-fire that was put in this place, one that they helped draft and agreed to implement and to cause the regime to comply by it, they have failed to do that. So I think either Russia has to admit that it is not capable or it doesn't want to play a role in ending the Syrian conflict here. I think the role is incredibly destabilizing at this point.

Mr. VEASEY. I would also like to briefly kind of switch here and ask you just a little bit about Afghanistan too. I know that there have been some that have been concerned about our deteriorating relationship with the Pakistanis, and was wondering, how important do you think it is for us to continue to have relationships with Pakistan, keeping routes open, so we can adequately supply troops in the Afghanistan part of the Middle East? And just what are some of your thoughts on that whole relationship and, particularly, just how it lines up with Afghanistan?

General VOTEL. Congressman, my view is that success in Afghanistan and South Asia will require a strong relationship and the cooperation of Pakistan. And since the announcement of the South Asia strategy, this has been one of my principal focuses here, is to help Pakistan and us together, achieve the specific things that we require for them, we have asked them to do in support of our strategy.

And what I would report to you and to the committee is that I do have very frequent and routine professional communications with my counterpart. We talk almost weekly. We meet frequently face-to-face. And my goal is to develop this very productive and trustful relationship that will help us move forward together. I can't characterize the relationship as trustful at this particular point. There is a lot of history here that has to be overcome.

But what I will also tell you is that we are now beginning to see positive indicators. They, through their communications, they are reporting to us some of the actions that they are taking on the ground. These are positive indicators that they are moving in the

right direction. It does not yet equal the decisive action that we would like to see them take in terms of a strategic shift, but they are positive indicators. And it gives me hope that our approach is the right one. I have confidence in our approach, and it gives me hope that we can begin to restore this very important relationship.

Mr. VEASEY. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mr. Lamborn.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And, General, thank you for your service.

You have barely mentioned Lebanon and we hardly ever talk about Lebanon. But there are so many problems there, and in any other part of the world, it would be front and center in the headlines all the time. But with all the other problems in CENTCOM, it takes a backseat.

But given that Hezbollah is a U.S.-designated terrorist organization and that the Lebanese President has been very public in his support of Hezbollah as a military partner with the Lebanese Armed Forces, and given that we have, in the past anyway, supplied high-quality American arms to the Lebanese Armed Forces, do you think we should keep working with the Lebanese Armed Forces and giving them high-quality American weaponry, and are they a reliable partner?

General VOTEL. Congressman, I think they are a very reliable partner. And I think the investments that we have made over the last 10 or 11 years, very moderate investments in terms of people and money, compared to some of the other things we do, have really paid off. And they are helping us develop a very professional Lebanese Armed Forces that is beginning to be viewed as the principal security arm in Afghanistan.

And I note your comment here about it doesn't appear in the news, but, frankly, Lebanon is a frequent stopping place for me and for all of my commanders, and we pay a lot of attention to this relationship. We have an outstanding ambassador there who is a very, very engaged in the activities, and we are very proud of what Lebanese Armed Forces are doing. They very effectively last fall, on their own, orchestrated a pretty effective operation against ISIS. They view us as their most important partner, and I do think it is an investment worth continuing.

Mr. LAMBORN. But doesn't the relationship between the cozying up to Hezbollah within Lebanon to the conventional forces there give you pause?

General VOTEL. Well, I tell you, I frequently interact with the chief of defense there. I consider him to be a very professional military officer. You know, this is a multiconfessional arrangement here in Pakistan that obviously trips over into the political environment, but what I observe in Lebanon is a military that is answerable to the leadership, is doing a good job at staying apolitical, and is focused on security of the country.

Mr. LAMBORN. Okay. Shifting gears to Saudi Arabia, are we doing enough to help them and the United Arab Emirates defend themselves, as was discussed a little earlier, from Iranian-supplied missiles to the Houthi rebels? Are we doing enough?

General VOTEL. In this setting, I would say yes, we are. We are definitely focused on this particular threat right here, and I look forward to sharing a few more comments with you about this in the closed session.

Mr. LAMBORN. Okay. Thank you. Now, in Yemen, the U.S. military has conducted a much higher number of strikes against terrorist targets last year than in 2016, the previous year. What positive impact, if any, have these strikes had on AQAP [al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula] and on ISIS in Yemen—or excuse me, Islamic State in Yemen?

General VOTEL. Thank you, Congressman. It has had, I think, a very significant impact on AQAP. Certainly, it has impacted their ability to conduct external operations. It has gone into the areas in which they have had sanctuary, and it has continued to present them with multiple dilemmas that they have to deal with. So not only are they contending with our strikes, but they are also contending with partner operations that we work with our Arab coalition partners on the ground and with our Yemeni partners on the ground. And this has become very, very effective.

And I would tell you that we are extending that to ISIS in Yemen as well. That is not as well developed as al-Qaida is, but, of course, it is ISIS. We understand their ideology. We understand where they are going. And so we are very concerned about them as well.

Mr. LAMBORN. Okay. Thank you. And lastly, I would like to ask about the 4th Infantry Division at Fort Carson in my district. They are sending a brigade combat team to Afghanistan this spring. And even though we have had budget shortfalls for the military in recent years, we have made huge steps with this latest budget agreement to beef up military spending, which I totally applaud and support. So I think readiness will be less of an issue in the future, but do you feel good about the current state of readiness with, for instance, the brigade combat team going to Afghanistan this spring?

General VOTEL. Congressman, I do. I haven't had an opportunity to visit that specific brigade, but I just had an opportunity to visit one of the brigades that is coming in, the Security Force Assistance Brigade. I am extraordinarily appreciative of the efforts that are put forth by the Army, by the Marine Corps, the Air Force, all the services here that we depend upon in Afghanistan to give us high-quality forces.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Ms. Gabbard.

Ms. GABBARD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, General Votel, for your service and for being here.

I would like to talk a little bit more about what you began with in your opening statement and some of the comments you have made since about U.S. military objectives in Syria. You talked about how you are working to defeat ISIS and bring that campaign to a responsible close. Later, you mentioned that countering Iran is not a coalition mission in Syria. Last month, we heard from Secretary Tillerson about how U.S. military presence in Syria will remain for an indefinite period of time. And he went on to list a very expansive list of strategic objectives of the U.S. military, to include

ensuring the defeat of ISIS, to include diminishing the influence of Iran, advancing U.N.-led political resolution, et cetera, et cetera.

So my question is: What is the objective of our U.S. forces in Syria? And under what legal basis is this indefinite presence in Syria planned under?

General VOTEL. Thank you. So the principal reason we are in Syria is to defeat ISIS. And that remains our sole and single task that we are principally oriented on. Part of defeating ISIS, though, is removing their control of the physical caliphate, the physical terrain, as you are well aware, and ensuring they can't resurge. So that means that after we have removed them from their controlled terrain, we have to consolidate our gains and we have to ensure that the right security and stability is in place so that they cannot resurge. So that is part of being responsible coalition members in here, and that will take some time beyond all of this.

Our legal basis for operating in Syria was largely driven by the collective self-defense of Iraq. But when we first went there, ISIS, being an organization that did not adhere to sovereign boundaries, were moving back and forth across the area. And while we were beginning to address ISIS in Iraq, we knew that we also had to address ISIS in Syria.

I would also point out, Congresswoman, that the Syrian regime itself has proved unwilling and unable to address this particular threat. While they did do some operations down in the middle Euphrates Valley here several months ago, they have largely departed that area, and they have taken the pressure off of ISIS and created more problems for the coalition in dealing with this.

So, you know, I think those are the principal——

Ms. GABBARD. So our U.S. forces are still operating under the 2001 AUMF. Is that correct?

General VOTEL. We are.

Ms. GABBARD. And does countering Iran—I am just seeing some contradiction between what the Secretary of State is saying, that that is now going to be a part of the U.S. military objective in Syria, and what you stated today, saying that countering Iran is not a part of the coalition mission.

Just a follow-up to that, if it is, then how does that fall under the 2001 AUMF that deals directly with countering al-Qaida and its affiliates?

General VOTEL. I think my understanding as the Secretary of State laid this out is he laid it out not as a U.S. military objective, but he laid it out as a U.S. objective. So there are certainly other ways that we can address Iran's destabilizing activities and other than through military means.

The fact of the matter is, as I mentioned a few moments ago, even though Iran isn't our principal focus here in this campaign, our relationship with partners both in Iraq and in Syria does put us in a position where we can indirectly have an impact on the objectives that Iran is pursuing in this part of the world. So I think I would characterize it more in that regard than us actively doing something militarily against Iran.

Ms. GABBARD. Thank you. I believe Secretary Tillerson was quite specific in speaking about this within the justification of a maintained U.S. military presence there.

My last quick question is about Yemen, and under what authorization are we providing arms and direct military support to Saudi Arabia in what is essentially a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran?

General VOTEL. Well, any armed sales, of course, go through our foreign military sales and foreign military funding process that is managed by the Department of State, and so they have the principal oversight for that. The provision of fuel to Saudi aircraft is provided for under the Acquisition Cross-Servicing Agreement that we have in place with Saudi Arabia. And so that provides us the authority to provide that support to them.

Ms. GABBARD. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Wittman.

Mr. WITTMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Votel, thanks so much for joining us today. I wanted to begin by getting your perspective. You speak about Navy presence in the Gulf and the Red Sea, and we think about CENTCOM as being land-centric. But we also see, as you specifically point out, the first overseas Navy base put in place by the Chinese in Djibouti. We see in Port Doraleh a single berth there reserved for the Chinese Navy. We see President Xi Jinping, through a modernization of his military, looking to very aggressively expand and sustain operations around the world.

From your perspective there as CENTCOM commander in that AOR, specifically what do you see our U.S. Navy doing to counter this Chinese expansionism? And what do you need as far as U.S. Navy presence there to make sure that we have what is necessary there in relation to what we see as Chinese aggressive expansion?

General VOTEL. Thanks, Congressman, I appreciate the question. I would share—I am an Army guy saying this, I would share that while we do think about the land territory in CENTCOM, it very much is a maritime theater with the three critical chokepoints that, you know, are so important to us in this area. So I do recognize that.

I would just tell you that I think, certainly, the resources that are being provided to me, the maritime resources that are provided to me by the Navy and the Marine Corps, I think are adequate to the task that we have right now. I think the principal way that we develop resilience against these types of, you know, great power influences in this area is through, first of all, our presence, our constant presence, and we do maintain a constant presence in both the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, into the Arabian Gulf, and the Gulf of Oman as well, and through our very close partnership with our partners. We have three combined maritime task forces that are led out of our naval headquarters in Bahrain that include a variety of different nations.

So when I look at the nations that are on our team and I look at the nations that are lining up with some of these others that are entering in the area, I think our teams are very strong. And I think this is a very key way for us to maintain our influence and pursue our interests in the CENTCOM maritime environment.

Mr. WITTMAN. Very good. Last year, the U.S. Naval Office of Intelligence pointed out some challenges there with potentially placing the mines that would put at risk commercial vessels there near

Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. Give me your perspective, not only on what that potential threat is, because we see Houthis operating in the area, obviously, shooting at U.S. ships. Give me your perspective on what we are doing in minesweeping our operations there, looking to counter that potential threat for mines, because we know that that is a chokepoint area that is strategically very important.

General VOTEL. Thank you. Well, we certainly maintain minesweeping capabilities in the Gulf and have for a number of years, but so do our partners. And I would just point out, you know, some of our partners, like the Emirates and Saudi Arabia, have some very good capability in this regard. And so one of the things that we do is work with them to optimize their capabilities. Again, by, with, and through getting them to use their capabilities and using our intelligence and some of our experience to help them be more effective at this.

And so this, I think, has been very effective in preventing, you know, a major mine catastrophe, if you will, in the Bab-el-Mandeb, one that we are very concerned about. Sixty to seventy ships a day go through the Bab-el-Mandeb, not just ours, everybody's. So this is a very real threat that we have to pay attention to.

Mr. WITTMAN. Do you currently have intelligence gathering operations to look at what is happening in Bab-el-Mandeb Strait about the activities that are going on there, what we can do to maybe counter that, or the things we can do to interdict it? Because, obviously, keeping a mine from being laid is a lot better than having to go in and sweep those particular areas, especially from a time perspective. Give us your perspective on what is happening there.

General VOTEL. Congressman, I would say in this setting, we absolutely do, and I would look forward to sharing the details with you in a different setting.

Mr. WITTMAN. Very good.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Carbajal.

Mr. CARBAJAL. Thank you, Mr. Chair. General Votel, thank you for being here today.

America has been engaged in Afghanistan for 16 years, and it is difficult to determine what progress we have made. The administration's new strategy increased its troop levels to 14,000 troops. However, unable to learn from history, we are investing more lives and resources without clearly defined benchmarks. I am extremely concerned about the fact that significant information is being withheld from the Office of Inspector General for Afghanistan's Reconstruction and, ultimately, the American people.

According to the inspector general, quote: "It is hard to make a determination of how good a job we are doing, because if the Afghan military is not fighting that well, and there are not many of them, we can't determine fraud, waste, and abuse in Afghanistan."

Because they can't get basic facts from the Department, how are you measuring progress in Afghanistan? Please describe the end state. What does success look like to you? Currently, what is the amount of territory under the Afghan Government's control? And help me understand how withholding information has made a difference in our operations in Afghanistan.

General VOTEL. Thank you, Congressman. I will take your last one here. We are aware of that issue, and I think measures are being taken to address that right now. Some of that information is not necessarily U.S. Government information. It is information of the Afghan Government, and so they control the release and classification of that information. So this is something we have to continue to work with.

Mr. CARBAJAL. General, if I could just interrupt you. It is great to parlay that to the Afghan Government, but we are the ones with resources and the lives of our military there. So we have got to be able to get some information from them to appease those of us that have to make decisions on what kind of investments we need to make in the area.

General VOTEL. Thank you, Congressman, and I am committed to making sure that you do have those details.

You asked also about kind of how we are looking at the situation right now. What I would tell you is, the big idea here with what we are trying to do in Afghanistan right now, is drive towards reconciliation. This is different than the approach we have had in the past. And we are trying to do that through creating, not just military pressure with our military activities on the ground, but we are trying to do it through creating social pressure with things that the Afghan Government is doing, like credible elections that they are pursuing this year at the parliamentary level and the national level next year. And we are doing it through creating diplomatic and regional pressure, just as we talked about with Pakistan a few moments ago.

The idea here is that creating pressure on all of those three axes are going to create enough pressure on the Taliban that they come to the table. What is different this time as we approach this is that we are taking a conditions-based approach that is focused on reconciliation as its end state. It is a regional focus here, and we are engaging the partners in the region, not just Pakistan, but the Central Asian states as well who are key to this.

And we have changed the way that we are working with the Afghan forces. So we previously had advised down to a very low level with their Afghan special operations forces. We are now, with the additional enablers and additional advisers that the Department has approved for us, are taking that capability and extending it out to their conventional forces. We are building out the Afghan Air Force. We are doubling the size of their Afghan special operations capability. So there are a variety of different aspects to this approach. This will give us the ability to measure the progress.

You asked about how much of the population is controlled by the Afghan Government. Today, the figure is 64 percent. Twelve percent of the population is in areas that are controlled by the Taliban, and the balance of that are in contested areas. Our focus, the focus of our military operations is on increasing and expanding population control by the Government of Afghanistan. And what we are going to do this season is we are going to—our intention is to break the stalemate, grab the initiative, begin to expand population control this year and next year, and then ensure that we create an environment here that allows for credible elections to take place,

one of the most important things that the Afghan people need to see from their government.

Mr. CARBAJAL. We are running out of time. What about information, the sharing of information with the inspector general?

General VOTEL. As I mentioned, Congressman, we will do our very best to ensure that you have the information that you need to make the decisions that are necessary.

Mr. CARBAJAL. Thank you so much.

I yield back, Mr. Chair.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Scott.

Mr. SCOTT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General, thank you for being here.

I want to talk with you a little bit about ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] in the CENTCOM area. And I know you have got a lot of partners in that area, but what percentage of the ISR does the United States provide?

General VOTEL. I am not sure I can tell you what the percentage overall is. I mean, it is very clear that the majority of the ISR in the region is being provided by the United States.

Mr. SCOTT. What about the DOD's capacity to meet the demand for ISR? Do you have enough ISR currently?

General VOTEL. Well, I think, Congressman, I don't think you are going to find any commander that is going to say that he has enough ISR. We right now, today, have the largest concentration of MQ–9s down in Kandahar Airfield designed to support General Nicholson and his forces, and I know that is adequate for what he needs right now. But given his own druthers, I am sure he would want more. And so we would want more in all these areas.

Mr. SCOTT. I understand that the Army in some ways and commanders are agnostic as to the different platforms that ISR may come from, but I assume that when it comes to providing additional ISR, the commanders would not be agnostic to the timeline to get new ISR to the field. Would that be a fair statement?

General VOTEL. That is right. I think the faster we can continue to provide those capabilities, the better.

Mr. SCOTT. So one of my concerns, and I certainly have a tremendous amount of respect for the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of the Air Force as well, but as they have changed the strategy to more of a China or Russia strategy, they are canceling the procurement or have proposed to cancel the procurement of items that are not capable of flying against the Russians or the Chinese or in a direct conflict with the Russians and the Chinese.

One of these platforms is the new JSTARS [Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System], the recapitalization of the JSTARS, which we have spent hundreds of millions to develop and are now currently ready to purchase. And they have proposed to cancel the procurement of the JSTARS because they have said that they are going to use a system that has not been developed yet, which, obviously, changes the timeline on when we can deliver that system to you.

I guess my question is: Do the systems that you use in Central Command have to be survivable, if you will, in a conflict that would be as high end as that between the Russians and the Chinese, a direct conflict?

General VOTEL. Well, they don't necessarily need to be. I mean, the environment is different in parts of CENTCOM than it might be in other parts of the world. So, you know, some of the requirements that I have, the environment that we operate in, are probably different than what Admiral Harris and others, and General Scaparrotti, you know, deal with, and PACOM [U.S. Pacific Command] and EUCOM [U.S. European Command], respectively, here.

Mr. SCOTT. I would appreciate any advocacy you could have. I agree with you 100 percent, and I am not opposed to the DOD developing the system that they want for the fight against the Russians and the Chinese. But even in developing that system, we don't want to use that system unless we have to because we don't want the Russians and the Chinese to be able to gather the intel that they are going to gather from it every time we fly it.

So we certainly continue to be concerned about, as we shift in strategy to China and Russia, abandoning platforms that work in the other parts of the world which are very serious fights that we are in and that you are commanding right now.

