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**MILITARY ASSESSMENT OF
THE SECURITY CHALLENGES
IN THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST**

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED FIFTEENTH CONGRESS

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ONE HUNDRED FIFTEENTH CONGRESS

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MILITARY ASSESSMENT OF THE SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES,
Washington, DC, Wednesday, March 29, 2017.

The committee met, pursuant to call, at 10:02 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.

Today, we turn our attention to the Central Command area of operations, where much of the Nation’s military power has been engaged since 1991. While we are rightfully focusing attention on other threats, such as a resurgent Russia and a newly assertive China, the threat of terrorism has not gone away. In fact, as we discussed at our hearing a few weeks ago, it is difficult to see how ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] is totally eliminated from Syria, and Al Qaeda, with its various branches, has not disappeared either.

And while terrorists have physically spread out to more locations, some of them have become quite adept at operating online as well, instigating terrorist incidents in the West.

Of course, Iran poses a significant threat to regional stability, and none of us will forget about the essential fight to prevent Afghanistan from returning to be a base for terrorism. So there is much to occupy our witness today, and I appreciate his being with us to answer our questions.

I also want to mention one additional issue, which has been in the news lately. There have been a number of press reports about civilian casualties in Mosul related to U.S. aerial support of the Iraqi efforts to reclaim that city from ISIS. I would just suggest that everyone be cautious. In a dense urban environment, there may well be civilian casualties, and even the finest military in the world can make mistakes. But we also know for certain that ISIS uses innocent civilians as human shields, and that they can arrange civilian deaths to further their misguided narratives. ISIS uses such narratives to try to advance their cause and to curtail the effectiveness of our military campaign against them. I think we should always give the benefit of the doubt to the professionals who are working every day to keep us safe.

Let me turn to Mr. Smith for any comments he would like to make before turning to our witness.

**STATEMENT OF HON. ADAM SMITH, A REPRESENTATIVE FROM
WASHINGTON, RANKING MEMBER, COMMITTEE ON ARMED
SERVICES**

Mr. SMITH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have a brief opening statement, which I will simply submit for the record. I echo the chairman's comments about how important this region is to our national security interests, and the challenges there are great.

The only issue I want to highlight, and hopefully have the general discuss a little bit, as we continue in Iraq, the problem, to my mind, continues to be that the Baghdad government is not inclusive enough of the Sunni population. I met with the Sunni tribal leader yesterday. You know, certainly Prime Minister Abadi is trying, whereas Prime Minister al-Maliki did not, but there has not been much improvement. There is still a feeling amongst the Sunni population that Baghdad is more—is closer to Iran than it is to their own Sunni population. And until we fix that problem, whatever happens in Mosul, whatever happens elsewhere, if you have a—you know, disgruntled, dissatisfied, pushed-aside Sunni population in Iraq, you are going to have fertile ground for ISIS or Al Qaeda or whatever extremist groups want to exploit it. So I am curious to hear what we are doing to try and reintegrate the Sunnis into the Baghdad government so that it is not a sectarian Shia government, but a government for Iraq. I think that will be a great challenge going forward.

And with that, I thank the general for his service and his leadership and look forward to the testimony.

I yield back.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Smith can be found in the Appendix on page 37.]

The CHAIRMAN. General, without objection, your full written statement will be made part of the record. And you are recognized for any oral comments you would like to make.

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

General VOTEL. Thank you, Chairman Thornberry, Ranking Member Smith. For the members of the committee, before I do get into my short statement here, I do want to highlight for you, we have put a map at your—each of your spaces here. There is coverage on both sides. You will see the back side really focuses a little bit on the Iraq and Syria piece there, and the red kind of blotches kind of highlight where we think ISIS is located currently.

Chairman Thornberry, Ranking Member Smith, distinguished members of the committee, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to appear here today to discuss the current posture and state of readiness of the United States Central Command [CENTCOM]. I come before you today on behalf of the outstanding men and women of the command; military, civilians, and contractors along with our coalition partners from nearly 60 nations. Our people are the very best in the world at what they do, and I could not be more proud of them and their families. Without question, they are the strength of our Central Command team.

I have been in command at CENTCOM for about a year now. It has been an incredibly busy and productive period. Over the past

12 months, we have dealt with a number of significant challenges in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Egypt and the Sinai, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, and elsewhere throughout our area of responsibility.

We are making progress in many areas, but much, much work remains. We are also dealing with a range of malign activities perpetrated by Iran and its proxies operating in the region. It is my view that Iran poses the greatest long-term threat to stability in this part of the world.

Generally speaking, the Central Region remains a highly complex area, widely characterized by pervasive instability and conflict. The fragile security environments, which reflect a variety of contributing factors including heightened ethno-sectarian tensions, economic uncertainty, weak or corrupt governance, civil wars, and humanitarian crisis, are exploited by violent extremist organizations and terrorist groups, such as Al Qaeda and ISIS. These groups have clearly indicated their desire and intent to attack the U.S. homeland, our interests abroad, and the interests of our partners and allies. At the same time, the Central Region is increasingly crowded with external nation-states, such as Russia and China, who are pursuing their own interests in attempting to shift alliances within the region.

The point that I would emphasize to you is that while there may be other more strategic or consequential threats or regions around our world, today, the Central Region has come to represent the nexus for many of the security challenges our Nation faces.

And most importantly, the threats in this region continue to pose the most direct threat to the U.S. homeland and the global economy. Thus, it must remain a priority and be resourced accordingly. We sincerely appreciate this committee's continued strong support and particularly as it pertains to our budget requests and the funding provided, not only to be CENTCOM, but across the Department of Defense. We could not do what we do on a daily basis without that support.

Meanwhile, the team at U.S. Central Command remains appropriately focused on doing what is necessary to protect our national interests and those of our partners. Our strategic approach is very straightforward: Prepare, pursue, and prevail. And I will explain what I mean by that. We prepare the environment to ensure an effective posture and strong relationships across the region. We actively pursue opportunities to strengthen relationships and support our interests. And when we do put our forces into action, we prevail in our assigned missions.

I would also point out to you that today, to the credit and professionalism of our Armed Forces and coalition partners, we are executing campaigns in the Central Region with significantly fewer U.S. forces on the ground than in previous years. As you are seeing clearly demonstrated in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, and elsewhere throughout our area of responsibility, we have adopted a "by, with, and through" approach that places a heavy reliance on indigenous forces. While this approach does present some challenges, and can be more time-consuming, it is proving effective and is likely to pay significant dividends going forward.

Indigenous force partners continue to build needed capability and capacity, and they are personally invested in the conduct of operations and, thus, inclined to do what is necessary to preserve the gains they have achieved going forward. We also have a vested interest in insuring increased stability and security in the strategically important Central Region. To this end, I will close by highlighting three areas where I do believe if we apply the appropriate amount of energy and effort, we can and will have a lasting positive impact in this part of the world.

First, we must restore trust with our partners in the region, while at the same time maintaining the strong trust of our leadership back here in Washington. The fact is, we cannot surge trust in times of crisis, and we must do what is necessary now to assure our partners of our commitment and our staying power.

Second, we must link our military objectives and campaigns as closely as possible to policy objectives, and to our other instruments of national power. In other words, we must align our military objectives and soft power capabilities with desired national and regional strategic end states, recognizing that if we don't do this, we risk creating space for our adversaries to achieve their strategic aims.

Finally, we must make sure that we are postured for purpose in this region. We must have credible, ready, and present force coupled with foreign military sales and foreign military financing programs that serve to build and shape partner nations capability in a timely and effective fashion.

Ours is a challenging and very important mission. Much is at stake today in the Central Region. We recognize this fact, and I assure you that the CENTCOM team stands ready and willing to do whatever is necessary to protect our national interests and the interests of our allies and partners.

Let me close by thanking this committee once again for the strong support that you continue to provide to the world-class team at United States Central Command, and particularly to our forces located forward in the region.

As I said at the outset, the 80,000-plus soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, Coast Guardsmen, and civilians that make up the command are truly the very best in the world at what they do, and I could not be more proud of them and their families. And I know that you are proud of them as well.

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

[The prepared statement of General Votel can be found in the Appendix on page 39.]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, General. And you are right, we share your pride in them and in what they do.

As we chatted just briefly before the hearing, you expressed interest in addressing some of the press stories regarding civilian casualties, especially in Mosul. Let me invite you to do that at this point.

General VOTEL. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I appreciate the opportunity to talk a little bit about this right up front.

First off, I want to emphasize to everybody here, all the members, that these are absolutely tragic and heartbreaking situations,

and our hearts go out to the people of Mosul, and of Iraq, and other places where we are operating.

We acknowledge our responsibility to operate at a higher standard. It is my responsibility, as a combatant commander, to ensure that our forces operate in accordance with those goals and standards. We take every allegation seriously, and we are executing a—what we have and are executing a well-developed process to assess and, if necessary, investigate each of these allegations.

How we do things is as important as the things we actually do, and we are doing everything humanly possible to prevent these types of events and incidents from occurring as a result of our operations.

I do agree with Lieutenant General Townsend's comments yesterday—he is our commander on the ground in Iraq—when he said that there is a fair chance that our operations may have contributed to civilian casualties, but I would highlight to each of you that this investigation continues, and there is still much to learn from this.

We have a general officer assigned as the investigating officer to help us address and understand and discover the facts of this case.

We were able to visit the actual site yesterday, and gathered both additional evidence and perspective on this situation. In addition, we are reviewing over 700 weapons systems videos over a 10-day period to ensure—over a 10-day period that followed this alleged incident, to ensure that we understand the effects of the munitions we dropped in this vicinity. This should be an indicator to you of how intensive a combat situation this is.

The investigation will look at command and control; will look at the munitions we employed and the fusing for those munitions; it will look at intelligence; importantly, it will look at the behavior of the enemy; and it will look at how our actions may have played a role in any civilian casualties.

The investigation will confirm or deny our initial impressions and highlight the lessons learned. And while we consider and establish accountability over our actions in this incident, I think it is also important to clearly recognize that the enemy does use human shields, has little regard for human life, and does attempt to use civilian casualty allegations as a tool to hinder our operations. And so they bear responsibility for this as well.

The nature of this fight has evolved over the course of the operation, and on this 2½-year campaign. And our approach has evolved as well. One example of how we have evolved has been our effort to enable and entrust our leaders at the tactical edge with the authorities they need to help our partners win.

We have not relaxed the rules of engagement. I have authorized Lieutenant General Townsend to delegate the employment of rules of engagement to the appropriate level due to the tough urban fight that we knew was coming in Mosul. To be clear, there were no changes to the types of targets and the rules of engagement that allows us to engage. We are aware of all of the reporting, especially by organizations like Amnesty International, Airwars, the Center for Civilians in Conflict, and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, and we have developed relationships with a number of

these organizations, and we look forward to working with them as we complete this investigation.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Let me just ask about a couple of the things you just said, because as you recognized, there is widespread reporting that the rules of engagement have changed, and the implication is now we are carelessly dropping bombs and killing civilians. But as I thought I heard you pretty clearly, the rules of engagement have not changed. Is that correct?

General VOTEL. That is correct, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. And you have a long experience in Iraq and dealing with this enemy. How would you describe their ability to create and further narratives that they see is in their interest?

One example that stuck in my mind, I remember in Iraq that after a raid or something, the enemy came and deposited dead bodies, and then brought cameras in to make it look like they had been killed as a part of the raid, when, in fact, they hadn't. They were brought in after the fact. So just describe the sophistication of their efforts.

General VOTEL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I would—I would agree with you, that the enemy that we have faced in Afghanistan, in Iraq, Syria, and other places here is particularly savvy in how they use information operations. ISIS, in particular, is well-skilled in this. They have professionals, if you will, who have expertise in this particular area, and so they know how to manipulate the information environment and create situations that they know will cause concern for us in Western countries.

And as I mentioned in my comments to you, I do believe they do attempt to use our concern to operate at higher standards and to prevent civilian casualties as a way to distract our campaign. So I think it is important that we recognize that. That has not changed how we approach things. It doesn't change our values. It doesn't change our adherence to the law of armed conflict and the fact that we do operate at a higher standard. But I think it is an important thing to recognize about our enemy.

The CHAIRMAN. Well, I will just conclude by saying, we want to be informed of the results of the investigation. We share your commitment to make sure we do things the right way. And so—but the investigation needs to occur, and then you see what it finds.

So I will trust you and your folks to keep us fully informed once you are able to reach conclusions on that.

Let me yield to the ranking member.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

If you could answer the question I raised in my opening statement about, you know, where the Sunni population in Iraq is at right now, because it sounds like it is still a very deep divide. And while I, you know, concur with the chairman's comments about the civilian casualties in Mosul, I know that the Sunni population is concerned about the fight that is going on there and the loss of life that is happening from both sides.

They are also concerned about the presence of Shia militias, Iranian-backed militias, and basically, the general feeling that this continues to be a Shia-run country that is not making room for the Sunnis, and that, you know, undermines our entire effort, I think,

to defeat these groups. Is that an inaccurate portrait? Is it better than that? And what are we doing to try to fix what problems remain?

General VOTEL. Congressman, the way that I would characterize it is, I think in the near term here, as Iraq and assisted by the coalition confronts the ISIS enemy that they are dealing with, there has been some level of local accommodation, some cooperation, some collaboration between different groups, really focused on doing this. I would cite to you our continued efforts to raise tribal forces to bring hold forces into these areas, particularly Sunni areas as—after they had been cleared, we have seen some success with that.

But I would agree with you that long term, there is still much work to be done. I know in my interactions with the prime minister, we frequently talk about this. I know he is very concerned about it, and—but also, I think recognizes the balance that will have to be achieved here in the region with a variety of different interests that are ongoing. And so, I think he clearly recognizes that.

But I would agree with you, more will need to be done to ensure that the Sunni population feels engaged, empowered, and a part of—part of the Government of Iraq and of the Iraqi people.

Mr. SMITH. Quick question on that. The issue of arming the Kurds or other Sunni tribesmen, there was, you know, frustration expressed, they weren't able to get those arms directly, and it is our position, our country's position, that all of that has to go through Baghdad, basically. Then I—I understand that to a certain degree.

Is that accurate? And how is that impacting the ability to arm the Kurds and the Sunni tribesmen that we want to fight with us?

General VOTEL. I believe we have made some—we have made good progress on that over the last year. There certainly were some issues with that in the past in terms of how that was done, but particularly as we got focused on the operation for Mosul, I think we saw a high level of collaboration and coordination between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Government of Iraq, particularly as they prepared their plans and prepared their forces for that operation.

And I would highlight to you that I think one of the—one of the key successes here, and I think this has influenced the Government of Iraq, is the—is a high level of coordination that took place at the military level and security levels as that operation gets underway, and that continues to this day. And I do believe that is a basis for moving forward. That said, it is something that we continue to keep our—keep our eye on.

Mr. SMITH. And then looking up to Syria, as we—you know, people prepare for the attack on Raqqa, there is the great question of, you know, you have got the Turks involved there, you have got the Kurds involved there, but they don't get along. When we are trying to figure out what our coalition is in Syria, particularly going after Raqqa, how are we currently deciding the issue between the Turks and the Kurds?

General VOTEL. Well, there is engagement at the high political level that is taking place. And as you are well aware, the chairman

has been a champion for us in working at the chief of defense level and back and forth. We have, from a CENTCOM standpoint, working in conjunction with European Command, we have increased our interaction in Ankara to ensure there is good visibility on the things that we are doing.

And we certainly recognize Turkey's interests and concerns with us. They are a great partner here. We couldn't do many of the things we are doing without them.

That said, the most effective force that we have right now in Syria is the Syrian Democratic Forces that consists of both Kurds and Arabs, Turkmen, and, in some cases, some Christian organizations.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Wittman.

Mr. WITTMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Votel, thanks so much for joining us today. I want to get your perspective on what might happen in the future. We see today success happening in Mosul, with pushing out and defeating ISIS forces, both with our forces and with Iraqi forces. The question then becomes, I believe, in the future is what happens after that? And while ISIS is a concern, I believe that Iranian-backed Shia militant groups are an even greater concern. We don't hear a lot about that today, but I do believe that they are a significant issue. The IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] commander, Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Shia militant groups in that region, I believe, with Iranian backing, has visions about what would be happening in the future as ISIS has moved out.

Today, as we speak, Iran and the U.S. have common interests in defeating ISIS. The question, then, becomes once ISIS is defeated, Iran has in mind to recreate the Shia Crescent through that region. So by pushing out ISIS, and with the question about how governance takes place after that with the existing government in Iraq, what do you see as the future with us ultimately defeating ISIS, and what happens with these Iranian-backed Shia militant groups, and what happens there, too, with the Iraqi Government in trying to reestablish some kind of governance and control in those regions sans ISIS?

General VOTEL. Thank you. Thank you, Congressman. I share in your concern about Iran and their long-term intentions here. Certainly, with 100,000-plus Shia militia members on the ground there, this is an extraordinarily—it is an extraordinarily concern, big concern as we move forward.

I—we are engaged, and I know the embassy is well engaged with the Government of Iraq as they look to implement a paramilitary force law in their country. The prime minister, I know, has appointed a committee that is working through this aspect of it. We certainly have provided advice into that. We have given examples of how we employ national guards and other things here and how we would look at that.

Our concern, I think, with that particular aspect is that the PMF [Popular Mobilization Forces], the paramilitary forces that remain behind, don't become duplicative to the counterterrorism service or to the Iraqi army and those types of things, and that there is a valid role for them, and that they do answer to the government,

and that they remain, like the other security services, an apolitical entity, and, so, our very strong focus is in that particular—particularly with respect to the Shia PMF.

Mr. WITTMAN. Staying on the theme of Iran, looking there in the Arabian Gulf, and more specifically, recently in the Straits of Hormuz, where we had four Iranian mass-attack vessels swarm the USS *Mahan*, there is a concern about that continued effort, and what they are trying to achieve with that, and what our actions are, or reactions to that might be.

Give me your perspective, first of all, about the frequency of those attacks. What is Iran trying to achieve with that? Those probing maneuvers as I see them, I think, are very indicative of what Iran, I believe, is likely to try to achieve in that area, and that is to harass our ships just enough to stand us off.

Give me your perspective on what you think the Iranians are trying to achieve there and what our reaction to that is, or what we are doing to try to prevent that.

General VOTEL. Yes. Direct to your question, I think Iran's objective here is to be the regional hegemon. They want to be the predominant power in the region. There is no doubt about that, and I think that is what they are pursuing.

One of the very first things I did after becoming the commander at CENTCOM was to get on a ship and go through the Straits of Hormuz. As an Army guy, I wanted to understand what this was. And, frankly, the Iranians did not disappoint. Within 30 minutes of being on there, we had boats surround us in the area. I had a chance to observe our ship captain and crew and how they respond to that, and since I have had a chance to see that on a number of different occasions and I get normal reports on it.

I will tell you, Congressman, I am extraordinarily confident in our leaders and in the processes, procedures, and capabilities they have to properly defend themselves.

The presence of these types of boats out there very seldom, if ever, prevent us from accomplishing our missions. I think what they are out there to do is to demonstrate their presence, to, in some cases, potentially be provocative. I think as we—you know, if you look over a course of a year, I think you see probably 300-plus incidents of this kind of nature. About 10 to 15 percent of those we would classify as being abnormal, meaning outside of their normal pattern of life; unprofessional, meaning they are not following proper maritime procedures; or unsafe, meaning that they put themselves or they potentially put our vessel and our crews at risk.