I am down to about a minute, but just briefly, if you would, again, I have been on the border of Syria and Israel. The military objectives in Syria, can you just outline for us what they are again very briefly?

General VOTEL. Well, specifically, it is to ensure—principally, it is to ensure an enduring defeat of ISIS is what the principal objective is of our military campaign right now in Syria. You know, certainly we are concerned about the weapons of mass destruction, in terms of some of their chemical capabilities. As you have seen in the past, we are obviously very concerned about making sure we can provide the humanitarian aid, the stability that goes along with getting people back into their homes. We are concerned about making sure that we protect allies that are on the flanks of Syria—Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey—that all feel the impacts of that. And, of course, we are very keen to ensure that there is a political resolution to all of this. Of course, that is beyond my military——

Mr. SCOTT. General, my time has expired, but it is a tough situation. I am glad that we have a leader like you over there and thank you for your service.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Brown.

Mr. BROWN. Thank you Mr. Chairman.

And, General Votel, thank you for your leadership and for appearing before the House Armed Services Committee to discuss the readiness, the posture, and the activities within CENTCOM. So thank you.

I want to bring your attention back to Iran and its activities in Syria, perhaps covering some ground that has been covered and hopefully clarifying at least one point that you made. Iran is playing a very large role in Syria, providing senior advisers to the Assad regime, delivering weapons, cash, recruiting, and encouraging foreign fighters.

Last month, Iran launched a drone that entered Israeli airspace. There was a series of events resulting in the downing of an F–16. The situation is clearly escalating and at greater risk.

You mentioned, in response to Ms. Cheney's question, that we can impede Tehran. Can you just identify what those strategic and/

or operational impediments are that we are putting in Tehran's way, and can you evaluate the effectiveness of them?

General VOTEL. Well, I think some—as I mentioned, I think one of the things that we can do is we can build strong and resilient partnerships with our partners, whether it is the Iraqis on their side of the border or whether it is, you know, kind of the Syrian Democratic Forces. At this point, that is our partner on the ground.

You know, in many regards, these partners share the same concerns we do with this, that they don't want their countries, they don't want their areas exploited by others for purposes of creating instability in this area.

So the relationships that we develop with them, Iraqi forces, you know, particularly their border control forces, I think help aid and prevent the movement of these types of activities and equipment back and forth across their borders. I think the Iraqis are as concerned about that as we would be and as most countries would be.

And, certainly, I think in Syria, although I do acknowledge our partners on the ground are a very indigenous partner, they do control very important areas along the border between Iraq and Syria. And so they can as well, through their own operations, make it difficult for Iran to pursue their activities through these particular areas. And so that is why I kind of describe it much more in an indirect way as——

Mr. BROWN. If I may, General, so that sounds a little bit aspirational and I appreciate that. Can you evaluate the effectiveness of what you just described?

General VOTEL. Well, I think we are working on how we actually do that. I mean, most of these networks are very resilient. They are very savvy in terms of how they are doing things. So this is something that we are looking at now, how we measure the effectiveness of it.

I mean, we are only in this case largely talking about ground routes. Certainly, Iran has the ability to use air routes as well to basically go over or around all of that. They have the ability to use maritime routes. They have the ability to go through Africa to get to these areas as well.

So, you know, we have to look at this holistically as we try to address this.

Mr. BROWN. So let me ask one other question, perhaps the last in the time I have remaining. I understand that Israel is in the EUCOM AOR. You know, conflict in that region doesn't necessarily respect the area of operations of our different commands. Can you talk about in the event, regardless of the likelihood, of a conflict between Iran and Israel, regardless of how it is provoked, can you just comment on what our readiness—in this setting, perhaps it is best for the classified setting—our readiness and posture to come to the aid of Israel?

General VOTEL. Again, I think that is probably a question that is best suited for General Scaparrotti, but what I would tell you——

Mr. BROWN. For readiness and posture? That wouldn't involve CENTCOM?

General VOTEL. Right. Given that it is in his area and he has the principal responsibility for that relationship.

What I would tell you is this, is that, you know, the CENTCOM area, not just on the Israeli border, but certainly on the border of Egypt with Libya, on the border of Pakistan with India, to the north of the Central Asian states with Russia, it is a tough neighborhood. And so it is imperative for the combatant commanders to be very well-nested across all of these areas.

And I think, under the leadership of our chairman and with the National Defense Strategy that the Secretary has put in place, that we are improving significantly our ability to operate in cooperation with each other and in many cases very, very seamlessly.

So it is not unusual for General Scaparrotti and I to have a lot of coordination and talking across our common areas of concern, just like it is not uncommon for General Waldhauser in AFRICOM [U.S. Africa Command] and I to talk or Admiral Harris and I to talk about the things on his side.

So this is an area where we have really got to continue to pay attention to, and I think we are doing a much, much better job of this.

Mr. BROWN. Thank you, General.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Ms. McSally.

Ms. MCSALLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Votel, good to see you again. I have three important questions. I will be as fast as I can. The first is about this attack on U.S. forces in Syria, media reports alleging it is by Russian mercenaries.

Can you comment at all if we have confirmation that, in fact, those were Russian mercenaries, number one? How many do you think were killed? And do we have any confirmation that that was approved or ordered by the Kremlin or Putin? And what do you think their objective might have been?

General VOTEL. Congresswoman, I am not sure I can report anything different than you have seen in the media and in the press on this right now, in terms of numbers and attribution of who this is. What I can tell you is that, throughout this entire event, we were in communications on our communication channel with the Russians before, during, after. And what they told us is these were not their forces and not their military forces.

So, you know, I think that kind of speaks for itself here in terms of what they are. And then, of course, we have seen all the media that has come out after this. So, to me, it highlights, again, the unwillingness, inability of the regime and pro-regime forces to take seriously the ISIS threat, particularly if there is apparent contracted forces in the area attempting to do this.

Ms. MCSALLY. So do you believe they were not Russian mercenaries, and do we have any intelligence to corroborate or confirm or deny that?

General VOTEL. None that I would discuss in this particular setting.

Ms. MCSALLY. Could we maybe discuss in the follow-on setting?

General VOTEL. I would be happy to talk with you.

Ms. MCSALLY. But do you personally believe that they were not Russian mercenaries at this point, or can you not even say that?

General VOTEL. We have characterized them as pro-regime forces at this point.

Ms. MCSALLY. Okay. I look forward to following up in a classified setting.

The second topic is A–10 Warthog was back in Afghanistan kicking butt in January. Can you comment on the types of missions that they are doing? And I know it is a little specific, but as part of the shift in strategy, it seems like we are now going after more of the sources of revenue perhaps overall in attacking the, you know, poppy industry and the drugmaking facilities. And how is the A–10 doing over there?

General VOTEL. A–10s are doing great. They were in action within 24 hours of being on the ground here. And I have had an opportunity to visit the squadron and meet the squadron commander, and very, very proud of what they are doing. And they are doing the things that we would expect the A–10s to do.

Part of our concept and why we are pushing adviser teams down to a lower level is so that we can bring capabilities like the A–10 to bear very effectively in support of the Afghan National Defense Forces. And so that is what we expect they are doing.

You are correct: One of the things that has been successful and we have tried to carry over from our defeat-ISIS campaign is going after the revenue generation and, in this case, the narcotrafficking that fuels the Taliban. And so this is a key focus for General Nicholson and our forces at this point.

Ms. MCSALLY. Great. Thanks. I do want to note if the last administration got their way, all the A–10s would be in the boneyard by now. And as I told this President, you are going to have to pry them out of my cold dead hands, because it is such a critical warfighting capability. And I appreciate this committee and leadership working to keep that asset so we can be doing missions like this.

The last topic is I am really concerned about the buildup on Israel's northern border, so southern Syria, of Iranian-backed militias and forces, Quds Force commanding that, and the increased aggression we are seeing from there, as the Assad regime seems to be shoring up controlling that area, and the potential for escalation of a crisis with Israel.

Again, I know that's EUCOM's AOR, but Syria is yours. So can you speak to what you are seeing in the trends in the Golan area and whether there is a threat there?

General VOTEL. I think we share the same concerns that you have just highlighted right here. And, you know, what this is—you know, very effectively in this southwestern corner of Syria, we have been able to diplomatically begin to address that. And so working with the special Presidential envoy, Mr. McGurk, and others, we are continuing to keep focus on that.

Again, Russia is a party to this and they have responsibilities to ensure that, you know, the detractable partners that may be in this area are under control. And so they have to take responsibility for this and be held accountable, not just the Iranians but the others that are down there that are much more akin to the violent extremists down there. So I think we have to continue to address that in this particular aspect.

Ms. MCSALLY. Can you share any of the trends that you are seeing, increase in military capability we have seen, again, with the escalation over the last few weeks, and any concerns you have about that escalating into a full-blown crisis with Israel?

General VOTEL. Well, I think what I am concerned about is in these places down in the southwest and particularly up in places like Idlib, these are becoming collection zones for a lot of unsavory organizations right here, and eventually, they are going to have to be dealt with. And so I am concerned that, left unaddressed, that they will become bigger problems.

In terms of trends and stuff like this, I can't tell you in the southwest, particularly in this setting, that we have seen anything specific here in terms of this, but obviously there are some concerns. But what we have seen in places like Idlib and others is where these groups that have come together do potentially pose long-term challenges for security of the region, above and beyond Syria.

Ms. MCSALLY. Great. Thanks. I am over my time, but I look forward to discussing further in the closed session. Thanks.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Langevin.

Mr. LANGEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General, great to see you again. Thank you for your great service to the Nation. It is a pleasure to have you back before the committee once again.

I would like to continue on the Iran topic as well and do a deeper dive on this topic. So Iran supports numerous proxies: Hezbollah in Israel, Lebanon, and Syria; the Houthis in Yemen; and militias in Iraq. Iran is using its militias and insurgents abroad to upset the existing order and sow chaos, obviously. In addition to proxies, Iran uses other asymmetric means, like cyber operations and information warfare, to expand its influence in the region.

So can you explain how you have seen Iran utilize these techniques during your tenure as CENTCOM commander to create a land bridge through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon, and if you think they have been effective in increasing their influence through this strategy?

General VOTEL. Thanks. Thanks, Congressman. Some of this discussion probably I think is best set for a closed session here, but, you know, I think, you know, what Iran attempts to do is by creating proxy organizations that can go out there and do their bidding, that can operate in areas in which they have interests. I think they are attempting to do that. And I do think we see some instances of that as we look at some of the undisciplined Shia militia organizations that are here that are much more beholden to Iran than they are to, say, the Government of Iraq. This is very concerning to us, and I think this gives us indications that they are acting not on behalf of the government they say they are representing but on behalf of another party.

Mr. LANGEVIN. Okay. Good. I look forward to following up on that question too once we are in the closed session.

So the war in Syria has left hundreds of thousands dead, millions either internally displaced or seeking asylum as refugees. But as the fight against ISIL transitions to consolidating gains and building stability, it seems as if some of the groups that have

formed partnerships of convenience may now turn their attention towards fighting each other instead.

So how do you see these various elements aligning themselves in Syria, and do you worry about a potential shifting regional balance of power, and do you feel the Syrian Kurds might feel slighted by recent events and align more closely with Iran to ward off threats?

General VOTEL. Yes. So, first off, Congressman, what I would say is, with the partners that we operate, the Syrian Democratic Forces, we have not necessarily seen infighting among themselves here in terms of that. I mean, it is a large organization, roughly half Kurd/half Arab, and with some others thrown in there, Yazidis and others, Turkmen, that are involved in this group. But, frankly, they, in my estimation, have continued to be pretty coherent in terms of how they are doing this.

I guess the way I would describe it is that, as we are completing the defeat of ISIS, I think what we are now beginning to see is the reemergence of many of the underlying issues that have always been in place in Syria. And as we have converging forces in the area, we are now seeing diverging interests.

And I think we see this down in the middle Euphrates Valley between the focus of the coalition and our partners on the ground and what the pro-regime element is focused on. They are less concerned about rooting out ISIS than they are about going in and addressing some of the opposition elements to the regime.

So I think what we—I think what we have to be mindful of is that, as the caliphate goes away and as the threat of ISIS is removed, we will begin to see more of a return to the underlying challenges that really gave birth to many of these—to this problem and other problems in the country. And those are ultimately going to have to be addressed through some type of Geneva process that brings the parties together to, you know, establish some kind of process and arrangement that allows Syria to be the country that it should be.

Mr. LANGEVIN. It seems that we are at that tipping point right now where the State Department has to play a stronger role in working with the powers that have interests there and try to bring about a political solution. So I hope we are going to be pursuing that on dual tracks.

I see my time is about to run out, so I will hold my questions for the closed session, but, again, thank you for your service, General, and I will yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Russell.

Mr. RUSSELL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you, General Votel, for your testimony today.

A couple of areas that I have not heard discussed. Could you give us your thoughts on Turkish operations in Afrin and its partnering with al-Qaida affiliates, its attacks on U.S.-backed forces, and how that will impact the by, with, and through strategy to make a stable border security force?

General VOTEL. Congressman, I think some of that will probably be reserved for the closed session here. But, you know, I think we have acknowledged that Turkey has some concerns, has some significant concerns along their border with longstanding PKK inter-

ests. Our concern, of course, is that this activity in Afrin is detracting from our efforts against ISIS.

Mr. RUSSELL. And then kind of a broader scope on that. What actions do you think are needed to prevent this mixture of Erdogan-Putin counter-efforts to secure the hard-fought gains against ISIS?

General VOTEL. Well, I think as I mentioned in my opening statement, as I have said a couple times here, I really view Russia as being at the heart of many of these issues here.

And I am being very serious when I say they play the role of both arsonist and fireman, fueling tensions and then trying to resolve them in their favor and manipulating all the parties they can to try to achieve their objectives—their objectives—and not necessarily the broader objectives of the international community here.

So I think there certainly has to be more accountability and pressure put on Russia to do what they said they were going to do.

Mr. RUSSELL. Do you think that that pressure could come from the other instruments of national power from the United States on our NATO ally in Turkey?

General VOTEL. I think they can come from a variety of different sources, Congressman.

Mr. RUSSELL. And then I guess can you speak also to the need to interdict the ISIS/al-Qaida migration into sub-Saharan Africa, AQ Maghreb, Boko Haram, others, see a lot of that now, that as they have been pushed out of one area, that they may drift over to the other, and how that would cooperate between the combatant commands.

General VOTEL. Well, certainly, we are very cognizant of what AFRICOM is dealing with with their partners on the ground in Sahel and the Maghreb here and very, very concerned about that. I think one of the principal things that we can do is continue to share information back and forth.

Frankly, we are not seeing mass migration of these fighters. I won't tell you that they are probably not getting out with refugees and others that are doing that. That probably is occurring. But certainly, this is a concern long term.

And so I think one of the things that we are attempting to do is, particularly now that we have so many foreign fighters that have been captured and are in some level of detention with our partners here, is try to get the international community engaged in taking responsibility for their people and bringing them to some level of justice. There is a lot that can be learned from these foreign fighters, and we have to make sure that we have exploited that and learned as much as we can so we can prevent it, but we also need to make sure that they are put back into the judicial process so they can be dealt with by their countries from which they came.

Mr. RUSSELL. Then I guess the last question I have would be, could you give your assessment of Egyptian and Saudi combined efforts on Yemen and the status of Yemen?

General VOTEL. With respect to the status of Yemen, I think, obviously, Yemen is very destabilized at this particular point. Not only do they have a civil war going on, they have kind of a proxy war playing out here between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with Iran in-

troducing advanced technology into there. We see the enabled Houthis trying to challenge navigation in the Bab-el-Mandeb, and, of course, they have a counterterrorism problem that we are very focused on.

So, you know, I think, from the counterterrorism standpoint, I think we are making very good progress in this particular area. I don't see significant changes in the civil conflict that is taking place, that is largely being orchestrated by the Arab coalitions on the ground there. They certainly need to put some more effort into that. We are paying attention to the efforts by our diplomats and others here to try to address this politically. There had been—there has been some opportunities in the past that have not come to fruition yet, and I think we still have to continue on in this area.

But I think Yemen is an area that we should all be concerned about, because we are seeing all kinds of problems in that particular area and, on top of it, huge humanitarian issues. The people are suffering greatly.

Mr. RUSSELL. Thank you.

And thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Ms. Rosen.

Ms. ROSEN. Thank you. I want to thank the general for being here today and thank the ranking member and the chairman for this important hearing.

I would like to speak a little bit about sanctions on Iran and Russia, and what is your opinion and how would implementing sanctions or what level of sanctions, if any, do you think would influence activities in the Middle East, specifically Russia and Iran?

General VOTEL. Well, Congresswoman, we don't really manage those within the Department of Defense and certainly not within CENTCOM. I do know that the Secretary has recently provided some information to Senator Corker and others with regards to CAATSA [Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act] and some of the other things regarding sanctions out here, and I think those kind of represent his interest.

You know, I think sanctions are a very important part of this. In most of these threats—and I think as I tried to mention in my opening comments, this is a team sport. And so we can do things militarily, but we also need the other instruments of our national power, whether it is diplomatic, whether it is economic, whether it is informational, to really kick in on these things. And when we are able to bring all of those together, to include things like sanctions, I think we often have the best effects.

And so, you know, I think there are certainly some very good areas where sanctions will make a difference. We do have to look at the impact of those on some of our partners, and we have to be mindful of that. I do think granting waiver authority to the Secretary of State with regard to some of these things is a good approach and gives us the flexibility that we need in these regards, but, you know, I look at it as a key part of the whole-of-government approach.

Ms. ROSEN. So you feel you are getting enough support in this regard?

General VOTEL. I do. And I certainly know this is a continuing area of topic in other parts of the government.

Ms. ROSEN. Thank you.

I also want to switch over and talk about Syria a little bit. And so where does the communication stand after Russian-aligned troops, of course, attacked our partner forces in Syria in early February? So how are things going there? And our strategy of deconfliction with Russian mechanisms, has that been helpful?

General VOTEL. Congresswoman, there has been no change in the communication channel that we have had. Our deconfliction channel remains a very professional military discussion. It was before, and it has been since. And so it remains an effective way to deconflict our forces and make sure our airmen stay safe and our people on the ground are safe.

Ms. ROSEN. Thank you.

I yield back my time.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Gallagher.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Just to follow up briefly on something Mr. Russell said, what do we say to our NATO allies in Ankara regarding our support for Kurdish elements in Syria, the YPG, and other elements? What message do we communicate to them?

General VOTEL. The message that I have conveyed is that our Kurdish partners, part of the Syrian Democratic Forces, a multiethnic force that consists in equal measures and actually in greater measures of Arabs than Kurds, has been the most effective force on the ground in Syria against ISIS. And we need them to finish this fight. So I think that is the first thing and really one of the principal things we have to acknowledge to them. I think we also have to acknowledge their concerns about this. And so our attempts to try to be as transparent and clear in terms of what we are doing and our way forward I think are things we have to continue to emphasize to them.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Do they simply make no distinction between the PKK and the elements that we support on the ground in Syria?

General VOTEL. Well, they don't draw that distinction. And, of course, that is the tension.

Mr. GALLAGHER. To follow up on something Ms. Cheney said earlier, or that you said in response to her question, that it is not part of the coalition effort to counter Iran in Syria, how would you characterize our strategy in Syria vis-a-vis Iran? What are we trying to do to Iran in Syria?

General VOTEL. Well, I think our broad U.S. Government objective here is to limit Iran's influence in Syria, because, as we have seen, they are attempting to arm and motivate fighters that could pose threats to our other vital partners here. And so, you know, I think as a government, we have interest in trying to limit their influence and activities in this part of the region.

Mr. GALLAGHER. I don't want to spend my remaining time on a semantic debate, but I just would say if their influence is gaining in Syria and we need to limit that, I sort of think that necessarily involves us countering their gains in Syria. So perhaps some clarity, or let me rather say, what is our strategy? How would you characterize our strategy vis-a-vis Iran throughout the rest of the region?

General VOTEL. I would characterize our strategy as deter, assure, and compete. We have to have capabilities in place to deter

Iran's use of ballistic missile capability against our partners, and we have to ensure that we can deter their ability to race to a nuclear weapons capability.

We have to always assure our partners in the region. As I think I have said several times here, our partnerships, when you line up our coalition versus their coalition, ours is much more capable. And so continuing to develop those relationships is really very important and assuring our partners that we are going to be there with them.

And then we have to compete with them not just militarily but with our other instruments of power, in the areas that we can. And this is pushing back, rolling back on their influence, pushing back on their narrative where we can, and then, in the areas where we must, preventing them from moving their weapons and other things around the theater that pose threats to our partners.

Mr. GALLAGHER. But does that rollback, that competition sort of reach a limit in Syria? Is there some reason we are being less aggressive there? You sort of mentioned Iraq as an area where we are competing more effectively with them.

General VOTEL. I think my point is only that, as we form the coalition, the defeat-ISIS coalition, that, you know, has both a military and a political component to it, that one of the objectives that has not been assigned to us is countering Iran. It has specifically been focused on the ISIS mission. So I think that is what I am trying to emphasize.

Mr. GALLAGHER. And then, in Iraq, do you think we are actively or effectively competing with them? And I am thinking specifically of, you know, one of the biggest phenomena in the last year has been the rise of the PMF [Popular Mobilization Forces] and, you know, some of these groups may be able to be incorporated in the ISF [Iraqi security forces], but others are terrorists, you know, taking orders from the IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps].

General VOTEL. Well, I think, you know, certainly addressing the PMF is something that the Prime Minister will have to do, and in many regards, he has done that. But, again, I think one of the best things we can do on the ground in Syria is being a really good and valued partner to the Iraqi security forces, and I think the assistance that the United States and the coalition did I think demonstrated that.

And in my engagements with the security force leaders that I talk to on a regular basis, I think they deeply value that, and they appreciate it, and they look forward to maintaining that relationship in the future.

Mr. GALLAGHER. I have run out of time. Thank you, sir.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Suozzi.

Mr. SUOZZI. General, I want to thank you so much for your service and the great work of everyone under your command throughout the regions that are under your command.

My particular concerns are about Afghanistan that I briefly discussed with you before the hearing began. And the special inspector general's report on Afghan reconstruction reports that we are not making progress as far as population centers and how much we control. In fact, we lost a little bit of ground from the last report.

And I support what the military is doing. I supported the effort to increase the number of troops recently. And I think that you have a very clear strategy as far as the five points of help the Afghan Army, helping the Afghan special forces to increase their size and effectiveness; increase the collaboration between the Afghan Air Force and the Army; as well as replace their platforms with American equipment as opposed to Russian equipment; help the police; and put more pressure on Pakistan. It is a clear five-point strategy that makes tremendous sense, and you are doing a very effective job of clearing and holding area.

The problem is the backfilling. And in your prepared testimony, you talked about how Kabul's uncertain political situation remains the greatest risk of stability. And you went on to say that "the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan continues to suffer from a professional governmental capacity deficit, competing interests, and corruption." And my concern is that your colleagues on the civilian side do not have a clear plan the way that the military has. So I want to ask you, who do you see as being your clearest partners with General Nicholson on the civilian side in this effort, and what do you perceive their strategy to be? If you could put it in a succinct way, because I don't see them putting out a clear succinct plan on the civilian side. So you are clearing and holding, but when it comes to rebuilding and transitioning, they are not laying out a clear plan. So I just want to ask you to comment on that, please, General.

General VOTEL. Thank you, Congressman.

I think that the principal partner that we would look to on the U.S. side certainly is the Ambassador and the country team. And, you know, I do think we have a very outstanding Ambassador on the ground. I think he is very engaged in this. And I think we are beginning to address many of these things that you have talked about.

As I mentioned to you, in many regards the military missions in many of these countries really are the easy part of addressing the situation. And the more difficult part is the political resolution that has to take place afterwards, because this is when you have to address the deep underlying issues that, you know, oftentimes gave way to the conflict that we just resolved.

As I think I mentioned to you beforehand, you know, tomorrow in Kabul, President Ghani and, you know, certainly with the support of our Embassy, will be hosting the Kabul Process conference that will address both reconciliation and counterterrorism and will be an opportunity with 25 nations brought in to help do that.

There are efforts underway with our Department of State interlocutors to help devise ways to move forward with reconciliation. It is extraordinarily complex. The Taliban is not a singular contiguous group to deal with. It is broken. It is fractured. And so not only do we have to look at reconciliation, we have to look at things like reintegration as well.

So, you know, the task in front of our diplomats to solve this I think is an extraordinarily complex one as they move forward. And I do think this certainly is a challenge here, but I do think that they are moving forward in ways to begin to address this effectively

here as we apply military, social, and diplomatic pressure to bring the Taliban to the table.

Mr. SUOZZI. So, General, in your testimony, you also—thank you very much for that, by the way. In your testimony, you talked about how Pakistan is starting to share more information and collaborate more than they had historically. What is your prognosis with Pakistan? What do you see happening in real time other than the sharing of information, and what can we hope to expect as far as progress regarding the governing of the ungoverned areas?

General VOTEL. Well, you know, I would say that, first off, I think it is important to recognize that Pakistan has actually—you know, Pakistan as a country has suffered greatly from terrorism, perhaps as much as anybody in the region and maybe as much as anybody around the world. And they have taken a number of measures to address terrorism within their borders, and that has contributed over the years to, you know, some increased security in the area, and we have to recognize that upfront.

So our approach I think is to continue to be engaged with them. We want to have a candid discussion. I think I do. We want to have frequent communication. We want to build trust in this relationship. The history of the United States and Pakistan, there is a very long history here. We do share many interests, and they share many things in common with us culturally, militarily, politically, in terms of what we are doing, but we have to continue to work with them to move them in directions that cause them to make strategic changes in their approach. And that is really what we are aimed at. I don't know that we can put a time limit on that, but, as I mentioned to you, we are seeing some positive indicators, and we have to ensure that we don't overlook these as we move forward and we continue to build on these, and this is what my objective is with my counterparts.

Mr. SUOZZI. Thank you, General.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Gaetz.

Mr. GAETZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, General, for your service and for being here.

There is no place in the world where Iranian-backed proxy forces are a stabilizing feature of the terrain, is there?

General VOTEL. Not that I would—I would not characterize it that way, Congressman.

Mr. GAETZ. So, in July of 2015, we have the birth of the JCPOA. From that point in time until today, would we say that Iran has made the same investment in their proxy forces, a reduced investment in their proxy forces, or an enhanced investment in their proxy forces?

General VOTEL. I think I would characterize it as an enhanced investment in their proxies and partners.

Mr. GAETZ. So, since the JCPOA, we have got Iran putting more money behind proxy forces that are destabilizing in literally 100 percent of the circumstances in which they exist. In August of 2017, the Iranian Parliament votes to increase their military spending.

Are there particular capabilities that we think may emerge from that, particular tactics that Iran is investing in as they use more

of the cash that they now have access to to be a destabilizing hegemon?

General VOTEL. Well, Congressman, I mean, as I mentioned earlier, I think, as we look at the Iranian threat, I think what we have seen is not only an increase quantitatively but, in some cases, an increase qualitatively in some of the capabilities that they have developed.

They are using the opportunity of things like Yemen to—you know, like we go out to China Lake to test our weapon systems. They go to Yemen to test their weapon systems. So they are taking advantage of these opportunities to improve their capabilities around the world. So I definitely am concerned about this.

Mr. GAETZ. You also test some great weapon systems off my district in northwest Florida we are very proud of. My district is also home to the 7th Special Forces Group. They do a great deal of work in the CENTCOM AOR, and frequently they return home and then deploy to SOUTHCOM [U.S. Southern Command] AOR to find themselves fighting a very similarly flavored enemy in radical Islamic extremists funded in many circumstances by Iran through their terror proxies.

Are there areas within CENTCOM's AOR where there are training activities, where recruits are being brought in from other parts of the world, particularly the Western Hemisphere, and then essentially redeployed after receiving training in the CENTCOM AOR?

General VOTEL. I am not sure I can answer that in this particular setting here. I am sure that there probably are.

Mr. GAETZ. Okay. We may chat about that a little later today then. Are there particular capabilities in the development of Iran's terror proxies that we find them particularly investing in, whether that is drone technology, whether that is guerilla capability, the development of explosives?

General VOTEL. I think all of the above. I think these are all tactics that we have seen in the past. You know, certainly we are concerned about the increasing use of missiles, of all short-range, medium-range missiles, and that type of stuff is very concerning. Their use of UASes [unmanned aerial systems] is a particular concerning emerging threat for us here that we are concerned about.

But I think one, you know, of the other things is that, you know, I think as we look at what Iran did in—what it took Iran to do, took 20 years for Iran to do in Lebanon with the Lebanese Hezbollah, they are attempting to do in about 5 years with the Houthis in Yemen. This is very concerning to us.

So I think they are accelerating their pace in their ability to do this, and this is something we have to be very concerned about.

Mr. GAETZ. I completely agree. And I would add to the list activities in the Western Hemisphere where that very same game plan that we have seen Iran run in Syria, then on the Arabian Peninsula, and now in our own backyard would continue that troubling trend line with an increased boost in volume and in quality.

As we look at the particular missile systems that you mentioned and the areas where they may be used, I look particularly to our ally Israel as a point of vulnerability. Do we see the—or in what capacity do we see the Iranians hardening their positions in south-

ern Syria, and what feedback have we gotten at the mil-to-mil level from our ally Israel about their discomfort with that?

General VOTEL. In this setting, I would just say I think we have seen and we have seen in public media releases here, you know, Israel has struck at some of these locations here that they have posed a threat to them.

So, you know, I think in this setting, I think I would leave it at that, that there certainly are some concerns there.

Mr. GAETZ. Great. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to our next setting.

I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Gallego.

Mr. GALLEGO. Thank you, General.

We recently heard from Admiral Harris that munitions have been a great concern for him in PACOM. CENTCOM has obviously been using a lot of munitions in the counter-ISIL fight. So please describe for me the state of our current munitions in CENTCOM, and are you getting what you currently need?

General VOTEL. Congressman, we are. And I would be happy to take it for the record and give you some more detail on this. But what we did in CENTCOM here over the last—with the support of the Department, was put in controlled supply rates for our key munitions here, and we have been managing that for some time. Certainly, the success we have had in Iraq and Syria has resulted in a lowered use of that, which has allowed us to cross-level within the theater to Afghanistan to address our issues.

I won't comment on the broader Department-wide challenge with this, but I think we are being well supported right now in CENTCOM.

Mr. GALLEGO. Good. So, to follow up a little on that then, from where you stand, are the other combatant commands, especially EUCOM, are they keeping their stocks at the appropriate levels they need, anticipating the kind of adversaries——

General VOTEL. Congressman, I think that is probably a better question for them. I can't comment on their stockage.

Mr. GALLEGO. Switching gears then, would you call Qatar a dependable partner?

General VOTEL. I think Qatar has been a dependable partner to us. Certainly, we have our—my forward headquarters is located in Qatar. We have our air operations center there. I think they have been good partners to us in the past.

Mr. GALLEGO. Is the discord between our GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council]—other partners outside of Qatar and especially between the Saudi and Qatar in regards to the bloc, has that affected any of our operations in CENTCOM?

General VOTEL. It has not had a significant impact on our military activities. And we have made this very clear from the beginning that we would not allow that, and I think we have largely been successful in mitigating most of that.

Mr. GALLEGO. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Banks.

Mr. BANKS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And, General, thank you for being here today.

Can we go back to Afghanistan for a moment, and could you comment more specifically on how tenuous is our 39-member-nation coalition? Is it continuing to weaken, or do you have more of an optimistic outlook on where our coalition is heading forward?

General VOTEL. I think our coalition remains very, very strong in Afghanistan. You know, one of the things that underpins, you know, the President's roadmap for the Afghan National Defense [and] Security Forces was the commitment made by the NATO nations and the partner nations at the Brussels conference and in Warsaw to make sure that the support would be continued. And so we have seen the partner nations continue to sustain and in many cases increase their contributions to the effort.

Mr. BANKS. Just to repeat, so we are seeing in some places an increase. Can you mention which nations are increasing their commitment?

General VOTEL. I think the U.K. is an example. They have increased some of their recent contributions.

Mr. BANKS. Okay, thank you. A moment ago, you said, in addressing Mr. Suozzi's comments, that Pakistan has paid a significant price. "Has suffered greatly" was your quote.

In your testimony, though, you, quote, say: "The Taliban and Haqqani leadership and fighters continue to find sanctuary in Pakistan," end quote. And then, on the next page, you talk about our discontinuing of IMET/FMF [International Military Education and Training/Foreign Military Financing] support to Pakistan.

Could you dig a little bit deeper into that? I mean, what is working to bring Pakistan back to the table to thwart the Taliban and other like-minded groups in providing them sanctuary in Pakistan?

General VOTEL. Well, you know, I think certainly the pressure that our government put on Pakistan as we brought out the strategy I think contributed to that. I think what is also working right now is the approach that we have in place with them. I think we have tried to be very clear in terms of the things that we need Pakistan to do for us.

And what I have endeavored to do, not always in a public way but in a private way, is develop a relationship that allows us to provide feedback both ways. There are things, frankly, that Pakistan has asked of us as well. So this is a two-way street here. And so it is my responsibility, I think, to make sure that we have feedback loops in place that go back and forth between the things that we are doing to try to support each other and moving forward in that regard.

And so, you know, I would be happy to talk a little bit more about this perhaps in a closed session here, but that is really what this is about. It is about building a bridge back, building the trust that has to underpin this relationship that has been missing from it for a long time.

Mr. BANKS. Has there been a plan to recontinue FMF and IMET support to Pakistan?

General VOTEL. I don't think we have addressed that at this particular point.

Mr. BANKS. So we remain in a posture of discontinuing that support? Pakistan has obviously——

General VOTEL. That is the current posture, and I would imagine hopefully in the future we will have an opportunity to reconsider.

Mr. BANKS. Has that been beneficial?

General VOTEL. Again, I think it has created some of the pressure on this. In many regards, you know, Pakistan isn't necessarily looking for our equipment in all these cases. They are looking for our understanding and respect, in terms of what they have accomplished here. So, again, this is really about relationship building, and that is principally my focus here with my counterpart.

Mr. BANKS. Pakistan continues to provide a very important and strategic logistical route for our efforts into Afghanistan. Have you seen those logistical routes continue to operate fully as they have——

General VOTEL. I have. I have.

Mr. BANKS [continuing]. For the past decade plus?

General VOTEL. Ground lines communication, airlines communications, absolutely vital to us, and they have continued to sustain that.

Mr. BANKS. Thank you very much.

I yield back.

General VOTEL. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. O'Rourke.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General, could you tell us how many U.S. forces we have in Afghanistan right now? How many service members are deployed there as of this moment?

General VOTEL. We generally don't talk numbers in public here, Congressman. I would be happy to——

Mr. O'ROURKE. What can you say that we can say in a public setting? There is lots of reporting on this. What is a ballpark you could talk about?

General VOTEL. We are at the level that the Department of Defense has approved for us in this area, and we will maintain that going forward.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Is that public information, the level that the Department of Defense has?

General VOTEL. I think that the Office of Secretary of Defense has put some numbers out. I don't recall what their most recent one is, but I would be happy to follow up on that with you.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Okay. And so I would like to ask you, how many U.S. service members are in Syria or operating in Syria? I am expecting to get a similar answer. Are you able to tell me?

General VOTEL. Right. I think, you know, that the Department of Defense I think has basically said around 1,700 have been there, but, again, I would offer the same response to you in this.

Mr. O'ROURKE. And in answer to Ms. Gabbard's question about what our purpose is, you responded that the sole and single task is to defeat ISIS. Is that, in fact, the reason for our military presence?

General VOTEL. That is the reason for our military presence.

Mr. O'ROURKE. And with the defeat of ISIS, will we no longer have a military presence in Syria?

General VOTEL. Well, when we have completed our—when we have completed our mission here in Syria. It involves not only kick-

ing ISIS out of the areas in which they occupy, but it also includes the consolidation and the consolidation of gains and the stability that allows us to move forward with a political resolution to this.

So that has been defined for us by our leadership here, and so that is how we are gauging our military support. That is part of the mission.

Mr. O'ROURKE. The first part of your answer is clear to me. If there are no longer ISIS combatants on the battlefield, if we no longer have a threat from them, I think that is probably something we can measure.

The second part sounds a little mushy. Could you define that in terms that I and my constituents can understand so we will know when we have won and when service members can come back from Syria?

General VOTEL. Right. So what we will continue to do is support our partners on the ground, to ensure that we can consolidate our gains, we can stabilize the area, we can ensure that international organizations, humanitarian aid organizations can come back, and people can get into their homes. And this is about creating the security environment that allows that and provides the time for our diplomats to pursue the solution that we are seeking through the United Nations in Syria.

Mr. O'ROURKE. So, even after ISIS is gone, there is an indefinite military commitment from the United States of America, from the description you just gave me. What is the legal justification to be there after ISIS is no longer there?

General VOTEL. Well, the fact is ISIS is still there, and that is what we are dealing with right now.

Mr. O'ROURKE. But the question I asked you is: After ISIS is defeated and you have accomplished the task, what is the legal justification for U.S. service members to be deployed in Syria?