And so, we are paying extraordinarily close attention to this, but I feel very confident in our ability to protect ourselves and continue to pursue our missions.

Mr. WITTMAN. Very good. Mr. Chairman, I yield back. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Mrs. Davis.

Mrs. DAVIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General, thank you for your service. I want to turn to Afghanistan. What kinds of support are the Russians sending to the Taliban, and how direct is their involvement? What does that mean about our ongoing conflict there?

General VOTEL. Congresswoman, I think there is a lot that we don't know about what Russia is doing. I think it is fair to assume they may be providing some kind of support to them in terms of weapons or other things that may be there. Again, I think that is the possibility.

I believe what Russia is attempting to do is they are attempting to be an influential party in this part of the world. Obviously, they do have some concerns, because it is in—it is close to former Soviet states that they consider to be within their sphere, so there is some concern about that. But, in general, I don't consider their outreach and linkage to the Taliban to be helpful to what we have been—what the coalition has been trying to accomplish for some time now in Afghanistan.

Mrs. DAVIS. Could you share with us in your—the state of that accomplishment that you could talk about in this setting?

General VOTEL. In Afghanistan? Well, I think—I think we have pretty well established, we are at a stalemate right now. Right now, I would say that it is in—generally, in favor of the Government of Afghanistan, but stalemates have a tendency to decline over time. So I think we do have to—we have to continue to support this.

We have two missions in Afghanistan. One is our counterterrorism mission, fully resourced. That is going pretty well. I feel very confident in that. The other one is the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] mission, the train, advise, and assist. That is one where I think we ought to consider looking at our objectives here and how we—how we continue to support that mission going forward and ensure that the Government of Afghanistan has the time and the capabilities to accomplish what they need to.

Mrs. DAVIS. Yeah. Clearly, I think the governance piece is important. We have, obviously, been working on that as well for some time. But there is a great deal of concern that it hasn't been as robust as is needed in that setting, and I am not sure that I would believe that that is going to increase. I think, if anything, it is probably going to decrease.

Can you comment on that and the importance of that mission?

General VOTEL. Well, I think that—that, certainly, is a topic under discussion now with the Secretary of Defense and General Nicholson and myself and the chairman right now. So we are in the process of going through a review of our posture in Afghanistan and how we ought to—how we ought to look at that going forward. I think it is still kind of predecisional at this point, so I am not sure I want to get out in front of the Secretary in announcing anything in particular. But it is a key topic here and one that Secretary Mattis has been very engaged with us on.

Mrs. DAVIS. Thank you. One of the concerns as well is that the administration now has not been filling all the positions for that region, both—military, perhaps, is more covered than in other departments. But I wonder if you feel that these gaps are becoming problematic, and what should we be doing about it?

General VOTEL. Well, Congresswoman, I have the benefit of having a Cabinet Secretary who previously held my job, and so he understands the region that I—that I am operating in right now. And I—and we have a very open and communicative relationship here,

and so I feel I am getting everything that I need from the Department at this particular juncture.

So I can't tell you that I have—I have been disadvantaged while the transition completes and gets in place.

Mrs. DAVIS. Thank you. And just following up on my colleague's question earlier about how we are planning for what comes next in Iraq. What is it going to look like? And what is the extent of that planning? You know, how would you see that right now?

General VOTEL. Well, I think, as I mentioned in my opening statement, I think this has to be—it has to involve more than just the military. And in my advice to the Secretary and the chairman as we began to look at how we move forward in these areas, my principal piece of advice was we have to look at the political preparation of these particular—of these areas and make sure that we are addressing some of these long-term issues, like we talked about a few moments ago, how we accommodate the different parts of the population; how we have a plan for governance.

There is a lot that the military can do, but it is extraordinarily important that our diplomats, our Department of State, our other development agencies, others are involved in this particular process as well, and that we have a very—

Mrs. DAVIS. My question—

General VOTEL [continuing]. Smooth process.

Mrs. DAVIS [continuing]. Is are they?

General VOTEL. I believe they are. I feel very confident we are working with our partners on this.

Mrs. DAVIS. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Coffman.

Mr. COFFMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And, General, thank you so much for your long service to this country.

I think it was raised earlier about the concerns about the Sunni Arab population. I mean, the fact is that after we left the country in 2011, that the Shia-dominated government reverted to their worst sectarian tendencies, and I believe pushed out the Sunni Arabs from the government and created an opening for ISIS to spill across the border from Syria and to capture those areas with little to no resistance, because it was simply no loyalty to the government of Baghdad.

In the Iraqi constitution, there is a provision that was insisted by the Kurds—insisted by the Kurds that allows provinces to band together and to create semi-autonomous regions. Should, in fact, the Sunni Arabs look at that, and should we encourage that? It just seems like without a path where they have some say in—they are only 20 percent of the population—in their future—essentially, right now, all the revenue, basically, is from oil, most of the revenue, and so—and that is distributed by the central government out of Baghdad. So it is a tough position that they are in. And so do you have a view on that particular issue?

General VOTEL. Look, Congressman, as you know, our policy is one—one Iraq right now. And so that is—as we apply our military operations, that is the context in which we—which we do that.

I would agree with you, though, that there has to be a very serious look at this, and there has—we have to ensure that the different parts of Iraq are represented in their government, in other

things that are in their military and other security apparatuses, and other aspects and they have an opportunity to take advantage of the economic opportunity that is available in Iraq. So I certainly think there has to be much—a broader discussion about how we do that.

Mr. COFFMAN. Yeah. I would hope that would be something that our government would look at from your standpoint, from a diplomatic standpoint, in terms of encouraging the government. Because the fact is, it is still the vertically integrated government that we had left—that was in place, you know, prior to the fall of Saddam Hussein, where, really, all decisions are centralized out of Baghdad. I mean, there is no system of taxation at the provincial level. And so, I just think that a decentralization of authority that the Kurds now enjoy would be great for the Sunni Arabs, and I would just like that to be something that we look at.

And I would express my same concerns, having served there in 2005, 2006 for the Marine Corps, that the ranking member expressed in that this is a tough situation for the Sunni Arabs in that region, and the friction between the Shia militias that are Iranian-backed and that local population is not to be discounted. And, again, it is alienation from ever feeling that they are a part of the Iraqi Government.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Larsen.

Mr. LARSEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, General, for coming today. Initially, in your answer to your first question about the Mosul incident, you said that you are going to assess, and if necessary, investigate. Can you help me understand that distinction from your perspective, what that means for us?

General VOTEL. Absolutely. So, you know, this is, unfortunately, not the first time we have had allegations of civilian casualties in CENTCOM. And so what we do have is a process in place for how we—how we have standardized process for how we look at this. When we get—it starts off with the receipt of an allegation. We get allegations from all over the place. We get it from the news. We get it from social media. We might get it from people on the street. We might get it—we may—much of it is self-reported if we see something, so we get an allegation.

What we do then is we do what we call a credibility assessment. And the intention there is to do an initial review of the facts and circumstances to merit, make a determination about whether we need to move to a more fulsome investigation.

And so what we have—in this particular—and then if we make that determination, then we move to an investigation. And so for the incident that I was talking about here in Mosul, we have taken that step. We have decided, hey, there is—as you heard General Townsend acknowledge yesterday, there might be something here. We might—there is a fair chance that we may have contributed to this, and so now we have moved to the investigation phase.

So it will be a more formalized approach to really look into the details of this as much as we can to establish what happened, establish what the facts are, identify accountability, and then certainly identify the lessons learned out of that.

Mr. LARSEN. And you mentioned on the criteria that you are looking at, there is command and control, there was a few others. What were those?

General VOTEL. Thank you. So, you know, we will look at command and control. We will look at the intelligence that we had. This was a very dynamic situation. This wasn't a deliberate target or anything else. This was an evolving combat situation. So we will take a look at the intelligence that was provided to us by the Iraqis that we had. We will look at the enemy's reactions here, and we will try and understand exactly their role in this. We will look at the munitions that we employed here, and we will look at the fusing options. You know, you—we do have the technology, largely supported by Congress here, to have munitions that can be very specific.

I think as you heard General Townsend say yesterday, the munition that was employed here should not have created the effects that we—that have been observed. So that causes us to look at that to see if there are other things that may have contributed to that as well.

So what we do is try to be more—very complete in the investigation. It takes a little bit of time, but we usually have a pretty good answer at the end of it.

Mr. LARSEN. All right. Thanks.

I am going to switch gears here to Yemen. And could you just briefly describe the U.S. security objectives in Yemen for us?

General VOTEL. Well, thanks. I think there are two principal interests that we are concerned about in Yemen right now. One is that Yemen is not used as a platform or a sanctuary for attacks on the homeland. And that gets to our focus on Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Al Qaeda in Yemen.

This is the franchise of Al Qaeda that has demonstrated in the past the ability to try to attack our homeland, and some of those people are still—exist there. So that is a key aspect of our interests here. And so our operations are focused on disrupting Al Qaeda there.

The other key interest that we have in this particular area is freedom of navigation. On the western coast of Yemen, between it and the Horn of Africa, is the Bab-el-Mandeb. It is an extraordinarily restrictive strait. It is a chokepoint. It is a major transit area for commerce, not only ours, but for international ships. About 60 to 70 ships go through there a day.

What we have seen is we have seen, I believe, at the—with the support of Iran, we have seen the migration of capabilities that we previously observed in the Straits of Hormuz, a layered defense, consists of coastal defense missiles, radar systems, mines, explosive boats that have been migrated from the Straits of Hormuz to this particular area right here threatening commerce and ships and our security operations in that particular area.