General VOTEL. Well, the principal thing will be to ensure that ISIS does not reemerge in this particular area. Even though they have been eliminated from controlling terrain does not mean that ISIS is not present in this area. I think we have been very clear on that. So we have to ensure that ISIS isn't given the opportunity to resurge here.

With regard to your question on the legal authority of this, again, I would cite that, you know, the principal legal authority here was self-defense of Iraq in terms of this, and the unwillingness and inability of the Syrian regime to address this particular threat that posed a threat to, not just the country of Syria and Iraq, but really to a much broader group of countries around the world.

Mr. O'ROURKE. My understanding is that the administration has used the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force, whose justification is premised on the attacks of 9/11 and stopping those who attacked this country from being able to do so again.

And I think the logical conclusion of your answer to my question about our presence after ISIS is defeated is that the U.S. military can be in every country that there was ever an ISIS presence just so that there will not be an ISIS presence going forward, and I think that is a recipe for disaster. We will not have successful over-

sight or accountability or prosecution of that war, because we cannot define its goals or the strategy.

I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. General, what happened when we left Iraq completely in 2009 after we had supposedly defeated al-Qaida in Iraq?

General VOTEL. Well, Chairman, we saw the rise of ISIS, and we saw the inability of the Iraqi security forces to effectively address it as it was growing.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Hice.

Mr. HICE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General, according to the Worldwide Threat Assessment, the most recent one, Director Coats and the intelligence community assessed that Iran's support for the popular mobilization committee and Shia militants remain the primary threat to U.S. personnel in Iraq. Do you agree with that assessment?

General VOTEL. Congressman, I do think they certainly could pose a threat to our forces on the ground. This is something we are very vigilant for and are paying very, very close attention to. We have not seen that threat manifest itself at this particular point, but it is certainly something that we are very cognizant of.

Mr. HICE. How is CENTCOM working with the Iraqi Government and other regional partners to try to address this?

General VOTEL. Well, you know, certainly the Iraqi Government has a law in place that addresses paramilitary forces. And what we are doing as part of our broader security sector reform support that we provide to the Government of Iraq is encouraging them to take the steps to bring those forces to the right size and to ensure they have the right leadership and they are beholden to the Government of Iraq. So the principal way that we will do this is through our advice and, where necessary, our assistance to the Government of Iraq.

Mr. HICE. Okay. I would like to follow up a little bit on Mr. Gallagher's questions a little while ago and just kind of an overall perspective. What is CENTCOM's role in trying to curb Iranian influence, particularly in Iraq, but in the entire region?

General VOTEL. Well, you know, I think one of the principal roles that we have, as I mentioned, is assuring our partners and building partnerships around the region and helping our partners be resilient against this particular threat and making sure that they have the wherewithal to protect themselves. So certainly developing partnerships and assuring our partners is a key piece of this.

Another key piece of this is making sure that we have the right military capabilities in place to deter Iran from taking action, particularly with their growing and increasingly capable missile capability that they are developing. So we have a deterrence role.

And then, finally, I think we have a competition role. We have to challenge them for some of the things that they are doing. And we certainly can do that militarily, but we can also do that with our other instruments of national power that we have available for us.

Mr. HICE. Okay. Thank you. And that actually raises some questions that I think would probably be more appropriate in our next session.

But, with that, Mr. Chairman, I will yield back. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Bacon.

Mr. BACON. General Votel, thank you for your leadership, and I appreciate and thank the men and women who serve in the United States Central Command. I was a four-time deployed veteran of the command and proud of that.

I would like to drill a little bit more into the Iranian influence in Syria itself and that specific problem set. Iran has propped up Assad, I think maybe more so than Russia, but the two together have clearly been working together. They got advisers. They have sent fighters to Syria. They encourage Hezbollah to be supportive. Shia militants from other countries have been sent there. They have sent weapons, cash, petroleum. They have recently launched a drone, it appears. I think it was an Iranian drone versus a Syrian drone.

So what I am hearing from you—and please correct me if I am wrong, if my characterization is not right—that we do have a grander strategy that focuses on Iran in your AOR, but in Syria itself, we really don't have a strategy that limits Iran's influence in Syria. Is that a true characterization?

General VOTEL. I am not sure I would necessarily characterize it that way. There are things that are appropriate for the military to do, and that is the angle that I talk about, but there are certainly other parts of our government and other capabilities that we have within our national resources that can address Iran's malign activities, whether they are in Syria or in other places.

Mr. BACON. But you would agree it would be unacceptable for Iran to have a long-term presence in western Syria?

General VOTEL. It would be unacceptable if that presence resulted in threats to our other partners or in further destabilization of the region.

Mr. BACON. Would you say it is acceptable or unacceptable for Iran to build a land bridge from Iran, through Iraq, Syria, to the borders of Israel?

General VOTEL. I would say it is unacceptable if the purpose of that land bridge is to move lethal technologies and advanced capabilities in the hands of other fighters who may use those to attack their neighbors.

Mr. BACON. What would you say was the purpose of Iran launching that drone into Israel? Was that, indeed, Iran, or could it have been Syrian?

General VOTEL. You know, I am not sure. I think that is probably a better question for the Iranians here, in terms of that.

Mr. BACON. There seems to be a recent decline in Iranian harassment of our ships in the Persian Gulf and in the straits. Is that true, and why do you think that may be?

General VOTEL. It is true. We have seen a decrease in some of the interactions that we have seen. I think this is principally because of some of the strong rhetoric or the strong—the discussion we have had about the lack of professionalism of Iranian maritime forces and how they operate in this region. I think that has got their attention.

I also do think they are perhaps concerned about our stronger position on some of Iran's activities beyond just their nuclear weapons program here, and so they are paying attention to that.

I would tell you, Mr. Congressman, that one of the things we are concerned about is their increasing use of UAVs [ummanned aerial vehicles]. So, while we may see decreases with some of their activities in this area, I am equally concerned about their increasing use of UAVs that could pose a threat to our maritime activities in the region.

Mr. BACON. Thank you. Are we actively interdicting shipments to the Hezbollah in Lebanon from Iran?

General VOTEL. I think that is probably beyond the discussion in this room.

Mr. BACON. Going back to a previous question on Joint STARS, we are being asked by the Air Force to determine should we recapitalize the Joint STARS with a new airframe or let that go away and go to some new capabilities. And we are getting conflicting advice and counsel on that.

I would love to have your perspective. Do you need more Joint STAR capabilities or less, or do you have thoughts for us at the HASC [House Armed Services Committee]?

General VOTEL. You know, as a combatant commander, you know, I am very dependent upon the services to provide us the right capabilities. And they always do, and we are very, very satisfied with that. So I am less concerned about which platform it is on and more concerned with the capability that is coming our way.

Certainly, the Joint STARS provides not only ground movement targeting indicator capability that is very important in my theater and other theaters, but it also provides, you know, battlespace management command and control that comes along with. These are key capabilities.

What I am trying to achieve with our use of ISR is layered ISR. I want to be able to draw all these capabilities into an ISR scheme that meets our requirements in this particular theater.

Mr. BACON. Well, again, thank you for being here today and answering our questions. We are grateful to you.

I yield back.

General VOTEL. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Hunter.

Mr. HUNTER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General, thank you for being here. If you stick around long enough, you get to ask a question, whether you are good or not, if you are there.

I guess the first question is, we have been working on getting some kinds of UAVs, whether they are Predators or they are whatevers, to our allies in the Middle East, whether it is Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, UAE [United Arab Emirates], and we have been stopped. We have even offered them the ability to use U.S. contractors to do it so that they can prosecute their own targets, and we can use them instead of using our own.

So the question is: Can we tolerate a reality where, because of self-imposed constraints, we can't sell our allies our UAV technology, but the Chinese can—and you have already spoken to that point—but when it comes to technology, I think we are missing a big advantage there. Could you comment on that?

General VOTEL. I think it is—you know, as you are alluding to here, I think the opportunity for us to improve our interoperability through common systems, whether it is ISR or other systems we

have out here, I think these are always opportunities that we have to pursue wherever we can.

Mr. HUNTER. Do you support us sharing our UAV technology with our allies?

General VOTEL. I certainly think it deserves serious consideration.

Mr. HUNTER. Thank you. The second question is: In terms of Iran and a ratline that goes from Iran through Syria down to Israel, I have got big poster boards with Soleimani with his arm around every single Iraqi corps commander and militia guy. They are all buddies. Soleimani is now handpicking the guys that we are equipping and training, but that is the fight that we are in right now.

So the question is—and you have already spoken to this—but specifically, do you think it is going to be possible to extract Iran out of Syria and Iraq if there is an end to what is happening in Syria? Because they are dug in deeply now.

General VOTEL. Yeah. I think there certainly is an opportunity in Iraq through our strong relationships that we are developing here, and I think that, you know, one of the things that I have observed about Iraq over the last year has been their outreach to other partners across the region, whether it is Jordan, whether it is Saudi Arabia, whether it is Kuwait, whether it is Turkey, the other key Sunni nations in the area. And so they are very much emerging as, you know, trying to be much more involved in the region, which I think is a very positive thing. And I think it connotes the fact that Iraq is for Iraqis. And while they live in a difficult neighborhood with difficult neighbors and they have to deal with that, that they are principally concerned with Iraq.

Mr. HUNTER. Well, let's bring it back right now because, right now, we are playing the enemy of our enemy is our friend. That is what we are playing right now. If the Iranians are the major power players with weapons and our training and our gear right now with their handpicked militia guys, the Iraqis can reach out all they want to, but the power is with the Iranians in Iraq and Syria right now.

Is that not where the power lies, in your opinion, the actual power, and I am talking power by force?

General VOTEL. Well, I think there certainly is influence here, there is no doubt about that. But, again, I do see within the Iraqi leadership a very strong sense of independence and a desire to protect Iraq. And so I think these are things that we have to continue to build on.

Mr. HUNTER. So let me just lay it out then one last time. You are confident that in the next 10 years we are not going to see an Iranian-controlled ratline where the Iranians can go from Tehran through Syria down to Israel on a high-speed road with M1 Abrams tanks that we have trained them on. You do not see that happening?

General VOTEL. Congressman, I wouldn't speculate in that particular regard. What I would tell you is, I think our best opportunity to prevent something like that is to stay engaged and to——

Mr. HUNTER. I wouldn't disagree with you on that.

General VOTEL [continuing]. And to continue to be the valuable partner that we had been for them, and to continue to professional-

ize their forces and their capabilities so that they are beholden to themselves and not beholden to others to do things for them, and they don't allow their terrain to be exploited in the manner that you highlighted.

Mr. HUNTER. As you have seen, General, as we train and equip and try to pick sides, we are not always right on who we end up helping. And that has turned around to, you know, bite us a few times. And I really hope that, right now, with the Iranians we are not doing that in a much bigger way than we have messed up in the past. So thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. General, I want to follow on two questions that I don't think you have been asked directly. You started the hearing talking about considerable success in the fight to eliminate ISIS from controlling any territory. Is there or will there be a reduction in U.S. people and U.S. capabilities from Iraq, especially due to that success?

General VOTEL. Well, as part of our alignment process there already has been. And, you know, the success we have had has given us the ability to move some of these critical resources, whether it is ISR or fighter aircraft or some of our engineering capability or medical capability that we required on the ground and we have been able to reposition that within the theater, Afghanistan in particular, to make sure that General Nicholson has what he needs to be successful. So we already have seen that.

And, of course, as the situation continues to mature, we will continue to make smart decisions on this. We don't want to keep one more soldier, one more piece of equipment there than is needed to support the mission. And that is what we are pursuing, but we are trying to do it as smartly as we can.

The CHAIRMAN. Yeah. Because we also don't want to repeat the mistakes of the past and leave completely.

The other thing, at one point, the assessment we got was the most capable terrorist enemy we faced was AQAP, especially in their bombmaking and so forth. You have talked a little bit about al-Qaida and ISIS in Yemen. Is there still a terrorist threat that emanates from Yemen?

General VOTEL. There is, Chairman, and I think—first of all, I think our efforts over the last year have been very effective at addressing many of the concerns that we had with al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. And I think we have addressed their leadership, their media capability, their external operations capability, certainly some of their explosive capability that has been inherent in this organization.

But I think with al-Qaida, I think it is important to always understand what their long-term objectives are. And they are a very patient and savvy organization, and I think we always have to be concerned about al-Qaida. And so it is absolutely vital to not take the pressure off now but to keep the pressure on them and make sure that we complete this effort against them.

The CHAIRMAN. While it is a complex situation, you talked about the humanitarian, the Houthis, and all that is going on, I just think it is important not to lose sight of the fact that there continues to be a terrorist threat that emanates from there.

I think that we are good for now. Thank you for being here.

We will adjourn this open session, and within about 5 minutes, reconvene upstairs. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 12:08 p.m., the committee proceeded in closed session.]

A P P E N D I X

FEBRUARY 27, 2018

PREPARED STATEMENTS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

FEBRUARY 27, 2018

House Armed Services Committee Chairman William "Mac" Thornberry
Opening Remarks
Full Committee Hearing on
Terrorism and Iran: Defense Challenges in the Middle East

February 27, 2018

We welcome back to the Committee the Commander of the U.S. Central Command, General Joseph Votel. We are particularly interested in hearing General Votel's views on the changes that the new National Defense Strategy brings to his area of responsibility.

The Strategy's emphasis on strategic competition has implications for a region where Russian influence and presence is much greater now than it was before the Syrian conflict began, a region that is one of the targets of the Chinese whole-of-nation effort to increase its sway, and a region where the Iranians are aggressively expanding its wide arc of control to the detriment of its neighbors.

These developments and the continuing threat of terrorism in and emanating from the CENTCOM region suggests that the United States cannot afford to remove our attention or our presence from this vital region.

Fortunately, we have a number of strong allies and partners that are able and willing to actively defend our joint interests. But as we have painfully learned in recent years, there is simply no substitute for the United States. When we withdraw prematurely, the world, including the threats to our homeland, can rapidly grow more dangerous.

The challenge, however, is that CENTCOM has received the lion's share of military resources for some time, and while its importance remains, we have to be more active in other vital areas of the world at the same time. The recent budget agreement helps, but it will take time to rebuild and field needed capability. In these circumstances, General Votel has his hands full in making sure that U.S. national security is protected.

Statement of Ranking Member Adam Smith
House Armed Services Committee Hearing on:
"Terrorism and Iran: Defense Challenges in the Middle East"
February 27, 2018

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this important hearing. I would also like to welcome General Votel and to thank him for appearing today. His professional military views are instrumental to our evaluation of the complex and evolving security situations in the U.S. Central Command's area of responsibility.

The geographic region spanning the Middle East and much of Central and Southwest Asia is crucial to our national interests, and the United States must maintain its focus on security in that region. As we guard against threats, our efforts should be aimed primarily at easing tensions, promoting peace, and upholding the international rules-based order. Unfortunately, security challenges continue to permeate the region and emanate from it. The Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America (the NDS Summary) states, "Despite the defeat of ISIS's physical caliphate, threats to stability remain as terrorist groups with long reach continue to murder the innocent and threaten peace more broadly." The NDS Summary also asserts, "In the Middle East, Iran is competing with its neighbors, asserting an arc of influence and instability while vying for regional hegemony, using state-sponsored terrorist activities, a growing network of proxies, and its missile program to achieve its objectives."

Reports of continued military progress in the counter-ISIS campaign are encouraging. In the past year, Iraqi Security Forces secured Mosul and Syrian Democratic Forces liberated Raqqa. The persistent, cooperative methodology of Operation Inherent Resolve is succeeding. However, military achievements alone will not guarantee acceptable end states, and Secretary Tillerson recently indicated that the United States will undertake "stabilization initiatives." In doing so, the United States must work with the international community and employ a whole-of-government approach to foster and to sustain political, economic, and social conditions that are conducive to long-term stability. If left unaddressed, residual discontent will again metastasize into violent extremism. Moreover, we must make every effort to minimize civilian suffering by addressing the serious humanitarian situations that have been worsened by years of conflict. The Department of Defense is already providing necessary assistance through the interagency START team to address humanitarian needs in Syria. To truly defeat ISIS, we must be just as determined to secure a durable peace, as we have been to achieve a decisive military outcome.

We have long sought a stable end state in Afghanistan. For more than sixteen years, the United States has concentrated on eliminating threats from violent extremist organizations, including Al Qaeda and ISIS in the Khorasan province, and on denying these organizations safe haven from which to conduct terrorist activities. We have also worked closely with our allies and partners to

train, advise, and assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces to secure the country, and, despite significant progress, Afghan forces are still in need of assistance. So, where are we headed? Although the Administration's South Asia Strategy includes the familiar goal of a negotiated political settlement with the Taliban, I am concerned that it provides an open-ended pledge of increased military support without an articulated plan for how to reach the objective. We also must stay mindful of the fragile security situation in Pakistan, a nuclear-armed state that is vulnerable to extremist threats, and to ensure that policies are structured to yield results that will bolster stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Although our commitments to oppose violent extremism in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan are consuming, we must also remain alert to other regional security challenges. Al Qaeda has not been eradicated, and some Al Qaeda affiliates continue to pose threats to the United States. The NDS Summary characterizes Iran as "the most significant challenge to Middle East stability." While the United States and other key members of the international community concluded an agreement with Iran regarding its nuclear program, Iran is still a designated State Sponsor of Terrorism, and it exerts destabilizing influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. We must deter Iran from precipitating conflict and dissuade it from engaging in malign activities. Russia is increasingly involved in the region as well. Russian military units are operating in Syria, Russia may be establishing ties to the Afghan Taliban, and Russia is reportedly running influence campaigns to undermine U.S. and coalition efforts in the region. How will these and other considerations factor in the broader U.S. strategy to treat Russia as a strategic competitor?

I am also curious to know how Central Command's posture will evolve, especially in light of the NDS Summary's new direction regarding strategic priorities. The NDS Summary proclaims, "Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security." What, if any, significant changes will materialize as a result of this shift and how would such changes affect Central Command's capacity to perform its mission set? It is vital that we receive a timely and comprehensive assessment from the combatant commander, because a thorough understanding of our military posture in the Middle East and Central and Southwest Asia is fundamental to this committee's work in shaping the defense budget and in providing the resources necessary for U.S. Central Command to perform its duties effectively.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to General Votel's testimony.

STATEMENT OF

GENERAL JOSEPH L. VOTEL

COMMANDER

U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND

BEFORE THE HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

ON

THE POSTURE OF U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND

TERRORISM AND IRAN: DEFENSE CHALLENGES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

27 FEBRUARY 2018

Introduction

Last month I walked down the main street of Raqqah, the former capital of the brutal Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Amidst the mountains of rubble, reminiscent of European cities in World War II, vegetable sellers and falafel carts have set up shop, Raqqawi citizens are coordinating reconstruction efforts, and children are preparing to return to school – evidence of the indomitable spirit of the Syrian population.

Our Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and partners, in particular the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), have made extraordinary progress for over three years, liberating Mosul and Raqqah—the former capitals of ISIS's self-proclaimed "caliphate." Now, more than 98% of the territory in Iraq and Syria formerly held by ISIS is no longer under their control. In Afghanistan, our Operation Enduring Freedom Coalition of 39 countries is supporting an increasingly capable Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) as they destroy Taliban and ISIS safe havens, remove terrorists from the battlefield, and establish the conditions for greater Afghan governmental control. U.S. Navy vessels and the Combined Maritime Force (CMF) patrol the Gulf and Red Sea, ensuring the free flow of commerce through these strategic waterways. Every day, our military and civilian personnel, forward deployed across the region, conduct training exercises and strengthen our partners' abilities to defend themselves from external threats and challenge violent extremism within their borders. These activities, paired with robust diplomatic efforts from our country teams also help balance against Iran's destabilizing influence in the region.

Our success over the last year is largely due to the unyielding support of our allies, tremendous cooperation with our interagency partners, provision of additional authorities, and the continued faith of the American people in our military. However, despite the great strides we have made,

there is much work left to do. The challenges in the region are many: terrorism, violent conflicts, massive refugee populations, economic stagnation, social upheaval, great power competition, nuclear and ballistic missile threats, humanitarian crises, and radical violent ideologies to name a few. As our country begins to shift focus to threats in other parts of the world, the CENTCOM region remains vital to United States' security and economic interests. We will continue to ensure our nation's resources are responsibly employed to protect the American people from terror, promote American centers of trade and prosperity, and preserve peace through strength to deter future conflicts.

CENTCOM's Challenging Environment

The CENTCOM area of responsibility stretches from northeast Africa, across the Middle East, to Central and South Asia. The twenty countries within this vast region confront profound social, economic, and political upheaval while simultaneously facing grave security challenges in the form of widespread conflict, expansionist regional powers, violent extremist organizations (VEOs), and destabilizing behavior from outside actors. The enduring tension between the nuclear powers of India and Pakistan remains unreconciled while fractured states like Yemen and Syria are wrestling with enormous humanitarian concerns. The generational Israeli-Palestinian conflict simmers incessantly below the surface and complicates partnerships and coordination. Iran, Russia, and China are increasingly competing to be the partner of choice – militarily, politically, and economically – with U.S. allies. Turmoil in the Central Region seldom remains contained, and regional problems quickly become global as they bleed across Combatant Command seams into Africa, Europe, Asia, and threaten the United States.

Humanitarian Crises. Years of conflict in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen have caused large-scale humanitarian crises, created havens for extremism, blurred national borders, and provided Iran and Russia opportunities to expand their influence in the region. Millions of refugees stress Middle Eastern

and European countries. The government of Iraq, in partnership with the UN, has facilitated the return of millions of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), but sustainable returns are contingent on successful security and stability efforts. In Syria, the return of displaced persons has started but the vast majority cannot safely return to their homes until fighting has ended, IDPs feel free from Syrian regime reprisals, and Explosive Remnants of War (ERW) are cleared from their roads and homes. Yemen is plagued by cholera and malnutrition, with nearly 80% of the population requiring urgent humanitarian assistance.

Economic Uncertainty. Economic prospects across the region remain hampered by poor economic policies and corruption, which are compounded by inadequate education and health services. This has led to stagnant economies marked by inflation, low wages, and high unemployment. Many economies in the CENTCOM region depend on oil and gas revenues, but low oil prices have challenged governments' abilities to balance fiscal considerations with social contracts. Large state-owned sectors and bloated civil service departments are a drag on economic growth and limit opportunities for a burgeoning youth population.

Corruption inhibits reform and stabilization efforts and undermines the population's confidence in its government. Unfortunately, corruption in the Central Region is at historically high levels; according to Transparency International Corruption Index, 90% of countries in the Middle East score a failing grade, and CENTCOM includes some of the most corrupt countries in the world – Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. President Ghani is challenging persistent corruption in Afghanistan by putting reforms in motion to fight corruption in the military and government. Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi is working with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to implement an ambitious reform program, but the challenges are daunting. Some of the countries in the region are working to address these economic challenges; Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 program, Egypt's

ambitious macroeconomic reforms, and Jordan's concerted efforts to boost GDP growth rates and reduce unemployment are a few examples.

Violent Extremism. The violent extremist ideologies of ISIS, al-Qa'ida (AQ) and other VEOs remain a threat to the United States and our allies and partners, not just in the CENTCOM region but worldwide. Although ISIS has steadily lost control over physical territory and no longer controls any major population centers in Iraq or Syria, Sunni populations remain vulnerable to identity-based recruitment into VEOs. Violent extremists have utilized online forums to spread violent interpretations of Islam to audiences across the globe. The impressionable youth in this tumultuous region, seeking community and justice, are highly susceptible to extremists' teachings; consequently, a new generation of radicalized followers could become online citizens of a "virtual caliphate," dedicated to the struggle against the West.

Both ISIS and AQ are resilient and have proven capable of projecting propaganda and inspiring attacks throughout the region and outside of the Middle East. In Egypt, ISIS has expanded its reach into the mainland and carried out mass-casualty attacks. ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) continues to orchestrate high-profile attacks in Afghanistan. Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) continues to plan attacks on the homeland from the ungoverned spaces in Yemen.

Proxy Warfare. The Central Region has a long history of proxy warfare, violent militias, and irregular forces operating in the "grey zone" – military competition short of war. Iran has extended its tentacles across the region through numerous proxies, including Lebanese Hizballah operating in multiple countries, hardline Iranian-backed Shia Militia Groups (SMGs) in Iraq and Syria, and Iranian support has enabled the Houthis. The result is prolonging the civil war in Yemen, threatening Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and risking expansion of Yemen's civil war into a regional conflict. Iran uses its

proxies to secure supply lines for malign activities and influence neighboring governments. Militants operating out of remote areas in Pakistan threaten Afghanistan and India.

Nuclear/Ballistic Missile Proliferation. Regional conflicts and power imbalances drive nations to seek and acquire nuclear weapons and extend ballistic missile capabilities to secure their influence. As an example, Iran continues to develop advanced ballistic missile capabilities and also transfer them to the Houthis and to its Hizballah proxies. This will enable them to strike U.S. partners and allies, and the possibility Tehran will reinvigorate its nuclear program in the out-years of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) remains a potential risk. Nuclear proliferation, combined with proxy warfare, increases opportunities for miscalculation and generates a serious threat to the region and the United States.

Regional Competitors. Iran remains the major threat to U.S. interests and partnerships in the Central Region. The competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia for influence in the region exacerbates multiple security dilemmas throughout the Middle East – from Iran's support of Houthis in Yemen, to Riyadh's attempt to diminish Hizballah's authority in Lebanon. Iran is also working through proxies and friendly political allies in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to establish an arc of influence, or "Shia Crescent" across the Middle East. As we navigate the many challenges and relationships in our region, we partially view them through the lens of countering Iran and diminishing malign influence.

We must also compete with Russia and China as they vie for access and influence in the Central Region. Russia's presence in Syria established Moscow as a long-term player in the region, and the Kremlin is using the conflict in Syria to test and exercise new weapons and tactics, often with little regard for collateral damage or civilian casualties. An increase in Russian surface-to-air missile systems in the region threatens our access and ability to dominate the airspace.

On the diplomatic front, Moscow is playing the role of arsonist and firefighter – fueling the conflict in Syria between the Syrian Regime, YPG, and Turkey, then claiming to serve as an arbiter to resolve the dispute. Moscow continues to advocate for alternate diplomatic initiatives to Western-led political negotiations in Syria and Afghan-led peace processes in Afghanistan, attempting to thwart the UN's role and limit the advance of American influence. Russia's insistence on a separate Syrian political peace process at Astana and Sochi detracts from the internationally-sanctioned UN talks in Geneva. In Afghanistan, Moscow has exaggerated the presence of the ISIS-K threat, and while the Coalition and the Afghans are the only forces actively fighting ISIS there, Russia has used familiar propaganda techniques to brand ISIS's presence as a U.S./NATO failure.

Russia is also trying to cultivate multi-dimensional ties to Iran. Though historic rivals, Moscow and Tehran share interests across the region, including an overarching desire to sideline, if not expel, the U.S. from the region. Russia and Iran are both trying to bolster a brutal regime in Syria, limit U.S. military influence in Iraq and Afghanistan, and fracture the longstanding U.S.-Turkey strategic partnership.

Russia also maintains significant influence in Central Asia, where the countries of the former-Soviet Union rely on Russia to varying degrees for their economic and security needs. This is problematic as Russia's efforts could limit U.S. engagement options and provide Moscow additional levers of influence, particularly as NATO forces deployed in Afghanistan are dependent on Central Asian partners for logistical support. Since 2014, Russia has increased Eurasian integration efforts to reassert Moscow's dominant influence along the periphery or buffer zone.

Likewise, an increasingly assertive China is testing Russia's dominance in the economic and security arenas of Central Asia but also posing challenges to U.S. influence. China seeks to capitalize on regional concerns over what it perceives as waning U.S. influence and support. Toward this end,

Beijing is building and strengthening trade, infrastructure, defense, and political relationships across the Middle East, Central and South Asia.

China is pursuing long-term, steady economic growth that bolsters its international influence and access to energy resources. Its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which includes the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), could serve as a stabilizing, profit-generating project in the region, but it could also improve China's military posture. This collection of infrastructure projects already provides China with access to Gwadar Port in Pakistan, which is operated through a Chinese-Pakistani agreement and has the potential to increase China's strategic presence in the Indian Ocean. China also recently established its first overseas military base adjacent to the Bab al Mandeb (BAM) in Djibouti. While Beijing claims both locations support peacekeeping and humanitarian operations, the new military base and port allow China to project forces more permanently within the region and influence strategically valuable trade waterways.

China also seeks to increase its economic and diplomatic cooperation with Iran. The lifting of UN sanctions under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) opened the path for Iran to resume membership application to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a Eurasian political, economic, and security organization. This, along with the existing BRI cooperation between the two nations, increases China's ties to Iran.

China considers its relationship with the GCC states critical for its current economic needs. The Gulf States provide approximately one-third of China's oil, and Qatar is its single largest supplier of natural gas. Like Russia, China has sought to arbitrate some conflicts in the region, offering to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran. While China will continue to develop its relationships with nations in the Middle East, Beijing will likely maintain its stance of avoiding a major role in ongoing conflicts.

North Korea plays a relatively minor role in the Central Region, but its potential export of ballistic missile and nuclear technology remains an area of concern. For decades, North Korea widely proliferated ballistic missile expertise and materials to a number of actors including Iran and Syria. North Korea also exports cheap labor to various Middle Eastern countries; remittances from these laborers are a significant source of revenue for North Korea, despite the State Department's efforts to persuade our partners to expel these workers.

Prepare – Pursue - Prevail

CENTCOM's mission is to direct and enable military operations and activities with allies and partners to increase regional security and stability in support of enduring U.S. interests. We aim to accomplish this mission through our strategic approach of "Prepare, Pursue, Prevail." This approach aligns with the recently published National Defense Strategy (NDS), which directs us to "Compete, deter, and win in conflict and reinforce all levers of national power from sustainable positions of military advantage." It also aligns with the POTUS-approved strategies for Iraq and Iran. These strategies look to consolidate gains achieved through defeating ISIS, while neutralizing and countering Iran's destabilizing influence, and ensuring a stable Iraq does not align with Iran and remains a productive strategic U.S. partner.

Preparing in advance of crises creates decision space for leaders and allows for the responsible and effective employment of resources and forces. Effective preparation enables CENTCOM to compete with the other major actors in the region through strengthening alliances and partnerships. **Pursuing** opportunities ensures we seize and maintain the initiative as we meet each of the challenges in our complex region. We also retain the flexibility to effectively deter threats, preferably short of military force. We constantly seek to **Prevail** in conflict, winning the current fight and preparing for the next challenge.

CENTCOM Priorities

While the CENTCOM team manages a broad range of difficult challenges on a daily basis, a significant portion of our efforts and resources are necessarily focused in three areas: supporting the Administration's South Asia Strategy – to include Operation FREEDOM'S SENTINEL (OFS) and Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in Afghanistan; countering VEOs in the Central Region, to include Operation INHERENT RESOLVE (OIR) in Iraq/Syria; and countering Iranian destabilizing activities across the region.

Supporting the Administration's South Asia Strategy. Since my last posture hearing, CENTCOM has begun a transition – an operational alignment and rebalancing to better address challenges, mitigate risk, and optimize resources in an ever-changing battlespace. With ISIS's territorial control crumbling in Iraq and Syria, we have shifted our main effort to implementing the military component of the South Asia Strategy in Afghanistan through OFS and NATO's non-combat RSM, while still retaining sufficient resources to enable local security forces to prevent the reemergence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

The NDS directs us to deter adversaries from aggression against our vital interests and to discourage destabilizing behavior. Working "by, with, and through" the ANDSF, we have maintained constant pressure on the Taliban with the intent of removing their influence on the population and forcing them to reconcile with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA). Our conditions-based approach to the conflict gives hope to our Afghan partners and demoralizes the enemy. This strategy reaffirms the U.S. government's enduring commitment to Afghanistan while supporting two complementary missions – counter-terrorism operations and security force assistance of RSM. Preventing AQ and ISIS-K from directing or

supporting external attacks against the United States and our allies is a vital national interest, and the RSM preserves peace through a strong network of alliances both regionally and globally.

The GIRoA is making dedicated and transparent efforts to combat corruption at every level and ensure an effective Afghan fighting force. Implementation of the current GIRoA 4-Year Roadmap is improving overall ANDSF capabilities. Our method of working "by, with, and through" the ANDSF ensures we are training Afghan forces to take the lead in combat, enabling them with key assets like intelligence and logistics, and working through the GIRoA to find Afghan solutions to Afghan problems.

ANDSF capability to respond to crises has greatly improved over the last few years, and they are able to prevent security setbacks from becoming cascading events; however, the ANDSF does not have the ability to prevent the insurgency from maintaining a rural presence and occasionally threatening a population center or critical ground lines of communication (GLOC). The increase in U.S. and RSM partner military personnel enables the provision of enhanced train, advise, and assist capability to the ANDSF. This will advance the ANDSF's ability to plan and execute simultaneous offensive military operations, keeping constant pressure on the enemy.

In addition to our plan for closer, more persistent advising, we are developing critical capabilities within the ANDSF to provide them clear advantages over the Taliban. The Afghan Air Force (AAF) continues to develop offensive capability, and our security cooperation funds are training maintainers as the AAF transitions from dated Russian platforms to modern U.S. aircraft. We are also working to double the size of the Afghan Army's Special Operations force – currently the most effective combat element against the Taliban.

Simultaneously, we are targeting many of the Taliban's revenue and support networks; illicit narcotics production and trafficking largely finances insurgent operations. The Taliban remains a resilient adversary capable of inflicting heavy ANDSF casualties, but we, shoulder to shoulder with our

ANDSF partners, will continue to apply military and economic pressure to force the Taliban to the negotiating table.

Kabul's uncertain political situation remains the greatest risk to stability as the ANDSF increases security nationwide and the GIRoA prepares for planned 2018 elections. GIRoA continues to suffer from a professional governmental capacity deficit, competing interests, and corruption. We are pursuing opportunities to develop bilateral relationships with Central and South Asian states to promote regional stability and to encourage them, and our NATO allies, to contribute financial and advisory support to the GIRoA. As an example, we strongly support improved Indian-Afghanistan ties as a means to advance Kabul's economic interests and increase Afghanistan's financial independence.

As Afghanistan's neighbor and a critical supply route for RSM operations, **Pakistan** presents both challenges and opportunities as we implement the new South Asia Strategy. Pakistan's cooperation is imperative for the success of our South Asia strategy. As the President made clear in the unveiling of the strategy last August, the United States expects Pakistan to take decisive action against the Taliban and Haqqani Network leaders that operate from its territory. Taliban and Haqqani leadership and fighters continue to find sanctuary in Pakistan. Other Pakistan based groups like Lashkar-e-Tayyiba threaten Pakistan's neighbor, India, and carry out attacks that jeopardize regional stability and U.S. strategic interests.

Pakistan has made many sacrifices in the war against terrorism, including important contributions in significantly degrading AQ and combatting ISIS-K. Anti-Pakistan militant groups like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) are able to conduct devastating terrorist attacks within Pakistan, killing scores of civilians and military. The Pakistani military is conducting counter-terrorism operations against select terrorist groups that target the Pakistani state. Pakistan has also

undertaken several high profile and effective counter-insurgency operations in North Waziristan and other parts of the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) against TTP. Security along the border with Afghanistan will remain a priority in 2018 as Pakistan seeks to expand border control mechanisms and efforts to improve paramilitary security capabilities. Recently we have started to see an increase in communication, information sharing, and actions on the ground in response to our specific requests --- these are positive indicators. However, ongoing national counter-terrorism efforts against anti-Pakistan militants throughout the country have not yet translated into the definitive actions we require Pakistan to take against Afghan Taliban or Haqqani leaders. This problem is compounded by increasing cross-border terrorist attacks and fires between Pakistan and Afghanistan, which hinders both countries' abilities to coordinate on border security.

We have preserved our valuable military-to-military relationship with Pakistan and attempted to increase transparency and communication with influential military leaders, while pressing our serious concerns about Pakistan's provision of sanctuary and support to militant and terrorist groups that target U.S. personnel and interests. Achieving long-term stability in Afghanistan and defeating the insurgency will be difficult without Pakistan's support and assistance. Although most security assistance for Pakistan is currently suspended, since 2002 Pakistan has been among the largest recipients of U.S. provided Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and International Military Education and Training (IMET). To date Pakistan has also been reimbursed hundreds of millions of dollars in Coalition Support Funds (CSF) for counter-insurgency operations that support U.S. security objectives in the region. We use ground and air routes in Pakistan to deliver materiel to Afghanistan. However we also have options to utilize routes through the other Central Asian nations.

CENTCOM continues to promote U.S. interests in the rest of the **Central Asia/South Asia** (CASA) sub-region, which includes the countries of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic,

Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. While our Central Asia partners continue to seek U.S. engagement, Russia, China, and Iran continue to discourage cooperation and engagement between Central Asian countries and the United States. Despite this pressure, several CASA governments continue to support the transit of supplies to U.S. troops in Afghanistan and engage the United States on shared interests related to access, border security, counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, and counter-insurgency.