Mr. LARSEN. Just can you—do you assess that we will be able to stay with those objectives, and we won't be dragged into other—other people's goals?

General VOTEL. Well, of course, as you know, there is a civil war ongoing right there, that is playing out between a Saudi-led coalition and an Iranian-supported element. And so, there—you know,

we provide some indirect support to that. Obviously, this is something we are paying very, very close attention to. While that rages, it does have—it does have some impact on our other—on our principal interests in this area, so I think we do have to pay some attention to that.

Mr. LARSEN. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Cook.

Mr. COOK. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It is going to—next month or so, it is going to be very intense here in Washington. Obviously, there has been a lot of talk about health care. But there is also something looming, at least in my mind, that is going to have direct implication on you, and that is the continuing resolution. That is the budget that we have got to pass to support you.

And I am going to be very candid. You don't have to answer totally. I think you can kind of see this one coming, but a number of us are very, very worried about the readiness indicators, about—we had folks in talking about maintenance. You have got a large area, a large military, and everything else. And if we don't do this correctly, to the best—can you give us an evaluation, the impact in terms of readiness, tempo of ops, and the ability to conduct your mission?

General VOTEL. Thank you, Congressman. And so, first off, you know, I—the support that I get from the services is extraordinary. They give me everything that I ask for, and I have been well taken care of by that. But I share your concern on the impacts of a continuing resolution on the services and on SOCOM [Special Operations Command] that really provide the capabilities that a combatant commander like I need to have. And so, I am concerned when we are not able to pursue long-term programs and fund them and approach them over time, I am concerned with the impacts that continuing resolutions and other instruments here have had on readiness.

For example, I just—I look at the MEU/ARGs [Marine expeditionary units/amphibious ready groups] that the Marine Corps provides into my area as well as into the AFRICOM [Africa Command] and EUCOM [European Command] area. They don't come with all of the same number of helicopters that we have had in the past. I believe that is a readiness issue, and it impacts my ability to have flexibility and agility and react to things in the area. So I am very concerned about this.

And while, you know, I—the money won't necessarily come to me, it goes to the people that provide me the capabilities that I need to pursue our objectives, and so I am very concerned about this.

Mr. COOK. I want to switch gears a little bit. I am also on Foreign Affairs. And, you know, we have the issue that continually pops up about the foreign military sales, and last year, looked at the replacement for the Saudis, the number of M-1 battle tanks that they had lost. And sometimes—you have alluded to it, there was a question about Yemen and everything else and the toll that that has taken there.

Do you influence at all with the State Department foreign military sales, particularly for some of our allies that would obviously contribute to your ability to conduct your mission?

General VOTEL. Congressman, we absolutely do. We do that through our security cooperation offices that are located in many of these countries, almost all of the countries that we have here. And I would share your—share your concern about this. FMF [foreign military financing] and FMS [foreign military sales] are extraordinarily important programs for us.

From my perspective as combatant commander, what I want to try to do is build capability for our partners to do the things—to provide their own security and then to be integrated with us. And I am concerned when we choose not to sell our systems, provide them to them. They will go somewhere else to get them, and they will get lesser systems. They won't get the sustainment, they won't get the training, and we won't be integrated. And it doesn't help us. So I think we have to recognize that this is an important part of our security cooperation aspect, and we can't completely define our FMF, our FMS systems as something to try to change people's behavior.

That is certainly an aspect of it, but it has got to be focused on building capability, in my mind.

Mr. COOK. Thank you, again, for your service and for your candidness. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Courtney.

Mr. COURTNEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you, General, for your testimony this morning. I just wonder if you could help clarify what is going on right now in terms of increased deployments in Syria. Again, this month, again, from a whole variety of news outlets, it was reported about 4- or 500 marines were deployed, new marines, new contingent of marines this month. You know, why was that decision made, and what is their mission?

General VOTEL. Thank you. So, Congressman, what we are constantly doing is this is an evolving campaign, and we are—you know, the enemy changes, we change, and the situation changes a lot on the ground. What we are constantly trying to do is assess what our requirements are and how we best support our partners through our, kind of “by, with, and through” approach, and make sure we have the capabilities to fully enable them and to help them win. So there is a constant process of assessing what we need.

I demand that our leaders forward—General Townsend, in this particular case, provides rationale for the additional capabilities that he needs, and that we have very, very clear roles and missions for the things that we are bringing forward.

And so what we—we do have a very deliberate process. What you have seen here most recently are not things that just came up relatively quickly. These have been things that we have anticipated for some time, the—you cited, for example, the marines, and some of the artillery organizations. We have recognized that as we continue to pursue our military objectives in Syria, we are going to need more direct, all-weather fire support capability for our Syrian Democratic Force partners. And so this—that is what you are seeing. So they have deployed. They are helping us with that par-

ticular aspect. They are also helping us with some of our logistics capability in Syria.

Syria is a fairly immature area for us in terms of that, so we don't have a big infrastructure like we have in Iraq or some other places here, so we do need some help in those particular areas.

So I—what I can assure you is that there is a rationale, and there are specific roles and missions for all of these capabilities that we are bringing.

Mr. COURTNEY. So—well, thank you for that answer. Again, I don't actually want to second guess your sort of military judgment, but what I would—it sounds like, you know, they are starting to get much, sort of deeper involved in the fight in Raqqa. And I guess—you know, we voted a couple of years ago in this committee in defense authorization bills have been extending title 10 authorization, which, in my opinion, as someone who supported that, it was not about troops—you know, boots on the ground, direct military involvement, but this sounds like we are sort of creeping in that direction.

General VOTEL. Congressman, I think what I would tell you is that we have not taken our eye off of what our principal mission is, which is advise and assist and enable—enable our partners. And, so, I think that is what you continue to see with all of these deployments right here.

We are not—we have—one of our key principles here with our folks forward is to help our partners fight but not fight for them. And so, as we continue to bring these additional capabilities in, these are things that we emphasize. So they do fit into our continuing mission of advise, assist, and enable our partners.

Mr. COURTNEY. Thank you.

Again, I mean, there is a larger question here about the fact that I think the authorization of use of force is long overdue for a revisit, but that is our problem, not on your side.

During the time you have been at Central Command, the carrier gap phenomenon has been occurring, again, from, I think, 2007 to 2015, we had continuous presence of carriers and air strikes against ISIS. I mean, how are you coping with that?

General VOTEL. Thank you for bringing it up. I think this is another example of some potentially readiness concerns here.

So the way that we do that is, what we have done is we have worked with—through our air and maritime commanders in theater. So we have, on occasion, brought in additional air force organizations to help fill in the gap in those particular cases. We just completed that with a squadron from the United States that came in and did an exceptional job for us for about 90 days. And we also look to our allies, our partners, to do this. The U.K. [United Kingdom], the French, have surged some of their ships down in this particular area to help make up for this gap as well.

So this is a constant management process for us. We expect to do this now. It has been vital to our operating here. We are always looking for ways we can kind of balance out what our requirements are with the whole joint force, whole joint and combined force that is available to us.

Mr. COURTNEY. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Dr. Wenstrup.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, General, for being with us today. We appreciate it very much.

You know, we perceive that we are in the process of increasing our—and/or our allies' capacity and capabilities in the fight against ISIS right now.

I am curious, what is the conduit for this committee to get some knowledge on number of personnel needed? And I don't need exact number, and I don't like when we have caps, because we end up using contractors instead of our troops, sometimes cost more. But just trying to get some understanding of what you need as far as personnel and what we need to execute the mission so that we can somewhat justify the expenditures that may be involved with that.

General VOTEL. Well, Congressman, I think we have a closed session right after this, and I would be happy to talk with you in great detail about the advice that I provide and what we think we—what we need and what we have talked about with our leadership.

Dr. WENSTRUP. I appreciate that.

Another question is General Scaparrotti the other day mentioned something about Russia's influence in Afghanistan increasing. What is your understanding of their influence, and how does it change your efforts?

General VOTEL. I—it hasn't significantly altered our approach here at this particular point, but I think what they are attempting to do is they are attempting to be an influential third party here in Afghanistan. I think they are reaching out to the Taliban, and they have made the decision under their own determination that the Government of Afghanistan and the coalition that supports them is unable to solve the concern about ISIS, and I think they are much more concerned about ISIS and the potential that has to move into the Central Asian states, and potentially have an impact on them. And so, they have created a narrative that we really have to partner more with the Taliban to address this particular threat.

And they are trying to leverage that into a bigger role in terms of, I think, trying to pursue peace agreements and other things with the Taliban.

Frankly, I don't consider it to be particularly helpful at this particular point to what we have been doing and the process that we have been using.

Dr. WENSTRUP. So does that change your behavior in any way with their presence?

General VOTEL. I don't think it has changed our behavior. We have been working with our Afghan partners. We have been extraordinarily focused on the Islamic State as it has emerged in Afghanistan. It has, I believe, had a significant amount of success against them. We have reduced them from about 15 districts that they are operating in to about 2. We are targeting a lot of their leaders right now. We have persistent pressure on them all the time. So it has not—it has not impacted our approach.

Dr. WENSTRUP. Okay. Thank you, General. I appreciate it. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Ms. Tsongas.

Ms. TSONGAS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And it is good to have you with us today, General.

I appreciate very much you taking the time here. I want to thank you for your service to our Nation, as well as the remarkable women and men who are serving in some of the most contested parts in the world. We are forever grateful.

And I appreciated listening to your opening statement as well as reading your written remarks, which I think illustrate so clearly the threat posed by ISIL [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant], Al Qaeda, and other affiliated groups in the region, and certainly make clear that there are no easy answers given the seriousness and complexity of the challenge to reverse ISIS' gain.