Our Central Asian partners remain concerned about the long-term stability of Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as the specter of returning foreign terrorist fighters to their home countries. We are postured not only to help them address transnational threats, but also to continue to develop our military-to-military relationships in the CASA sub-region. In support of these efforts, our two major forums that promote military cooperation, the CASA Directors of Military Intelligence Conference and CASA Chiefs of Defense Conference, are developing beyond ceremonial affairs into venues that encourage free-flowing military-to-military communication and seek practical solutions to security challenges. These efforts, in addition to our operations in Afghanistan, will ensure that CENTCOM continues to support the Administration's South Asia Strategy in the CASA sub-region with a long-term, regional approach.

The U.S.-**Kazakhstan** relationship is our most advanced military relationship in Central Asia. We are making notable progress as the Kazakhstani Ministry of Defense focuses on institutional reform of its Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) corps, human resources administration, and its professional military education system. Reliance on Russian-produced equipment presents challenges to developing a more robust defense sales relationship. Despite these challenges, Kazakhstan looks to the U.S. to balance, not replace, Russian and Chinese influence through a multi-vector foreign policy, which allows more security cooperation possibilities.

The **Kyrgyz Republic** has increasingly aligned its interests with Russia and China. The U.S.-Kyrgyz security relationship has declined since the closure of the Manas Transit Center and the termination of the bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement in 2014. Despite the Kyrgyz armed forces' desire to improve military-to-military cooperation with CENTCOM, Kyrgyz senior civilian leaders have shown little interest in improving military relations.

Tajikistan remains a key U.S. partner in Central Asia due to its 800-mile border with Afghanistan. While U.S-Tajik relations are positive, Russia is increasingly impinging on U.S. influence and spreading inaccurate information about Afghanistan and the region. Tajikistan is Central Asia's poorest country, and its armed forces are habitually under-funded and ill-equipped, which complicates our efforts to help the Tajiks build and sustain long-term security capacity. Moreover, the Russian forces at the 201st Military base located outside of Dushanbe loom large on the political and military landscape. The Tajik government also depends heavily on foreign assistance and on the remittances of its migrant laborers working in Russia, giving Moscow considerable leverage over the country. Despite all of these challenges, CENTCOM continues cooperation with Tajikistan focused on border security, counter-terrorism, and counter-drug trafficking. Tajikistan is a major transit point for Afghan opiates; our efforts to help strengthen Afghan-Tajik border security are important to reducing the drug trade that funds the Taliban and destabilizes the region.

Turkmenistan is an important nation due to its strategic geographic location between Europe and Afghanistan. Turkmenistan, as other Central Asian states, is concerned about instability in Afghanistan and thus supports international counter-VEO, counter-terrorism, and border security efforts. Currently, we are building our partnership with Turkmenistan through medical exchanges.

Uzbekistan remains a key U.S. partner in Central Asia due to its strategic geographic location at the heart of Eurasia and proximity to Afghanistan. Over the past year, Uzbekistan experienced a relatively

smooth succession of power from the late President Karimov to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who has instituted a number of reforms as Uzbekistan's second president since independence in 1991. Our bilateral relations serve to counter Russian and Chinese influence in the region. Russia exercises a degree of political and economic influence, yet the Uzbeks continue to pursue a strategic relationship with the U.S. Uzbekistan has been a relatively closed society, but we are now seeing positive changes within Uzbekistan that are leading to improved military-to-military relations, to include increased military professionalization and training. CENTCOM is also working to improve its military's logistics and sustainment systems to better support previously transferred U.S. defense equipment. We also continue efforts to bolster Uzbekistan's special operations forces.

Countering Violent Extremist Organizations. Another critical objective from the NDS is to prevent terrorists from directing or supporting external operations against the U.S. homeland, allies, and partners. In the past year, Operation INHERENT RESOLVE has achieved remarkable success against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The ISF and SDF are operating at their most effective levels since the operation began. Millions of IDPs have returned home and are starting to rebuild. The destruction of ISIS' so called physical "caliphate" is imminent, but now we must consolidate gains by investing in the population that will hold this territory and keep ISIS from returning. The U.S. Strategy for Iraq contains four primary objectives: stabilize Iraq, limit Iran's influence and its use of Iraq to shape the Middle East, achieve a stable Iraq economy, and sustain an enduring relationship with the ISF. We must now look to how we effectively resource these objectives along with the President's objectives in Syria.

The Coalition's campaign to defeat ISIS has had considerable success. Coalition airstrikes have killed hundreds of ISIS leadership figures and facilitators in Iraq and Syria, which has disrupted ISIS' command and control network; degraded its use of unmanned aerial systems (UAS);

reduced its ability to conduct research and development, procurement, and administration; and denied sources of funding for terrorist activities. These losses have undermined ISIS' ability to conduct attacks throughout the region and the world. With the loss of terrain and the liberation of the population, ISIS can no longer generate funding through extortion and taxation. Additionally, airstrikes and ground operations have crippled and seized hydrocarbon generating facilities and facilitation routes that moved and supplied ISIS fighters and supported illicit oil sales. We have also degraded ISIS media operations; the most recent version of their monthly online terror magazine "Rumiyah" was last published in September 2017.

In Iraq, the ISF fought a vicious, urban battle to liberate Mosul, with ISIS providing stiff resistance using tunnels, vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), and unmanned aerial systems. The liberation of Mosul provided the ISF with the momentum that led to the quick liberation of Tal Afar and Hawijah. Our partnership with the ISF is an excellent example of the successful application of the "by, with, and through" approach. Using a minimal number of U.S. and Coalition advisors, we enabled the ISF with robust communications, logistics, intelligence, and precision fires. Iraqi forces led from the front in each operation, and their success elevated their legitimacy with the population.

There remain enduring political and cultural challenges in Iraq. Reconstruction, discontent with corruption and any delay of rebuilding efforts as well as the Kurdistan stand-off could fuel future instability. ISIS' reversion to an underground insurgency will remove the greatest unifying factor among Iraq's competing factions and may reignite unresolved grievances. In the post-ISIS period, the GoI will be challenged to rebuild Sunni areas while balancing competing security demands, enacting government reforms, and managing tensions among Iraq's political factions. The KRG remains a strategic partner and their negotiations with Baghdad for a peaceful settlement are critical to ensure the disputed territories are not further complicated by intra-Iraq divisions.

In Syria, the fight against ISIS has been complicated by the multiple countries involved in the conflict, many of whom have widely divergent interests. Syrian President Bashar al Assad remains in power, and, due to military support from Russia, Iran, and Lebanese Hizballah (LH), is attempting to bring all of Syria under regime control. In 2017, the regime made significant territorial gains in central and eastern Syria, culminating in reducing opposition enclaves in western Syria and seizing urban centers from ISIS along the western bank of the Euphrates River from ISIS. Nevertheless, the Assad regime has insufficient forces to adequately secure recaptured territory and often faces insurgent counterattacks behind its lines. The regime is highly dependent on billions of dollars in external Iranian and Russian economic and military support, the cost of which press both Moscow and Tehran to seek an end to the conflict.

The intervention of the Coalition and regional powers in the Syrian conflict has blocked Assad's ability to recapture major portions of northern Syria, and entrenched opposition fighters and VEOs across Syria continue to challenge regime control. Diplomatic efforts to establish de-escalation zones were most successful in a deal negotiated between Russia, the U.S., and Jordan in southwest Syria. Russian and Iranian-led Astana talks have been far less successful, and Russian bombardment of the Astana agreed de-escalation zone in East Ghouta calls into question Moscow's sincerity in guaranteeing the security of these areas. There has been some success, often under UN auspices, to negotiate on humanitarian issues, but Syrian regime recalcitrance to allow aid deliveries is probably driven by Assad's choice to use starvation as a weapon of war. Assad's reluctance to negotiate directly with the Syrian opposition, and Moscow's reluctance to force him to do so, indicates significant challenges lie ahead in forging a political resolution to the conflict.

For the Coalition, the SDF's liberation of ISIS' capital Raqqah in October 2017 was a significant turning point in the conflict. The SDF, which is composed of local Sunni Arabs and

Kurds, has been a valuable partner in the fight against ISIS, and they sacrificed greatly to liberate large portions of their country. Simultaneous operations by the SDF in Syria and the ISF and PMF in Iraq effectively isolated ISIS remnants in the Middle Euphrates River Valley (MERV) and along the Syrian side of the Iraq-Syria border where both forces are currently conducting operations to kill or capture all remaining ISIS fighters.

Pro-Regime Forces (PRF) and Russia also continue to operate in the MERV as they isolate ISIS fighters south of the Euphrates River, though Assad's decision to prematurely withdraw his forces has likely given valuable breathing room to ISIS on the western side of the river. With PRF operating in close proximity to Coalition-backed forces in the MERV, de-confliction measures are vital, and we have worked closely with Russia to prevent accidental strikes and to ensure the safety of the various forces on an increasingly complex battlefield. The Coalition does not seek to fight the Syrian regime, Russian or pro-regime forces partnered with them. While the deconfliction efforts have been largely effective, the Coalition recently demonstrated its commitment to defend U.S. and partner forces operating in Syria by striking PRF that conducted an unprovoked attack on SDF and Coalition forces. And we will continue to do so, as necessary.

Though our partnership with the SDF is critical to defeating ISIS in Syria, it has created challenges with our NATO ally Turkey, who views the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) elements within the SDF as analogous to the PKK terrorist group. U.S. Special Operations forces have been working with vetted elements of the SDF for several years to defeat ISIS. Our assistance to the SDF has been focused on this goal, and we have included safeguards and transparency measures to ensure it does not physically threaten Turkey. In January, Turkey began air strikes and ground incursions into the predominantly Kurdish enclave of Afrin, where CENTCOM has no presence or direct relationships in northwest Syria, in an attempt to, according to the Government of Turkey, "remove the terrorist threat

from its border." Though we have no relationship with YPG fighters in Afrin, who previously cooperated with Russia and the regime, these operations directly impact our ability to affect a lasting defeat against ISIS through the SDF. Many fighters in the SDF have familial ties to the Kurds in Afrin, and they are now forced to choose between completing operations against ISIS fighters in the MERV and assisting their fellow Kurds in northern Syria. Our alliance with Turkey is paramount, and we will continue to assist the Turkish military in countering the PKK and other VEOs that threaten their border, but we must continue to urge restraint as their actions have clearly increased risk to our campaign to defeat ISIS.

Amidst the visible damage caused by the Syrian civil war, the country has also witnessed a far less-publicized change: democratic organizations in the form of local civil councils have assembled in places previously controlled by ISIS. These councils are providing the necessary basic functions of governance and starting to rebuild their war-torn communities. These ad-hoc democratic organizations come in various forms and engage in a range of activities from providing the most basic services to rallying the population against the re-emergence of VEOs. For example, in the cities of Manbij and Raqqah, local councils ran civic campaigns against ISIS in concert with more moderate rebel groups, providing a two-pronged strategy that ultimately prevented ISIS from regaining a foothold in these areas. In other parts of Syria, councils have developed a more sophisticated capacity and are building roads, repairing sewage lines, and holding local elections. As Secretary of State Tillerson has said, "Interim local political arrangements that give voice to all groups and ethnicities supportive of Syria's broader political transition must emerge with international support." Any interim arrangements must be truly representative and must not threaten any of Syria's neighboring states. Similarly, the voices of Syrians from these regions must be heard

in Geneva and in the broader discussion about Syria's future." The key to the success of these groups is their ability to maintain legitimacy among the populace.

Although these local councils have made great strides, they can only provide aid and assistance to the population at the pace at which they receive it. As we enable local solutions to local problems, supporting these local councils with our full range of Department of Defense, interagency, and Coalition capabilities will help them maintain popular support and set conditions for enduring, stable governance.

A significant challenge we face as we complete the defeat of ISIS is the repatriation of hundreds of foreign fighters to their home countries. The SDF and ISF are both holding several hundred fighters from a number of different countries in prisons or temporary detention facilities, with no clear process for prosecution or repatriation. The longer these fighters remain in detention together, the greater danger they pose as they form new connections, share lessons learned, and prepare to re-establish networks upon their release or escape. This urgent problem requires a concerted international effort involving law enforcement, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic agreements.

Yemen is another area where VEOs pose a threat to the homeland**.** The civil war continues unabated and the humanitarian crisis worsened in the last year. Saudi Arabia and the UAE continue to lead a coalition supporting Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, and despite attempts to reestablish itself in Aden, some elements of the Republic of Yemen government (ROYG) remain in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Houthi forces control Yemen's capital, Sana'a, and are undeterred in their efforts to retain key territory and attack the Saudi coalition. The civil war has severely affected Yemen's population, with nearly 80% of the population requiring urgent humanitarian assistance. Similarly, its economy has been devastated by insecurity, extremely high unemployment (35%) and near cessation of its petroleum industry. Neither the Houthis nor the exiled Hadi government has the ability to govern effectively. In December 2017, the relationship between previously aligned Houthis and former

President Ali Abdullah Salih disintegrated and culminated with Salih's assassination by his former allies. It is unclear if the Saudi-backed Hadi faction can capitalize on these events, and Salih's forces have splintered, adding continued chaos.

Terrorist groups like AQAP and ISIS-Yemen continue to maintain a presence in Yemen and are focused on attacks against ROYG, the Saudi coalition, and Houthi targets. Since mid-2014, ISIS-Yemen has leveraged the chaotic security situation to expand its capabilities and conduct intermittent attacks against Saudi coalition and Yemeni security targets in Aden. AQAP still aspires to threaten Western interests with high-profile attacks, although U.S. and Saudi coalition strikes have removed successive levels of leadership and logistics support, critically damaging their network. Our Emirati partners have also played a key role in countering the threat from AQAP and ISIS-Yemen in southern Yemen.

The conflict in Yemen has opened opportunities for Iran, which continues to provide support to the Houthis with the aim of building a proxy to pressure the Saudi-led coalition and expand its sphere of influence. This support enabled the Houthis to launch missiles at Saudi Arabian and Emirati cities and target ships in the Bab al Mandab and Red Sea on multiple occasions in the last year, threatening Americans and our partners and raising the risk of broader regional conflict.

CENTCOM is partnering with the Saudi-led coalition to help maintain a favorable regional balance. Our goal is to ensure that nations in close proximity to Yemen are able to secure their borders and safeguard their populations while negotiations lead to a cessation of hostilities between Houthis and the ROYG. Saudi Arabia has announced that it is working to facilitate the movement of humanitarian assistance, food, and fuel by opening ground and air avenues from Saudi Arabia into Yemen, utilizing additional ports, and partnering with NGOs to provide humanitarian and medical assistance.

The Levant, which includes the countries of, Syria, Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon – and Iraq and Egypt remain an active area for CENTCOM theater security cooperation and partnership due to instability stemming from the Syrian Civil War, the rise of ISIS, and malign Iranian influence. Though the scourge of ISIS is receding, Levantine countries remain under threat of attack, as seen in Egypt where ISIS-Sinai continues to carry out barbaric attacks against civilians and Egyptian security forces, including the November murder of over 300 citizens in prayer at a mosque in northern Sinai. U.S. assistance to our partners in the Levant has enabled improved border security in Lebanon and Jordan. The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) demonstrated this kinetically in August – expertly routing ISIS fighters on their eastern border during Operation Dawn of the Hills.

In **Jordan**, the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) remain a dedicated partner, providing access, basing, and overflight essential to furthering U.S. interests in the region – we must ensure we do not take them for granted. Though the GOJ and the JAF have successfully handled security concerns and domestic stability challenges, regional turmoil and persistently low economic growth rates have led to rising unemployment and high national debt. Additionally, Jordan currently hosts approximately 660,000 UN-registered Syrian refugees and 63,000 Iraqi refugees, straining government resources, services, and infrastructure. Despite this strain, the GOJ recently facilitated critical humanitarian support to the Rukban IDP camp on the Syrian side of the border. Continued commitment to funding Title 10 programs, in addition to FMF and economic and humanitarian assistance, enables Jordan to mitigate its humanitarian and economic difficulties, while remaining a capable partner in coalition efforts. The JAF is also contributing to stabilization efforts in OIR, including reopening the Turaybil / Karama border crossing with Iraq in August 2017, a key step in normalizing relations and restoring trade between the two countries.

Lebanon is critical to our national security interests and exemplifies our challenges in the Middle East. Wedged between a key friend in the region, Israel, and a corridor of Iranian influence from Tehran through Iraq and Syria, Lebanon has managed to remain relatively stable in a region embroiled in conflict. However, Lebanon faces a stagnant economy, a Syrian refugee crisis, and the growing influence of Hizballah, which holds a de-facto veto on Lebanese policy decisions due to their strategic political alliances, omnipresent threat of violence, strength as a social service provider, and financial support from Iran. Furthermore, the possibility of an Israel-Hizballah conflict is a constant threat to the stability of Lebanon and security of Israel.

Our effort to strengthen the Lebanese security forces, especially the LAF, as the country's only legitimate security provider is a critical aspect of our policy to promote Lebanese sovereignty and security. With successful operations like Dawn of the Hills, the Lebanese people are realizing more and more that the LAF, their country's most trusted and respected institution, is increasingly capable of protecting them from external threats. The United States is the LAF's top security assistance partner, and our consistent, long-term commitment and training efforts, in addition to the more than $1.7 billion in security assistance provided since 2006, have successfully modernized and strengthened the LAF as a fighting force. U.S. Special Operations military and civilian personnel have forged a strong relationship with the LAF and enhanced their capabilities, making them a capable partner in our regional counter-terrorism campaign. During the most recent military operations against ISIS, U.S. military personnel assisted the LAF in planning and conducting combined arms maneuver, aerial reconnaissance, and integrated fires. Since our security assistance began, Lebanon has maintained an exemplary track-record for adhering to regular and enhanced end-use monitoring protocols. We are confident the LAF has not transferred equipment to Hizballah. Nonetheless, we are concerned about Hizballah's efforts to infiltrate Lebanon's security

institutions and have made clear that any cooperation with Hizballah will risk our continued cooperation and assistance.

On the western edge of the CENTCOM area of responsibility, **Egypt** remains an anchor of U.S. interests in the region given its strategic location, demographic heft, religious and cultural influence, and its enduring peace treaty with Israel. Egypt is an essential partner in countering the flow of foreign fighters, materiel, and financial support to extremists transiting from Libya through Egypt into the Central Region. Egypt supports our overflight requests, ensures Suez Canal transit, and shares our commitment to defeat ISIS. The cornerstone of this relationship is our security assistance partnership. In one example of our intensifying joint efforts, in January 2018, we celebrated the successful signing of the bilateral Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CIS MOA), crowning over thirty years of effort to enhance security and counterterrorism cooperation.