But I am also concerned about the steady buildup of U.S. forces in the region, most especially in Syria, absent a robust debate in Congress on an authorization for the use of military force, something Secretary Mattis called for last week before the Senate Armed Services Committee, and I was glad to see that.

I am concerned that additive deployment may lead to an expansive, open-ended commitment. I think you have referenced an evolving campaign, that could have long-term consequences raising substantial and unpredictable risks that haven't been fully considered or endorsed by Congress as a whole.

I am also mindful of the human toll in the countries where we are waging the fight against ISIL and how mounting civilian casualties, tragic in and of themselves, as you yourself said, can ultimately work against our long-term interest in setting the conditions for stability.

And I appreciate your redressing—addressing it in your open remarks, but I also appreciate the important work that international groups are playing in monitoring civilian casualties.

As reported in The Washington Post yesterday, quote, "According to Airwars," a group that you are familiar with, which is a British monitoring group, "the frequency of civilian deaths alleged to be linked to U.S. strikes in Iraq and Syria has now outpaced those linked to Russia. The scrutiny has been compounded by a string of high-profile reported U.S. attacks in both countries, including assaults on a mosque, a school, and, most recently, a building apparently used as a shelter in the Iraqi city of Mosul" that is currently being investigated appropriately so.

These reports come alongside indications that the administration is considering relaxing the rules of engagement put in place by the Obama administration, which made a concerted effort at avoiding civilian deaths, and you have said today that there has not been such a change.

And I have read that you have said that the coalition will, quote, "take extraordinary measures to avoid harming civilians," unquote.

So can you tell us how you balanced a pursuit, a very important military objective, with those extraordinary measures? And, in particular, when fighting an enemy that intentionally places civilians in harm's way, we all know that, how much risk should the U.S. and its civilian coalition partners accept in limiting air or artillery strikes where it may be difficult to confirm civilian presence, especially in Mosul, where civilians have been directed to shelter in place? So there are so many still there. It seems to be an extraordinary challenge, and I am curious as to how you are thinking this through in order to minimize civilian casualties.

General VOTEL. Thank you, Congresswoman, for your question there.

First off, you know, we have provided, I think, very clear and concise guidance to our commanders in the field. I think the principal way that we are addressing this is by entrusting and enabling our very well experienced and trained leaders on the ground. They are the best guard against this. We have seen that in the past. We will see it in the future here. Their judgment, their experience is the best thing to ensure with this.

As we go through this, you know, and with our on-scene commanders that are very, very close to this, I think the key thing that we do emphasize to them is we go to war with our values, we hold ourselves to a higher accountability, a higher standard with respect to this, and, of course, we always operate in accordance with the law of armed conflict and we do everything that we can to prevent this.

And what we try to do is we try to work that through our leadership and ensure they understand the obligation that we all expect, and that as they carry out these obligations in what are extraordinary, complex, and difficult situations, that they are making the best judgments, the best decisions that they can based on the information that they have. And I will tell you that in many, many, many cases, they are making the right calls. I have visited—I visit Iraq every month and I talk to our advise and assist teams and I hear about operations that we support, but I will tell you at the same pace, I hear about operations where we choose not to strike, where we choose not to do something because it didn't look right, we couldn't confirm what was going on, we didn't have a good situational awareness.

So I think, from my perspective, we are going to trust our processes and we are going to trust our people and we are going to continue to put emphasis on that throughout the process.

Ms. TSONGAS. Trust but verify your processes.

General VOTEL. Right.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Russell.

Mr. RUSSELL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you. It is good to see you again.

And I guess my own take on it is that we are not seeing a never-ending increase; we are recovering from a massive decrease in disengagement in the region. It has not been that many years ago, six, and because of that decrease, we now see Iraq in the throes of a civil war, Syria in the throes of a civil war, Yemen in the throes of a civil war, the complete area destabilized, making a whole number of things even harder to deal with, plus distancing to our allies in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, not to mention other coalition partners on a whole number of other affairs. And so I tend to disagree with some of my colleagues here in that view.

With regard to collateral damage, no one cares more about civilian casualties than the United States military, no one. No one takes more pain or more effort to prevent the needless loss of life. No one has the systems in place to prevent the things that we do in our targeting systems and everything else. And we know about our own errors, because it is us who expose them, who discover them, and who try to refine them.

So before we get in a bashing of those that are in uniform and needless loss of civilian casualties or somehow suggesting that we are causing more civilian deaths than the Russians, I challenge that, I defy that, I reject that, I don't think that it reflects anything to our practices as a nation or certainly our men and women in uniform.

General Votel, you spoke of the need to use the other instruments of national power. There are a number of areas that we obviously see a need to do that, you have spoken to a lot of them, but I guess one of the most troubling things that gets the least amount of attention is Yemen. And as we would see the Gulf of Aden now slip into a possible future Hormuz Strait, there is serious implication with that. We have got 60 percent of the Yemen population now that is malnourished. We have got opportunities to do a lot of good things with President Hadi and other efforts.

The foreign military sales being crucial, the foreign engagement being crucial, if you could design it where you engage the other instruments of national power to support the coalition efforts as well as the CENTCOM efforts, what would it look like? What would you want that other engagement to be other than just the military?

General VOTEL. Thanks, Congressman. I think that, you know, certainly one of the things that has to be addressed, as you kind of highlighted here, is we have to resolve the civil conflict that is taking place there, right. That creates an environment that makes it extraordinarily difficult for us to be—has made it difficult for us to be persistent in our efforts against Al Qaeda. It has caused us to break relationships we had with the Yemeni forces we developed over a course of years, and it has given rise to the threat that we have already talked about this morning in the Bab-el-Mandeb in the Red Sea, an area where we have 60 to 70 ships go through every day, not just U.S., but international ships go through there. So I think that is important.

So I think the thing that we have to continue to press on, is we have to press in our diplomatic efforts to resolve that conflict as quickly as we can. I think that will help, I think, set the table. There are perhaps some things that we can assist with on the military side to bring that forward without becoming enmeshed into a civil conflict here. We should consider those things.

I will tell you, I have talked with our ambassador there on a regular basis. He is excellent. He is extraordinarily engaged here. And I just think we have to continue to press in this particular area. And this is an area where we will need the Department of State and others to help us move through.

Mr. RUSSELL. Do you still see a base of support? A lot of relationship has been developed for decades, and much is lost if we see the things tip toward the Houthi rebels and, as you had mentioned, Al Qaeda gaining leverage with engagement with the population and assisting in feeding them and other things. Could you speak to some of that?

General VOTEL. I do. And I would highlight to you that we have some very good partners in the area, certainly Saudi Arabia on the edges here, and the United Arab Emirates [UAE] have been extraordinary partners for us and they have good relationships here.

So I do see the ability to reestablish some of these partnerships again.

Mr. RUSSELL. Thank you. And thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Ms. Rosen.

Ms. ROSEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you, General Votel, for your very great insights today.

I want to switch back to Iran for a moment. You know, you said you believe that Iran is one of the greatest threats to the U.S. today. So if that is true and your assessment is true that their overall objective is to be the most powerful in the region, then to pursue this end, do you believe Iran has increased destabilizing activities since the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action], and if they have, how should we react to these alleged activities without risking escalation and other conflicts in the region?

General VOTEL. Congresswoman, I do believe they have. And I believe that Iran is operating in what I call a gray zone, and it is an area between normal competition between states and just short of open conflict, and they are exploiting this area in a variety of different ways. They do it through raising surrogate forces, they do it through lethal aid facilitation, they do it through their own cyber activities, and they do it through their influence operations. And I think they are clearly focused in this particular area, and I think they have—their efforts have increased in this particular area.

I think the things that we need to do is—I think there are three broad things, and I have had an opportunity to talk to some of our regional partners about it. I think we need to look at opportunities where we can disrupt through military means or other means their activities, particularly their facilitation aspects here. I think we need to look at opportunities where we can expose and hold them accountable for the things that they are doing. That has to be done. They have to account for their destabilize—the destabilizing role that they are playing in the region right now. And, finally, I think we do have to address their revolutionary ideology, and what has to be addressed. And certainly we play a role in that, but others in the region do as well. Iran has a role in the region. There is no doubt about that.

And I want to be clear that we think differently about the people of Iran than we think about the leadership of Iran, the revolutionary council that runs Iran. In my mind, those are two very distinct things. And our concern is not with the people of Iran, but it is with their revolutionary government.

Ms. ROSEN. Thank you.

And I would just like to switch a little bit to the greater geopolitical tensions in the region. Is terrorism really the most pressing threats emanating from the Middle East, and what is our best way to exert our influence, if that is true, against those threats?

General VOTEL. Well, Congresswoman, I think terrorism is what is being manifested out of what are really deep underlying issues that pervade this region. There are some serious sectarian issues across the region that have to be addressed. There are disenfranchised populations, there is economic disparity between governments and the people that they lead. And so these deep underlying issues in many cases still remain across the region. Those have to be addressed.

And I think the way that we see this being manifested is in violent extremism, that we see the rise of ISIS. When you go back and look at why that came up, the desire for young men and in some cases young women to join organizations like Al Qaeda or ISIS, they are looking for a job, they are looking for money, they are looking for relationships, they are looking for economic opportunity that may not exist in their local communities.

So there are deep underlying issues that have to be addressed in this region that give rise to these threats that we are focused on. So I don't want to give the impression that beating ISIS will—it will remove a threat, but it won't solve many of the underlying challenges in this particular region. That will take more work.

Ms. ROSEN. So considering that we are going to be creating a bill fairly soon, where do we best put our resources to fight this? What do you need?

General VOTEL. Well, I think this—Congresswoman, I think we have identified, from a military standpoint, I need to build and sustain the operations that we have ongoing in places like Iraq and Syria, and really across the region. I need to ensure that the services, that Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and SOCOM, that provide me capabilities, have the resources they need to develop the capabilities and the resiliency within their formations to continue to provide me things.

So, you know, those are the key things that I am thinking about right now in terms of the resources that I need moving forward.

Ms. ROSEN. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Ms. McSally.

Ms. MCSALLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, General Votel. Do you know how many civilians have been killed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria?

General VOTEL. Congresswoman, I do not know that number.

Ms. MCSALLY. I mean, there are media reports. I would love to hear back from you on what the number is, but it is in the tens of thousands. Is that probably fair?

General VOTEL. I think that is fair.

Ms. MCSALLY. Thank you. And having spent a lot of time in the targeting process both shooting 30-millimeter out of an A-10 all the way up to, you know, working at the COCOM [combatant command] level, I just want to agree with my colleagues here and with your statements that we go through great pains in our targeting cycle to make sure that we are compliant with the laws of armed conflict and that we are avoiding civilian casualties.

More for my colleagues, I want to make sure you understand what the laws of armed conflict [LOAC] are. That if we have a legitimate target, we do everything we can to minimize civilian casualties, but we are not allowed to target civilians. We never target civilians.

Is ISIS targeting civilians?

General VOTEL. I believe they are.

Ms. MCSALLY. Absolutely. Is it a violation of the law of armed conflict to have human shields?

General VOTEL. Yes, it is.

Ms. MCSALLY. So ISIS is violating the laws of armed conflict.

Again for my colleagues, the standard for the LOAC is that we make feasible precautions towards limiting civilian casualties while we are hitting legitimate military targets. The last administration went above and beyond this, far higher than I have ever seen before in my 26 years in the military, using near certainty that no civilians will be killed.

I agree with some retired generals, General Deptula, and most recently, General Dunlap published something a few days ago on this, that if we are not hitting legitimate military targets and allowing these terrorists to continue to live, then we are actually allowing them to continue to kill civilians. I mean, this actually enables them to continue their terrorist activities, to include exporting it to other places.

So this is what General Dunlap calls a moral hazard of inaction, of us doing nothing on legitimate targets because of this near certainty standard, from my view, actually allows the terrorists free rein to continue to kill civilians, tens of thousands.

And also, I now believe that what we are seeing in the change here is that ISIS knows that they can use human shields to avoid being hit. It is their air defense system. Additionally, it is my view that as we move closer into the urban conflict into Mosul and they are using human shields, civilian casualties are going to go up. This is a horrible element of war, that ISIS started this war.

So do you agree that some of the high level of, I think, ridiculous standard that we had previously has now created this behavior by ISIS, that they now realize if they take human shields, they are going to avoid being struck, and that actually this is adding to the problem?

General VOTEL. Congresswoman, I do believe they understand our sensitivity to civilian casualties and they are exploiting that, and I do agree that as we move into these urban environments, it is going to become more and more difficult to apply extraordinarily high standards for the things that we are doing, although we will try.

Ms. MCSALLY. Great. Thank you.

Again, I look forward to continuing to talk with you in the classified realm, but, look, this whole line of thinking that somehow because we are engaging the enemy and, unfortunately, again, the investigation is ongoing on this latest attack, somehow it is our fault that as we are engaging the enemy, that perhaps civilians are being killed either by mistake or because the enemy is using a tactic that actually has them become part of the target. That is on them, not on us.

And if we then move back further and allow more terrorists to live to fight another day because of this narrative, then we are going to actually open up more civilians to be killed by these terrorists. Is that a fair line of thinking?

General VOTEL. I share your concern, Congresswoman.

Ms. MCSALLY. Great. Thank you.

I also want to ask, and maybe this is more for the classified setting, when we are identifying combatants and noncombatants, this used to be a pet peeve of mine, sometimes I would be in VTCs [video teleconferences] where we were getting ready to schwack some bad guys in Somalia, and I would hear the terminology of whether

there is women and children versus men. There are combatants and noncombatants. And what we saw in Yemen is we had a bunch of women that were actually shooting at our troops. That has been reported in the media.

So can you confirm with me that we are still using the terms in our analysis of combatants and noncombatants, and we are not making assumptions that just because you are a woman, you are not a combatant? That is not the law of armed conflict.

General VOTEL. We do think of it as that and look at it that way.

Ms. MCSALLY. Okay. Great. Thank you. Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Langevin.

Mr. LANGEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General Votel, welcome back before the committee. I want to thank you for your testimony, but most especially for your service and the men and women who serve under you. We are grateful for all you do to defend the Nation.

As our cyber capabilities are maturing, particularly with U.S. Cyber Command now being stood up and the training and deploying of our cyber mission teams, can you please discuss with us your views on the impact of our cyber operations against ISIL, how effective they have been and what more can be done to enhance them?

General VOTEL. Thank you, Congressman.

And I look forward to an opportunity to talk about this in a classified setting as well, but what I can tell you here is that I think, with the great support of Admiral Rogers and the team at Cyber Command [CYBERCOM], we have forged a very close relationship between CENTCOM, Cyber Command and their subordinate elements, and I would throw SOCOM in there as well, that has allowed us to use this capability to have effects against this particular enemy. And I do think we are starting from an area where we didn't have much experience in this. We are actually creating effects on the ground.

I would share with you that this is an extraordinarily, extraordinarily savvy enemy, and so they have capabilities in this area, and we will need to continue to evolve in this. I would also add that some of our partners, some of our coalition partners have unique capabilities in this area, and they have been well integrated into this as well. So I do think we are beginning to have good effects with this, but there certainly is more that we need to do.

Mr. LANGEVIN. Good. And I look forward to following up and getting some more details when we get into the classified session.

Let me ask you this. In your opinion, is the current joint task force areas command and control construct effective, efficient, synchronized, and deconflicted with other operations taking place in the CENTCOM area of responsibility? And, also, how would you characterize support and integration with teams from U.S. CYBERCOM?

General VOTEL. I think they are excellent in both cases. In fact, when we recently hosted a congressional delegation down at CENTCOM to talk about things we are doing, we actually invited JTF [joint task force] areas to come in and be part of that because we consider them to be that close of a team member.

So I think the integration has been exceptional with JTF areas, and the leadership there at Cyber Command and in that particular organization have been extraordinarily well engaged with us.

Mr. LANGEVIN. Thank you.

Another topic. We obviously rely heavily on special operations forces [SOF] for operations around the globe. The authorities and capabilities of SOCOM allow us, obviously, to keep the footprint small and carry out unique activities. However, that utility may have led to an overreliance on SOF.

As the former SOCOM commander and current CENTCOM commander, what are your concerns in this regard? And what actions can we take to decrease the high demand for SOF around the globe, such as increasing conventional forces training capability?

General VOTEL. Well, as the former SOCOM commander, obviously, you know, we wanted to do everything we could to support the other combatant commanders here. And, you know, General Thomas and I have, I think, a very strong relationship, we talk frequently, and I think we have been able to figure out ways that we can manage the force moving forward here. So I do support the—you know, obviously the very continued support of them.

I will tell you, one of the things that does concern me a little bit about SOCOM and some of the very unique capabilities that they have is that many of them are heavily leveraged in OCO [Overseas Contingency Operations budget line]. Some of the very unique capabilities, and, again, we can talk about this in a classified session, are very heavily leveraged in OCO, and that concerns me about the sustainability.

It concerned me as the SOCOM commander and now concerns me as the CENTCOM commander, who are very dependent on that. I am very concerned about that. I think we need to stabilize that and I think we need to make the commitment to give SOCOM the things they need to serve the Nation.

Beyond that, Congressman, I would tell you one of the things I am most proud of being the SOCOM commander—or being the CENTCOM commander is the very close relationship between our SOF forces and our conventional forces. It is almost indistinguishable how they are able to operate, and that comes for a variety of reasons; certainly our experience over the last 15 or 16 years working together and the fact that a lot of our leaders know each other, not just professionally.

But personally, but I want to assure the committee and I want to assure the American people that we are fighting the enemy together, we are not fighting each other here, and that was not always the case in the military, but I am very pleased with how our conventional and SOF forces are working very, very closely together, with our interagency partners as well.

Mr. LANGEVIN. Very good, General. Well, as a former SOCOM commander, I have great confidence that you are going to balance that force just right and you are in a unique position. So thank you for you are doing, and I look forward to the classified session.

I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Bacon.

Mr. BACON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And I want to thank General Votel for your leadership, and your team. So many challenging problems in your AOR [area of responsibility], and it is not just one, two, three, it is just hard. So I know you and your team work very hard at that, and we appreciate it.

I associate with the comments too of some of our colleagues here that say that we need to get a congressional authorization for force. I think we do. I think what we did in 2001 and 2003 are applicable and I feel like we have got to work towards that in Congress.

And I also want to say that I agree with your comments on Iran. I think you are right on target. My fourth deployment there, I think, when I was in there 2007 and 2008, I believe roughly half of our service men and women were killed due to actions from Iran with the explosive—or the EFPs [explosively formed penetrators] and the very support they were giving to the Shia militias, and I dare say it would probably be about a thousand of our service men and women over time were killed due to the Iranian actions.

My question to you today is, we can do kinetic operations indefinitely with ISIS or Al Qaeda, but I don't think in the end that wins the fight. How do you see a grand strategy, or how do you see our grand strategy to defeat these enemies? It has got to be—we have got to go after their ideology, their financing, their recruiting. Do you think we have the right strategy?

General VOTEL. I do, Congressman. I think we do have the outline of a good strategy to address the things that you are highlighting here. As you are aware, one of the first things that the new administration did was direct the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State to come up with a plan to address and defeat ISIS more completely. And I think the acknowledgement that that is both the Department of Defense, Department of State, and many others in the government here, I think, is an acknowledgement that we need—that we do need to do that. We certainly need to go after their finances, we need to go after where they are physically, we need to go after the conditions that give rise to these particular organizations.