ISIS-Sinai continues to conduct daily attacks against the Egyptian Armed Forces (EAF) and security services, causing hundreds of casualties, while other extremist organizations have carried out attacks on the mainland. The United States commitment to continuing to support Egypt in this fight against terrorism, in bringing security for the Egyptian people, is steadfast. Until now, the EAF has contained most of the violence in the northeastern Sinai Peninsula; however, without a comprehensive whole of government strategy to defeat ISIS-Sinai, the threat will persist and grow. The United States is committed to working with Egypt to develop a comprehensive counter-insurgency strategy that addresses the underlying political, economic, and social conditions that give rise to extremist elements, while defeating the threats that plague Egypt and the region.

Through our partnership efforts, we have observed improvement in the security of Egyptian maritime and land borders. The EAF has shown some success stemming the flow of fighters and illicit material into Israel and the Central Region. We will look to strengthen our security cooperation

partnership through continued engagement and with development of their counterterrorism/counter-insurgency strategy and capabilities, including the prioritization of FMF toward appropriate defense articles and training. In FY16 and FY 17, Congress appropriated up to $1.3 billion in FMF and $1.8 million in IMET. As a sign of our continued support of Egypt's efforts, the President requested Congress continue to provide $1.3 billion in military assistance for Egypt in FY 2018, despite the increasingly constrained budget environment. Moreover, the United States and Egypt have elevated the strategic nature of the assistance relationship through mechanisms such as our Military Cooperation Committee and Defense Resourcing Conferences. Through these means we help Egypt plan for its security needs on a long-term basis.

Countering Iranian Expansionism. Countering the Iranian regime's malign influence in the region is a key component of our efforts to defend allies from military aggression, bolster our partners against coercion, and share responsibilities for the common defense. Our relationships with the GCC countries play a key role in this effort.

Iran is generating instability across the region, and the Iranian Threat Network (ITN) continues to increase in strength, enhancing its capacity to threaten U.S. and partner nation interests. Concurrently, the Iranian regime continues to maintain longstanding criticisms that the United States is a source of instability in the Middle East and cannot be trusted. While the International Atomic Energy Agency reports that it continues to monitor and verify Tehran's implementation of its JCPOA nuclear-related commitments, Iran continues to express frustration with the degree and pace of sanctions relief under the JCPOA and has publicly criticized U.S. statements regarding continued participation in the JCPOA. Iran seeks expanded economic, and in some cases diplomatic, engagement with the International Community to achieve what it views as the full benefits of sanctions relief afforded under the deal. The United States is upholding its JPCOA commitments

and has made clear that Iran's economic troubles stem not from issues related to JCPOA implementation, but from internal economic mismanagement, a weak banking sector, and widespread corruption, among other factors.

Over the past year, Iran has focused its regional efforts primarily on operations in Syria and Iraq to expand its influence in the region and secure supply routes to Hizballah to threaten Israel. Iran has provided increasingly sophisticated maritime and missile attack capabilities to the Houthis in Yemen. Additionally, Iran continues smaller-scale support to other groups such as Bahraini Shia militants, Gaza militants, and the Afghan Taliban. It remains wary of U.S. and coalition intentions throughout the region, and continues to engage Western nations in the "grey zone," rather than through direct conflict.

Iran will continue to pursue policies that threaten U.S. strategic interests and goals throughout the Middle East while seeking to expand diplomatic and economic relations with a wide range of nations. Leaders in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Quds Force (IRGC-QF) have taken advantage of surrogates, businesses, and logistics entities to execute direct action, intelligence, influence building, terrorism, and cyber operations against the U.S. and our partner nations. By supporting proxies in the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria and against the Saudi coalition in Yemen, Tehran seeks to gain lasting influence and indebted allies in each country. The conflict in Syria has also proven the ITN's expeditionary capacity; fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Lebanon wage war there solely at Iran's behest. After the current conflicts abate, the ITN will undoubtedly turn its attention to other adversaries; future flashpoints could occur wherever there is a U.S. or allied presence.

Iran continues to acquire and develop increasingly lethal weapons to raise the cost of direct military conflict. The expansion of Iran's military capabilities over the last decade enables Tehran to threaten international trade and regional stability throughout the Gulf and beyond. Production of advanced military equipment and threats to the free flow of commerce through the Strait of Hormuz are intended

to challenge the U.S. enduring presence in the region. Iran's military is composed of approximately 700,000 personnel divided into two separate militaries: the Islamic Republic of Iran Armed Forces (Artesh) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which both continue to improve. Iran's ground forces are improving their ability to quickly mobilize and deploy in response to internal and external threats. Iran has also advertised the development of quick reaction forces, consisting of armor, artillery, and heliborne assets that can deploy within four hours.

Iran postures its forces and supports proxies to threaten – or be able to threaten - strategic locations like the Bab al Mandeb, Strait of Hormuz, and oil platforms. With little warning, Iran could quickly close the Strait of Hormuz using stockpiles of naval mines and disrupt key maritime chokepoints throughout the region. Iranian surface to air missiles (SAMs) along its littoral pose a significant threat to U.S. Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance (ISR) assets operating in international airspace. During 2017, Iran's capabilities improved with the deployment of advanced S-300 long-range SAM systems provided by Russia.

Additionally, Tehran continues to increase its strategic power projection capability with its expanding ballistic missile force. Iran has the largest missile force in the Middle East, which can range 1,200 miles and reach key targets in the region. Iran is continuing to increase the range, precision, and lethality of these missile systems. Tehran relies on these systems to deter adversaries and provide a reliable retaliatory capability against neighbors and U.S. forces.

Iran intends to expand its regional influence, counter Saudi Arabia, threaten Israel, and maintain a capability to threaten strategically important maritime transit routes in the Bab al Mandeb, Strait of Hormuz, and the Gulf. On a positive note, over the past year, we have seen an overall reduction in unprofessional Iranian actions toward U.S. and coalition vessels; such interactions decreased by 36% from 2016 to 2017.

To counter Iranian expansionism and destabilizing activities, CENTCOM will deter conventional Iranian aggression, bolster our network of allies and partners, and compete for influence throughout the region. Our forces maintain a high level of readiness at bases across the region and consistently patrol the waterways – this persistent presence deters Iranian conventional military attacks against our allies and protects international sea lanes. By improving our Arab partners' capacity to defend themselves and encouraging them to work together as a coalition, we also create a bulwark against Iranian aggression and proxy warfare.

Our efforts to compete to be the partner of choice for our Gulf and Levant partners further weakens Iranian threat networks and limits Tehran's malign political, economic, and military influence. This is especially crucial in Iraq, where Baghdad must work with Iran as a neighboring state, but limit Tehran's manipulation and infiltration of political parties and government institutions. We must continue to be a reliable partner to the ISF to build their capacity to provide internal security and protect their borders. Ongoing stabilization efforts that strengthen Iraqi social and economic institutions will also impede Iran's ability to negatively influence our Iraqi partner.

On the **Arabian Peninsula,** GCC states are among the United States' best partners in the region and a counter-balance to Iran. The virtually unhindered access, basing, and overflight approvals from our Gulf partners, as well as their contributions of troops and airlift have been critical to the success of Defeat-ISIS operations over the past year. The GCC also represents the most promising baseline effort for promoting collective defense initiatives, including joint counter-terrorism and ballistic missile defense. As they look to the United States for military equipment, training, and assistance, it is essential we seek opportunities to include GCC partners in our combined efforts to defeat regional threats posed by extremism and Iran's burgeoning influence. However, the most significant complicating factor in the unified deterrence to Iranian malign activity is the still-unresolved rift between Saudi Arabia, UAE,

Bahrain, and Egypt with Qatar. While efforts to reduce the impact on military-to-military relationships among the Gulf States have been largely successful, the rift continues to present challenges in the political sphere.

Within the GCC, the **Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)** is undergoing potentially far-reaching changes in social, economic, and security spheres under the banner of Vision 2030 and the National Transformation Plan, which includes wide ranging fiscal and cultural liberalization. This could alter the dynamics of the Saudi economy. King Salman's appointment of his son Mohammed bin Salman as the Crown Prince, the purported anti-corruption campaign, and recent Saudi efforts to influence Lebanon have exacerbated an environment of uncertainty in the kingdom's future.

Saudi Arabia remains embroiled in the conflict in Yemen, which appears to be at an impasse in terms of a political or diplomatic solution with the Houthis. To assist with the military aspects of the conflict, we have increased the number of advisors to the Saudi military over the past year to help improve command and control and formalize targeting processes. These additional training and advisory efforts will help mitigate incidents of avoidable civilian casualties in Yemen.

The **United Arab Emirates**' strategic location, vast natural resources, willingness to engage terrorist organizations, and ambition to be at the forefront of military innovation makes them a valuable partner. The UAE was among the first countries to join the Defeat-ISIS Coalition. Although its military role tapered off when its resources shifted to Yemen in March 2015, Abu Dhabi remains active in pursuing many of the Coalition's lines of effort, including counter-ISIS messaging, stabilization, countering ISIS financing, and stemming the flow of foreign fighters.

Bahrain hosts CENTCOM's naval component and CMF and has publicly supported the Defeat-ISIS effort, including allowing U.S. forces to conduct counter-ISIS strikes from its territory. In Yemen, Bahrain's air, land, and sea forces participated in Saudi-led coalition

operations against AQAP and the Houthis; these deployments have improved the overall readiness of the Bahrain Defense Force. We continue to make strides in our collaborative efforts to enhance the Bahraini Coast Guard's capacity and expand Bahrain's role in countering piracy and violent extremism in the region's maritime domain.

Internally, Bahrain is dealing with a domestic economy negatively impacted by low oil prices, political discord, and a persistent, low-level threat from Iranian-backed militant groups. We continue to provide appropriate assistance to help it address security threats. Prior restrictions on FMS to Bahrain created tension in the bilateral relationship; recent movement on key FMS cases, however, has provided renewed strength in military and political ties with Bahrain. We continue to reassure our Bahraini counterparts that we remain committed to our partnership, while also encouraging them to respect freedom of expression and pursue dialogue with the nonviolent political opposition.

The Government of **Kuwait** continues to provide a critical environment within the Central Region for access, basing, and overflight in support of U.S. and coalition operations and hosts the forward headquarters of CENTCOM's army component, U.S. Army Central Command. Kuwait is also CENTCOM's primary logistics gateway for movement into and out of the region.

Over the last 20 years **Qatar** has provided the U.S. with invaluable regional access through basing and freedom of movement for U.S. forces at Camp As-Sayliyah and Al Udeid Air Base – home to the Combined Air Operations Center, U.S. Air Forces Central Command, U.S. Special Operations Command Central Forward, and the CENTCOM Forward Headquarters. Qatar hosts approximately 10,000 U.S. service members, and aircraft launched from Al Udeid Air Base support operations throughout the region.

While the rift has had little direct impact on U.S. operations, it has imposed significant restrictions on Qatar's freedom of movement in the region through the closure of land borders and air space.

Additionally, it has impacted Qatar's participation in Gulf state-hosted multilateral exercises and eroded coalition building efforts. It has also proven to be a distraction from Saudi-led operations in Yemen. In a concerning development, the rift has pushed Qatar to become more reliant on Iran and less connected to the GCC.

Despite its small size, Qatar has contributed to coalition operations throughout the region, including against ISIS, and seeks to expand its participation in other regional coalitions. Qatar is currently the second largest FMS customer in the world with $25 billion dollars in new cases and is on track to surpass $40 billion dollars in the next five years with additional FMS purchases. Qatar's efforts to expand its military both in size and capacity have resulted in increased bilateral military engagements between CENTCOM and the Qatari Armed Forces. This gives the United States an invaluable opportunity to make a positive impact on the military development of a key partner in a turbulent region.

The **Sultanate of Oman's** relationship with the United States remains strong, and Oman continues to play a constructive role in regional diplomatic issues, including serving as an interlocutor for the U.S. in dealing with Yemen, Iran, and the GCC. However, unless the government successfully makes policy changes to constrain government spending and attract foreign investment, Muscat will likely face an economic crisis in the next few years. Oman's strategic location provides CENTCOM with key logistical, operational, and contingency capabilities; it provides important access in the form of over 5,000 aircraft overflights, 600 aircraft landings, and 80 port calls annually. The Omani military also participates in numerous bilateral exercises and training events on a yearly basis.

Required Programs, Capabilities, and Resources

In order to ensure we can effectively execute the NDS and protect our national interests, we must be properly postured, alongside our interagency partners, with the necessary policies, capabilities, and resources to address the challenges and capitalize on the opportunities mentioned above. To this end, CENTCOM requires specific means in the form of programs, capabilities, and resources. We sincerely appreciate Congress' continued support for fiscal authorities and appropriations required to support on-going theater operations, as well as the increased responsiveness of the USG in tackling the challenges inherent to the Central Region's complex environment.

Building Partner Capacity (BPC). The Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF), Afghan Security Forces Fund (ASFF), Combatant Commanders Initiatives Fund (CCIF), Coalition Support Fund (CSF), and Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) have been key enablers to the battlefield successes the Coalition achieved in disrupting and dismantling ISIS and the Taliban. Your approval and increase in ASFF funding to support Afghan Aviation modernization allowed the ANDSF to begin closing their gaps in aerial fires and lift capability and reduced their reliance on U.S. and Coalition forces, while also making them more lethal against the Taliban and ISIS-K.

In Syria, CTEF-procured equipment and supplies provided to the Vetted Syrian Opposition (VSO) like the SDF have been instrumental to their success against ISIS. We will continue to use Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid (OHDACA) and other humanitarian and civic assistance funding to improve conditions and access for other U.S. federal and international aid organizations' follow-on missions. These authorities must respond in a timely manner to environmental and operational challenges. We continue to prioritize our needs based on our most critical requirements, coalition and interagency capabilities, and the conditions on the ground.

In Iraq, the success of the ISF in dismantling the physical caliphate and the fragmentation of the ISIS hybrid-conventional force over the past year is a validation of our Coalition's BPC effort. As we

reduced major combat operations, the authorities granted to the Office of Security Cooperation – Iraq (OSC-I) were expanded to cover critical sustainment efforts. These authorities allow OSC-I to work with all ISF that are posturing to battle a potential insurgency and secure their border with Syria. OSC-I is currently executing programs to enhance professionalization of the ISF along with prudent implementation and oversight of FMF. In FY18, OSC-I will leverage $42 million in authorities to transform the ISF into a sustainable, affordable, and effective force through security sector reform and security cooperation efforts.

CENTCOM efforts to implement and focus BPC initiatives yielded increased capabilities to support security cooperation and partner nation goals. The Section 333 authority also authorizes funds to be available for two fiscal years and program sustainment for up to five years, allowing for execution of long-lead time programs without cross-fiscal year constraints and improved program maintenance, training, and sustainment support.

The **CENTCOM Exercise and Training Program** continues to be one of the most cost effective and efficient tools to conduct security cooperation engagement with partner nations throughout the region. Every exercise, including the planning process, provides an opportunity to demonstrate U.S. resolve in the region, strengthen partnerships, promote cooperation among our partners, conduct key leader engagements, and sustain and improve both joint and combined readiness. The program continued to grow in complexity and relevance with extended participation throughout the CENTCOM region during FY17 and into FY18.

CENTCOM executed 53 bilateral and multilateral exercises during FY17 with 42 partner nations, spanning seven Combatant and Functional Commands. This enhanced U.S. Joint Force capability supports theater-wide contingency operations and sustains U.S. presence and access in the region. Other program impacts include improving partner nation interoperability through

military-to-military engagement, integrating staff planning, executing Joint and Combined operations, developing coalition warfare, and refining complementary partner warfare capabilities given conflicts that are increasingly trans-regional, multi-domain, and multi-functional in nature.

However, continued force reductions in the area of responsibility, as well as the increased operational use of forces remaining in theater, threaten the viability of the CENTCOM Joint Exercise Program. Exercises like EAGER LION – the largest CENTCOM exercise – are routinely affected by reductions in participating forces or threatened with cancellation due to competing requirements for operational forces. Mitigation is limited with current exercise program funding levels that provide restricted air/surface options for movement of out-of-theater (CONUS) based forces to participate in exercises.

Forces and Equipment: The Key to Interoperability. With the greater focus on operations "by, with, and through" our partners to accomplish common objectives, interoperability is increasingly important, and our BPC and FMS programs remain instrumental to this process. The "total package" approach with which we pursue equipment support and long-term sustainment ensures that maintenance support and training are a part of the FMS plan from the outset.

However, due to political considerations, cost, or delivery speed, some of our partners are seeking alternate sources of military equipment from near-peer competitors like Russia and China. When our partners go elsewhere, it reduces our interoperability and challenges our ability to incorporate their contributions into theater efforts.

CENTCOM must also remain prepared for major unforeseen contingencies and crises; prepositioned war reserve materiel is a critical equipment enabler as we posture to address emerging and unforeseen threats. The tyranny of distance between our service depots and the Central Region requires ready, prepositioned capability sets that can rapidly integrate with deploying forces for contingency

response. These capability sets provide the necessary shock absorber and help us preserve decision space for the national leadership at the front-end of emerging contingencies. Congressional support for the services' regeneration and reset of prepositioned war reserve materiel remains essential to our operational depth and resiliency.

Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD). We are also working to counter the adaptive threats from enemy networks and adversary states in the form of emerging missile and unmanned aircraft technologies. CENTCOM continues to employ IAMD and Counter Unmanned Aerial System (CUAS) resources to provide the best possible defense design to the theater.

Threat missile systems continue to improve in accuracy, giving them the ability to selectively target CENTCOM's critical assets. Current IAMD resources remain vital to helping CENTCOM maintain acceptable levels of risk without creating additional demand on the force. Providing IAMD protection to deployed U.S. forces and our critical infrastructure is crucial to mission success and provides a visible deterrence to regional aggression. Moreover, it signals U.S. commitment to partners and provides flexibility to respond to contingencies.

Partner nations continue to field missile defense systems that are technologically interoperable with U.S.-based defense systems. Several partner nations have also expressed interest in working together with the U.S. to address the growing CUAS problem set. We must work with our partners to integrate the systems into one comprehensive network that enables better interaction, flexibility, and increased levels of protection against all potential adversarial air and missile threats.

Several of the GCC countries have expressed a desire to integrate their missile and CUAS defense systems with U.S. IAMD systems. The U.S. Patriot force in the GCC is an important warfighting capability and a visible symbol of U.S. partnership, resolve, and deterrence and is

linked to bi-lateral defense agreements. Integration of these systems would increase duration and level of protection provided by the defense design against the spectrum of threats in theater.

Critical Munitions. We appreciate continued Congressional support for the procurement and development of precision and specific purpose munitions, which are essential to defeat the threats to our national interests. Multiple factors increase demand on worldwide precision munitions stock levels, to include readiness to address threats from China and Russia, enduring combat operations, investment in our "by, with, through" approach, our directive to minimize collateral damage, and the drawdown in munitions funding prior to OIR. Projected expenditures coupled with partner requests for precision munitions show a system under stress down to the industrial level. Saudi Arabia, in particular, continues to request precision munitions to assist in reducing the threat from Iranian-supported Houthi forces in Yemen in the most precise manner possible.

We have implemented controls for existing and projected requirements to ensure we can meet our current commitments while staying ready to meet future operational needs. We also continue to work across the Department on process improvements to provide a more precise demand signal to the Services and the industrial base and enable multi-year investment in this critical commodity area. Congressional support for base budget, production, and forward positioning of critical preferred precision and specific purpose munitions is vital to the future success of military operations.

Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance (ISR) Assets. Competition with China and Russia are increasing demands across the theater for ISR assets. In addition to continued ISR requirements to enable our partners in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, counter-Iran operations in Yemen, the Bab al Mandeb, and the Gulf place substantial ISR demands on already severely limited resources. We also anticipate additional requirements to assist Egypt in their counter-ISIS operations in the Sinai

The Processing, Exploitation, and Dissemination (PED) enterprise is also stressed by continuous operations; shortfalls of PED for collected intelligence will continue in the foreseeable future, necessitating an increased focus on automation and development of new PED tools, including tools to exploit publically available information. Funding for organizations such as the National Media Exploitation Center is also critical to our ability to handle the volume of captured enemy material.

In order to partially mitigate these ISR shortfalls, CENTCOM is working closely with the Services, Joint Staff, Combat Support Agencies, Office of the Secretary of Defense, and the interagency to acquire contract ISR solutions, incorporate non-traditional ISR (such as that collected from strike assets), and improve efficiency and asset de-confliction.

Our Coalition partners are also assisting with ISR collection and PED, but this support is limited by national policies regarding deployed force levels and manner of employment as well as resource shortages. Further, partners are generally challenged to address many of CENTCOM's requirements, such as those where multi-discipline, low-observable, or strike-capable assets are required. All of these factors combine to substantially increase operational risk in those areas that will not receive adequate ISR coverage due to decreased capacity.

Information Operations/Strategic Communications. The operational information environment continues to evolve at a rapid pace; our adversaries are not limited by geographic boundaries as they increase global radicalization and recruitment online. Russia and Iran are also waging strategic communications campaigns to cloud perceptions of U.S. success in Syria and Iraq and to call into question our commitment to key partners in the region. Offensive Information Operations (OIO) capabilities developed and refined over the last two years provide CENTCOM and the Department of Defense with the best "high impact/low cost" investment to deter aggression,

counter destabilizing behavior, and decrease the potential for direct action operations requirements. CENTCOM combines actions and information by employing assets ranging from print, radio, television, and the internet to conduct robust, synchronized information operations in order to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp our adversary's decision making. These efforts also directly support both the Iran and Iraq strategies that specifically call for integrated strategic communications campaigns.

The ISIS problem set has enabled the Department of Defense to closely collaborate with other U.S. government agencies, Coalition partners, and regional allies to coordinate and synchronize messaging strategies. We are building on our combined experiences to create a broad, long-term, whole-of-government approach that amplifies our efforts toward conflict prevention. We also routinely work with Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia to improve interoperability, share lessons learned, and ultimately develop a collaborative strategy to counter violent extremism – our regional partners will play the largest role in shaping their own futures.

As we work to address the propaganda that terrorist organizations use to recruit new followers, we must also address the serious threat that state-sponsored disinformation poses to U.S. national security. Amidst these trends in the information environment, it is more critical than ever that the U.S. government has a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach to strategic communication that supports and harmonizes with our military efforts. In this vein, the Department of Defense works closely with the Department of State's Global Engagement Center (GEC), and we appreciate that Congress has expanded its mandate to synchronize and coordinate the federal government's efforts to recognize, understand, expose, and counter these harmful propaganda and disinformation efforts. Recognizing that information operations will continue to be a force multiplier, we must ensure organizations like the GEC can compete and win in the information environment.

Cyber Operations/Cybersecurity. All of the traditional threats within the Central Region are exacerbated by several challenges in the cyberspace domain. The global nature of cyberspace means it has no legal boundaries, challenging our legal system and ability to deter threats or respond to contingencies. We have an adaptive enemy who has proven creative in the information environment.

Based on the speed of technological evolution, attackers in the cyberspace domain have an advantage over defenders. Worse, friendly capabilities can be co-opted by adversaries at a scale and ease greater than in other domains. Consequently, small groups can exercise state-like powers, while a state actor can have tremendous impact. Defenders must expend a disproportionate amount of resources to protect multiple avenues of attack on many different networks and resources.

Integrated Operations with Interagency Partners. Whole of government solutions are critical to resolving the complex problems in the Central Region, and we strive to balance our own authorities and resources with our interagency partners' unique capabilities, expertise, and authorities. Our embassy country teams across the region are doing an incredible and critical job providing nuanced information, recommendations, and support for military operations, and senior embassy leadership is integral to facilitating our access to senior foreign leadership. We strive to ensure that our military activities in the AOR reinforce our embassy colleagues' diplomatic engagements in order to mutually advance national security priorities. The Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have been invaluable partners from the inception of combat operations in Iraq and Syria to efforts focused on consolidating hard fought gains. As Secretary Tillerson mentioned in his recent remarks at Stanford, "The United States has had diplomats on the ground in affected areas working with the UN, our partners in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, and various NGOs. We will continue to devote personnel and resources to

stabilization efforts." In partnership with USAID, CENTCOM has been heavily involved in the conduct of foreign humanitarian assistance and foreign disaster relief operations across the region. Steady-state foreign humanitarian assistance activities are a key security cooperation tool that enhance our BPC efforts and improve Department of Defense visibility, access, and influence while addressing critical humanitarian needs. We request your support of the Administration's annual OHDACA funding request to allow us to continue these important engagement activities.

Counterdrug-funded train and equip programs have become increasingly important in the CENTCOM AOR. We work with our interagency partners in the region to reduce drug trafficking. This is most evident in the Central Asian states, where a large part of CENTCOM's security cooperation activities provide counter-narcotics support. We routinely send additional manpower to embassies in the region to assist them in executing counter-drug programs that include infrastructure improvements, communications equipment, and training in the latest technology such as scanners and ground sensors. Together this builds an effective capability to stem the flow of illicit trafficking in narcotics, weapons, and persons. For example, the Regional Narcotics Interagency Fusion Cell (RNIFC) in Bahrain continues to facilitate the maritime interdiction of heroin and weapons emanating from the Makran Coast of Pakistan, by providing intelligence support to Allied naval partners.

We are also working closely with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Department of Justice (DOJ) to provide counter-threat finance, counter-facilitation, and counter-procurement support to U.S. Forces-Afghanistan's reinvigorated counter-threat finance cell. Continued linguist support and law enforcement training for Afghan DEA mentored units is critical to receiving time-sensitive information from the DEA-sponsored judicial wire intercept program. We will also participate in the Department of Treasury-led Terrorist Financing Targeting Cell in Saudi Arabia. This initiative is part of a larger Saudi-

led GCC effort to counter violent extremism in the Arabian Peninsula and throughout the Central Region.

In the past year, we have also seen the effective expansion of our Department of Defense Rewards program, which allows for our IA partners to incentivize sources that deliver information, at great risk, that result in increased force protection or counter-terrorism kinetic strikes.

A key component of our working relationship with the IA is the exchange of personnel; representatives from eight U.S. government departments and agencies reside within the CENTCOM Headquarters, a majority co-located in our Operations Directorate's Interagency Action Group (IAG). We sincerely appreciate the provision of high-quality personnel to support CENTCOM operations. Reciprocally, we have embedded personnel within the headquarters of several USG partners. These embeds provide support to the gaining organizations and facilitate collaboration on mutually supportive IA objectives. Embeds also allow us to maintain visibility and coordinate activities across our "seams" with EUCOM, PACOM, and AFRICOM.

Coalition Partners. A unique characteristic of CENTCOM remains the presence of 49 nations at our headquarters in Tampa. Over the last 15 years, the composition, task, and purpose of the national representation has changed based on security trends, ongoing operations, and our partner engagement strategy. Each nation is represented by a Senior National Representative, and most nations have additional officers that regularly synchronize with their counterparts in the Command staff, creating an integrated, coalition-centric approach to our operations.

Many nations consider counter-VEO operations a focal point for their efforts. We capitalize on this extraordinary access to our partners to facilitate information sharing, interoperability, operational support, and force generation. Our co-location with SOCOM in Tampa also enables us

to capitalize on economies of scale and synergies between our respective commands and coalition partners.

In spite of the longevity of the Coalition, the current environment of fiscal austerity may inhibit our ability to sustain it at an optimal level of performance. Additionally, the lack of national-level intelligence sharing agreements often hinders the timely and comprehensive communication of information. Our classified networks are largely unavailable to our partner nations and inhibit our ability to integrate operations, often requiring costly and labor-intensive solutions to overcome.

However, utilizing a coalition-centric approach necessitates a paradigm shift and a deliberate acceptance of risk in order to foster an environment of reciprocal information sharing. We have an opportunity to sustain momentum in the global campaign against ISIS and other VEOs while continuing to refine the whole-of-coalition approach. Opposition to violent extremism provides unique alignment of national interests and can increase trust, understanding, and cooperation on other critical issues. If we can sustain an enduring coalition, we will be able to deal with persistent conflict in the region and be postured for response when necessary. Our lessons learned can inform departmental and national strategies for attaining increased levels of integration with our partners.

Conclusion

Given the many forces driving change and uncertainty in the region, U.S. commitment to the CENTCOM area of responsibility is more important now than ever. Recent experience has shown that a precipitous withdrawal of support, before conditions for stabilization have been set, can lead to catastrophic results. We have also learned that a modest commitment of resources, applied steadily and consistently over time, and in a predictable fashion, can assist our partners in managing change, adjusting to new threats, and building their own capacity to act. This has the additional benefit of lessening our own requirements in future contingencies and building our reputation as a reliable partner.

Working "by, with, and through" our allies and partners allows us to multiply the effect of relatively modest commitments to ensure this crucial and truly "central" region never again requires a mass deployment of U.S. forces. We will retain the necessary American military presence in the region to protect the homeland from terrorist attack, preserve a favorable regional balance of power, and achieve our strategic objectives and interests found in our national strategies.

CENTCOM remains **the only geographic Combatant Command executing active combat operations**. In the last year, we have made great strides toward defeating ISIS. This year we will shift our focus to the South Asia Strategy in order to push OFS toward a successful conclusion, while consolidating the gains we have made against ISIS, supporting our political and security objectives in the Gulf and Levant, and countering Iran. We must continue to degrade and destroy VEOs that threaten the safety of our citizens and partners by pursuing ISIS across the Central Region. We will continue to counter expansionist regional powers and inappropriate nuclear ambitions by developing strong allies and building peace through strength.

We remain mindful that **ours is a team effort** and that success in the complex Central Region requires that we work together. This applies not just within the command but with our fellow Combatant Commands, our Component Commands, our established combined/joint task forces, the Central Region's 18 country teams, and the agencies and organizations of the U.S. government which have continued unwavering support over the almost two decades of persistent conflict. Our deliberate and close relationships with the U.S. Department of State, USAID, the U.S. Department of Treasury, the Defense Logistics Agency, the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Joint Improvised Explosive Devise Defeat Organization have paid enormous dividends in the pursuit of shared national goals and objectives. We look forward to

continuing to work with them and others on behalf of our nation. Further, we continue to benefit from our allies in the region, who support the CENTCOM headquarters with more than 200 foreign military officers from 49 nations – all of whom are a part of the success of CENTCOM, and we are grateful for their partnership.

In all of this, the outstanding men and women who comprise the United States Central Command are our finest and most precious resource. The world class CENTCOM team – which includes more than 90,000 Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, Coastguardsmen, and Civilians stationed throughout the CENTCOM area of responsibility – is highly-skilled, motivated, and stands ready to do whatever is necessary to accomplish the mission. They continue to make great sacrifices and contributions to ensure the command meets our strategic objectives and protects our nation's interests. We must ensure they have everything they need to do their jobs as effectively and efficiently as possible. This includes ensuring a safe environment for all our personnel, regardless of their race, gender, creed, or religion.

We are also keenly aware and grateful for the sacrifices made by our families. They are vital members of our team, and we could not complete our mission without them. They, too, make important contributions and tremendous sacrifices each and every day in support of us and on behalf of the Command and a grateful nation.

CENTCOM: *Prepare, Pursue, Prevail!*

General Joseph L. Votel
Commander, United States Central Command

GEN Votel attended the United States Military Academy and was commissioned in 1980 as an Infantry Officer. His initial assignments were to the 3d Infantry Division in Germany where he served as a Rifle Platoon Leader, Executive Officer, Battalion Adjutant and Rifle Company Commander. Following this he served as a Small Group Tactics Instructor at the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia before being assigned to the 75th Ranger Regiment as a Plans / Liaison Officer where he participated in Operation JUST CAUSE. He was next posted to the 1st Ranger Battalion where he served as the Battalion Liaison Officer, Operations Officer and Executive Officer.

Following this he was assigned to HQs, Allied Forces Southern Europe, Naples, Italy and the NATO Peace Implementation Force (IFOR) in Sarajevo. He commanded the 2d Battalion, 22d Infantry (Light) at Fort Drum, New York and was subsequently selected to command the 1st Ranger Battalion at Hunter Army Airfield, Georgia. Following attendance at the Army War College GEN Votel commanded the 75th Ranger Regiment and participated in Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, Afghanistan and Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, Iraq.

As a general officer he served in the Pentagon as the Director of the Army and Joint IED Defeat Task Force and subsequently as the Deputy Director of the Joint IED Defeat Organization established under the Deputy Secretary of Defense. He served as the Deputy Commanding General (Operations), 82d Airborne Division / CJTF-82, Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, Afghanistan and was subsequently assigned as the Deputy Commanding General then Commanding General of the Joint Special Operations Command, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He most recently served as the Commanding General of U.S. Special Operations Command, MacDill Air Force Base, Florida.

GEN Votel is a graduate of the Infantry Officer Basic and Advanced Courses, United States Army Command and General Staff College, and the United States Army War College.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MEMBERS POST HEARING

FEBRUARY 27, 2018

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MS. TSONGAS

Ms. TSONGAS. There has been some question to how many service members are currently serving in Afghanistan. Can you give me a current number?

Does that include temporary, or rotational, forces?

Do you have a sense of the number of civilian contractors? Who keeps track of that?

How are contractors part of the by, with and thru strategy? What is their focus? How many contract personnel are there in Afghanistan?

Do you anticipate needing more service members? If so, how many?

General VOTEL. [The information is for official use only and retained in the committee files.]

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. O'ROURKE

Mr. O'ROURKE. There has been some question to how many service members are currently serving in Afghanistan. Can you give me a current number? Does that include temporary, or rotational, forces? Do you have a sense of the number of civilian contractors? Who keeps track of that? How are contractors part of the by, with and thru strategy? What is their focus? How many contract personnel are there in Afghanistan? Do you anticipate needing more service members? If so, how many?

General VOTEL. [The information is for official use only and retained in the committee files.]

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. COOK

Mr. COOK. After recently visiting the UAE, Saudi and Egypt, I was left with a deep concern about the loyalties and interactions of Qatar. While Qatar is an ally in some respects, their deteriorating relationship with our other allies in the region, and their alleged support for the Muslim Brotherhood and relationship with Iran are troubling. How does General Votel and CENTCOM see our future relationship with Qatar playing out? Is there a back-up plan to move our base and forces from Qatar if the relationship deteriorates any further? Does he think the Qatari government is making efforts to improve the relationship with CENTCOM and the U.S.?

General VOTEL. [The information is for official use only and retained in the committee files.]

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MS. STEFANIK

Ms. STEFANIK. As best you can in this open forum, can you provide an overview of how you are approaching cyber operations to support your ongoing efforts across CENTCOM? And how specifically is U.S. CYBER COMMAND supporting your efforts?

a) In terms of adversarial cyber capabilities, are you more concerned with State-sponsored activities such as those exhibited by Iran, or non-state actors such as AQ and ISIS? Any concern about Russian cyber activities within your AOR?

b) We have heard a great deal about the need to speed up decision-making for cyber warfare and cyber operations. What has been your experience in making decisions to support cyber operations; would you agree with these assessments that we need to perhaps speed up the decision-making process, including those within the interagency?

General VOTEL. [The information is for official use only and retained in the committee files.]

Ms. STEFANIK. This question deals with countering adversarial propaganda and disinformation efforts: What do you think is your most effective tool as a combatant commander to counter adversarial disinformation efforts including those posed by ISIS, Russia, and Iran?

a) How do you work with the State Department? Does the Global Engagement Center support your operations? Are we doing enough? What else remains?

b) The BBC recently conducted an open-source analysis that showed that ISIS media is showing signs of a recovery after a sharp decline. Does analysis match your experiences? Can you discuss recent trends in ISIS media and propaganda?

c) What role does DOD play here as compared to the State Department?

d) Do you have all of the authorities you need?

General VOTEL. [The information is classified and retained in the committee files.]

Ms. STEFANIK. This question deals with the changing dynamics on the ground in Syria. More and more, our forces are engaging Russian and Syrian regime proxies, as most recently seen in the aggressive fighting in Der az-Zur (Dare-a-Zur). The defeat of ISIS now reveals the fingerprints of the larger geopolitical fight we are engaged in, putting at risk current authorities, frameworks, and partnerships. And, not to mention, the considerable risk to our forces on the ground in an already clouded and fractured battlefield.

a) What is your long-term view of U.S. presence and investments in the region?

b) What enduring counterterrorism capabilities do we need to be considering given the remaining threats on the ground ?

General VOTEL. [The information is for official use only and retained in the committee files.]

Ms. STEFANIK. The recent incident of overseas fitness trackers that telegraphed the positions and data of our servicemen and women overseas reminds us that the Internet-of-Things continues to change the game.

a) Can you talk about how this is impacting your approach to force protection. What did we learn from this recent incident and what changes have been made?

b) In a broader sense, and as a combatant commander, are you concerned about the proliferation of more than 50 billion connected sensors and devices? How does this impact your intelligence frameworks and collection, for example?

General VOTEL. [The information is for official use only and retained in the committee files.]

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