But I would also add that we need to go after this ideology. And there are things that we can do, but there are certainly things that our partners in the region can do. There are just some things that as a western country, as the United States, will not resonate as fully as it will from people in the region with respect to that.

So the ideology, in my view, is very, very important. And then getting after the underlying issues that we talked about here, I think, is ultimately what we really have to focus on.

Mr. BACON. One follow-on. In 2007 and 2008, we had great success largely because the Sunni tribes came over and started helping us against the fight—against Al Qaeda. I think on a grander level, we need to have that Sunni help, like you are alluding to, but our agreement with Iran, I believe, undermined the trust of many of the Sunni countries, I have heard that from some of our Sunni friends, because I think they fear Iran just as much as they do ISIS in many cases.

Have you seen that same trend when you have talked to our Sunni friends? Is there concerns with what we did the past 2 years, 3 years with Iran, and have you seen that undermine that ability to work with our Sunni friends?

General VOTEL. Truthfully, Congressman, I have. I have had Sunni leaders and other Arab leaders tell me that same thing. And so I know there certainly is a perception out there about that, and as you know, oftentimes perception is truth in many quarters here.

So that is why I think one of the key things that we have continued to emphasize with our people and with our leadership is the importance of building and rebuilding trust with our partners in the region. These are difficult situations here. And they are not all perfect, but we have to—I think it is better to be engaged with them and to be their confirmed partner.

And, frankly, the impression I get when I talk to all of our partners in the region is they do prefer the United States. They want to have a relationship with us. And so I think we ought to look at ways that we can take advantage of that moving forward.

Mr. BACON. Thank you very much. And, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Lamborn.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And, General, thank you for the job that you are doing. And I am so glad you are there now, especially given your past track record.

When it comes to Yemen, I am really glad that we are taking steps now to support our allies in the area and our friends in the area. When I have talked to people from the Emirates, for instance, their concern isn't ISIS, I mean, that is a concern, but they are concerned about Yemen and the Iranian proxy war that is going on there.

How do you evaluate what is going on in Yemen? I know we had a tragic loss of life with the recent raid, and that was regrettable, but I think it is very important that we are supporting Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, and I think it is overdue that we are doing that. What are your perspectives on Yemen?

General VOTEL. Well, Congressman, you know, as I mentioned a little bit earlier, I mean, I think there are some vital U.S. interests that are at stake here. Certainly we don't want Yemen to be used as a platform for attacks in our homeland or against our allies or partners around the globe or in the region, and so we have to—we have to be focused on that.

I am extraordinarily concerned about another contested maritime chokepoint in the region. And so that directly impacts our national interests, the freedom of navigation, freedom of commerce, and supports our global economic objectives here, and so I think we have to be very, very concerned about that. So I do think there are some vital aspects of that. All of that is against the backdrop of this civil war that you talked about here.

And, you know, certainly we all understand the implications of becoming involved in those types of activities. And if we don't choose to do it militarily, then we have to look at ways that we can try to move forward and try to resolve that situation. I do believe that as long as that continues to boil, that it will impact the ability for us to really focus on other principal interests that we have in that part of the world.

Mr. LAMBORN. Well, and obviously everyone wants peace in the area and the fighting to stop, but until that happens, I think we

have to take the side of our friends and allies, and they are so concerned that Iran is using the Houthi rebels as a proxy to destabilize and ultimately come after them. That is their perspective.

And while I don't think we need to consider any kind of boots on the ground or anything like that, I think as much as we can do with ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] and things like that to support our friends and allies is critical. If you want to better address this in the closed section of the hearing, tell me that, but is there more that we can be doing?

General VOTEL. Yeah, there is. And I think this would be a really good topic in a closed session, Congressman.

Mr. LAMBORN. Okay. Thank you. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Gallagher.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, General, for being here.

A quick follow-up on Yemen. To what extent has the ongoing fighting there enhanced or undermined AQAP's [Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's] power and reach? And do you envision a long-term presence for the Emirates and the Saudis in Yemen, and if so, do their long-term objectives in Yemen align with our own?

General VOTEL. Well, I think we had—you know, before the civil war started, it was my estimate that we had a very good focus on Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. The civil war changed our posture there. And in the—underneath the ongoing civil war right there, I do believe Al Qaeda had an opportunity to prosper and to become stronger and to be resilient and continue to pursue their objectives.

So what you have seen us do here most recently is renew our focus on that. And we are doing that with a variety of our partners in the region, the UAE and Saudi Arabia certainly among the principal partners that we are working with with respect to that.

With respect to their long-term presence, that is probably a better question for them. I don't know. I don't have any insight into what their strategic calculations might be there, but, you know, I think, as we see in most of these areas, a long-term commitment is usually necessary to really change conditions.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Sure. In Syria, Russia has seemingly doubled down on a long-term commitment going back to the 1950s with its client state there. It seems to me that Russia and Iran are in a tactical alliance in Syria, they sort of share the same organs, Russia provides air power, the Iranians, particularly through Hezbollah, provide a lot of the ground forces. Do you see evidence of a broader regional alliance between Russia and Iran, and if so, what are its manifestations?

General VOTEL. Well, I think there perhaps could be. I am not sure I see specific indications of that in other areas, but certainly they are cooperating together. I think the implications of this are things that we have seen. We have seen Russian jets operating out of Iranian bases. And certainly their cooperation together to prop up the regime and give them new life here is certainly an implication of that relationship right there.

So I am very, very—I am concerned about that. I think we should be concerned about it. I don't know that we have great in-

sight into what their—what the Russian long-term perspective is on that relationship.

Mr. GALLAGHER. I too am concerned. I think the rise of the Russian-Iranian axis has been the biggest development in the region the last couple of years related to the Iran deal.

One strange bit of continuity in the region has been a return in Egypt to some form of authoritarianism. Can you comment—and it has caused a great debate within foreign policy circles within the left and the right.

Can you comment on whether you are getting the cooperation you need from a military perspective from the Sisi government in Egypt?

General VOTEL. I think Egypt is an extraordinarily important partner to us. We kind of consider them to be the gateway into the region. They have had historical long-term relationships there. They are an extraordinarily important country to them. They have been very helpful in the Sinai, helping address threats to the multinational force there. They were particularly responsive to our request for assistance there. And they have been very, very good—very, very good partners there. And, you know, while we have had perhaps some differences politically with them, one of the things we have been able to maintain, I think, is a good military-to-military contact.

And I think—and from a CENTCOM commander standpoint, I look forward to continuing to build on that as we move forward. I think it is a vital relationship for us.

Mr. GALLAGHER. So would it be fair to say, General, that from your perspective, the FMF program and the broader relationship we have with Egypt is achieving its objectives?

General VOTEL. Well, I don't know, because right now we do see some instances where countries like Egypt and others are reaching out and buying their military hardware from other countries.

So, again, I think this kind of goes back to the discussion we had earlier about FMF. I think our FMS program accomplishes a lot of purposes out there. One of the principal ones, from my perspective as the CENTCOM commander, is building capability with our partners, especially capability that can be integrated with our capabilities so that we can operate together.

When we choose not to allow them to buy our systems or to buy—they will look other places for this. This doesn't necessarily help them, because they get lesser systems, they don't get the sustainment, they don't always get the training with that, they are stuck with stuff that they can't fully use, and it is not integrated with us.

And so I think FMF and FMS are extraordinarily important programs that fit into our security equation across the region.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Thank you, General. I am out of time, but—and I know it is something that adds to your AOR, but maybe afterwards, we could talk about to what extent our involvement with the YPG [Kurdish People's Defense Unit] in Syria has affected our relationship with Turkey and sort of, more broadly, how our relationship with Turkey affects your efforts.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield.

The CHAIRMAN. General, I will just add two points on the FMF discussion.

Number one, all our allies—I would say virtually all, if not all, our allies are very frustrated with the process.

So you talked about decisions, absolutely, that is one thing, but then the process being so sluggish, even if we ultimately decide that it is in our interest to sell or provide equipment, has even—even then it is a subject of frustration.

So our Oversight and Investigation Subcommittee is looking into this issue from our standpoint. I am hopeful that a number of members, who are also on the Foreign Affairs Committee, will look at it from the State Department standpoint, because I think one of your early points was reestablishing trust, and this is an important thing to reestablish trust.

Mr. Wilson.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And, General Votel, it is a great honor to be with you. Every time I am with you, it is just so reassuring. And I am also so grateful for the American people to hear your service. I appreciate it as a Member of Congress, and also I appreciate it as a fellow veteran, but I particularly appreciate your service as a military dad. I always like to recognize your service has meant so much to our family.

My oldest son served for a year, field artillery, in Iraq; my second son was a Navy doctor serving with the Rangers and the SEALs in Iraq; my third son, a signal officer, served in Egypt; and I am grateful that our youngest son was an engineer in Afghanistan. And so we certainly cover the CENTCOM area of jurisdiction, and at all times we appreciate your leadership. And I give credit to my wife for training these guys. But thank you.

As the Iraqi Security Forces continue to make progress toward liberating Mosul, what is the latest on the operation and what have been the keys to the Iraqi army's success?

General VOTEL. Thank you, Congressman. And let me just say on behalf of CENTCOM, we appreciate all the contributions of Team Wilson there and we are very, very grateful for it.

Turning to Mosul, the Iraqi Security Forces are making, I think, good progress. This has been an extraordinarily challenging fight. It took them about 100 days to secure the eastern side of the city. They did that at a cost of 490 killed and just about over 3,000 wounded. So it is an extraordinary price that they paid for that. They very quickly were able to get themselves focused on the western part of the city. And they are now engaged in what we are seeing as a very, very difficult fight there.

Some of their elements are engaged in what is known as the old city here, a very dense urban area, much, much more complex and much more favors the defender than it does the attacker, and so they have got their hands full as they are doing this.

I would just note that the Iraqi Security Forces just so far in about 37 days have sustained about 284 killed and a little over 1,600 wounded in the western part of the city.

The keys to success here have been, I think, the very close relationship they had with both U.S. and coalition advise and assist teams, and the ability for the Iraqi Security Forces to come to-

gether. As you know, institutionally they have got some challenges here. They have got federal police that answer to the ministry of interior, they have got Iraqi army that answers to the ministry of defense, and they have got counterterrorism forces that answer to the counterterrorism directorate, and so these are all separate ministries.

But what they have been able to do successfully is get a common commander in place among all of those different pillars of security here, who really performs a very good integrating fashion, and so they are operating much better in conjunction and in synchronization with each other, and I think that has really paid off in what has been a very, very difficult, and will continue to be a very difficult fight in the weeks and perhaps months ahead.

Mr. WILSON. Well, it is so important. And the American people need to know the city is over a million persons, it is the second largest city in the country of Iraq, and how important it is that it be liberated, and the subjugation and oppression that the people must have faced in the last year, 2 years.

And it was so encouraging for all of us last week on the Foreign Affairs Committee to have the opportunity to be with Prime Minister Abadi. I had met him in Baghdad last month, and it is just so impressive. And also the minister of defense, Hiyali, again, it is just—that country, I think, has very positive leadership for you to work with.

Additionally, you testified about Russia's entry into the Syrian conflict and that it has negatively impacted the balance of power. What is the latest on Russia's intrusion into Syria?

General VOTEL. Well, as you know, they have been focused on—I think, mostly focused on helping the regime accomplish some of their objectives in the western part of the country, and they, I think, have been successful at that.

I think Russia has achieved probably many of the objectives that they set out to pursue as they got in there. They have got a government that is favorable to them, access to ports, access to airfields, influence in the region, so I think they have accomplished that.

They have, I think, begun to—they are continuing to support regime forces now in this case as they fight ISIS. So to the extent that they are doing that, that is, I would admit, helpful to what we are doing.

I would share with you, Congressman, that we do share a very congested airspace with the Russians. We have a deconfliction mechanism in place. It is generally a very professional interchange. We talk with them very frequently to coordinate—not to coordinate, but to deconflict our operations in what is a very compressed airspace over northern Syria. That generally goes pretty well.

We are looking to make that a little bit more robust to ensure that we continue our freedom of action here as we continue to pursue the campaign.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you very much.

The CHAIRMAN. General, thank you.

As you can tell, members are interested in some further discussions in a classified session, which will start in just a few moments upstairs, but for now, this hearing stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:41 a.m., the committee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

MARCH 29, 2017

PREPARED STATEMENTS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

MARCH 29, 2017

Ranking Member Smith Opening Remarks
Full Committee Hearing
Military Assessment of Security Challenges
in the Greater Middle East

March 29, 2017

I thank the Chairman for holding this important hearing, and I thank General Votel for appearing today. I value the General's professional military insights, as they pertain to a complex and wide-ranging array of issues, and I very much appreciate his commitment to keeping the Congress well informed of the constantly evolving dynamics within U.S. Central Command's area of responsibility.

Recent reports of military progress in the counter-ISIS campaign are encouraging. ISIS is on the defensive, as Iraqi Security Forces push to liberate Mosul and as the Syrian Democratic Forces simultaneously pressure Raqqa. It appears that the persistent, cooperative methodology implemented by Operation Inherent Resolve is succeeding, largely due to the efforts of our partners in the region. Clearly, much still needs to be accomplished militarily in the fight against ISIS, but I wish to emphasize that military achievements alone will not guaranty an acceptable end state. The United States must work within the international community and employ a whole-of-government approach to foster and sustain political, economic, and social conditions that are conducive to long-term stability. Residual discontent will once again metastasize into violent extremism. Moreover, as the military campaign against ISIS continues to unfold, we must make every effort to minimize the risk of civilian casualties and to address the serious humanitarian situation resultant of years of conflict. As we strive to decisively win the military fight against ISIS, we must be just as careful, just as prepared, and just as determined to secure a prosperous and durable peace.

We have long endeavored to reach a similar end state in Afghanistan. For over fifteen years, the United States has focused on eliminating Al Qaeda and other dangerous international terrorist groups and on preventing Afghanistan from being used as a safe haven for terrorist activities. We have also worked diligently with our allies and partners to train, advise, and assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (the ANDSF). Without a doubt, the ANDSF are embroiled in a difficult struggle to stabilize Afghanistan. However, the ANDSF have responded to setbacks and challenges and their capabilities continue to improve. Despite significant progress, the ANDSF still needs help in building indigenous leadership and institutional capacities. We also need to continue to assist the ANDSF in establishing and maintaining a capable air force and in developing other key enablers. In short, the Afghans are not yet ready to secure their own country without our assistance and that of our coalition partners. We should continue

to evaluate, and to adapt as needed to, evolving conditions, as we empower the ANDSF to secure Afghanistan. In doing so, we need to stay mindful of the fragile security situation in Pakistan, a nuclear-armed state that is also vulnerable to extremist threats. We need to ensure that our cooperative counterterrorism efforts with Pakistan yield actual, enduring results that will bolster sustainable stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Although our military commitments in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan consume a lot of attention, we must also be alert to other regional security implications. Core Al Qaeda has not been entirely eliminated, and some Al Qaeda affiliates continue to pose threats to the United States. Iran poses another significant challenge. While The United States and other key members of the international community concluded an agreement with Iran regarding its nuclear program, Iran remains a State Sponsor of Terrorism, and it exerts influence over the Assad regime in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Houthis in Yemen. We must deter Iran from precipitating conflicts and dissuade it from engaging in malign activities. Russia too is becoming more regionally involved. The Russian military is operating in Syria, and Russia may be establishing ties to the Afghan Taliban. These regional considerations should factor in broader U.S. policy on Russia.

Other regional threats also abound. Illicit trafficking, cyber threats, and threats to freedom of navigation are just a few examples taken from a diverse spectrum.

It is, therefore, critical that we receive a comprehensive military assessment from the combatant commander. A thorough understanding of our posture in the Middle East 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 receiving the General'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
15 MARCH 2017

Introduction. The outstanding men and women who make up the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) Team are the very best in the world at what they do. The incredibly dynamic, volatile and tumultuous Central Region presents a complex convergence of compounding multi-faceted security challenges. Such an environment generates near continuous crisis action planning and response. These conditions demand a highly capable, vigilant capability at USCENTCOM Headquarters and our Service Component Headquarters, as well as forward throughout our area of responsibility (AOR). The exceptional individuals on the USCENTCOM Team expertly navigate this challenging environment. In doing so, they effectively protect and promote our Nation's interests and they represent our values wherever they go around the world. They work selflessly each day in support of our mission and the exceptional men and women serving in harm's way around the globe. We could not be more proud of them and proud of their families. They truly are the strength of our USCENTCOM Team.

The Central Region is a **fascinating area of the world**. Spanning over four million square miles it is populated by 550+ million people from more than 20 ethnic groups representing multiple religions and speaking eighteen languages with hundreds of dialects. The region lies at the intersection of three continents and important commercial sea lanes, flight corridors, pipelines, and overland routes run across it supporting regional and global economic networks.

It is also a **highly-complex area**, widely characterized by pervasive instability and conflict. The 20 nations that make up the Central Region have various forms of government, ranging from absolute and constitutional monarchies to theocratic, parliamentary, and presidential republics. The economic and social-political landscape is diverse, volatile at times, and rivalries often

create tensions that affect security and stability. Violent extremist organizations (VEOs), such as the terrorist organizations al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), exploit these conditions to foment unrest, challenge or destabilize governments, and threaten the global economy and U.S. national interests.

The turbulence across the region reflects a number of contributing factors or **“drivers of instability,”** including ethnic and sectarian hostilities between Shia and Sunnis, and Arabs and Persians; economic uncertainty and sustained low oil prices that severely strain energy-based economies across the region, contributing to reduced government services and weakened prospects for economic growth; a disproportionately large youth population facing increasing poverty and unemployment, which may make them susceptible to unrest, radical ideologies, and VEO recruitment; expanding ungoverned or under-governed spaces, exploited by VEOs; civil wars, which are “engines of instability” all by themselves; worsening humanitarian crises, contributing to growing refugee and internally displaced person (IDP) populations; and, competition among outside actors, including Russia and China, seeking to promote their interests and supplant U.S. influence in the region. While we must take the necessary actions to counter immediate threats, such as ISIS in Iraq and Syria, we also need to find ways to address these and other root causes of instability if we hope to achieve lasting positive effects in that part of the world. This cannot be accomplished solely through military means. The military can help to create the necessary conditions; however, there must be concomitant progress in other complementary areas (e.g., reconstruction, humanitarian aid, stabilization, political reconciliation). There are a variety of interagency programs and efforts underway that are

essential to translating military gains into actual achievement of stated goals and objectives. Support for these endeavors is vital to our success.

The current evolving security environment in the Central Region is further complicated by the fact that **most challenges transcend borders**; they are **trans-regional** (cutting across multiple combatant commands (CCMD)), **all-domain** (land, sea, air, space, cyberspace), and **multi-functional** (e.g., conventional, special operations, ballistic missile defense, cyber). Of note, the Middle East remains the global epicenter for terrorism and violent Islamist extremism. According to the Institute for Economics and Peace's 2016 Global Terrorism Index, the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) AOR accounted for 78% of all terrorism incidents worldwide, and the turmoil stretches across CCMD seams into Africa, Europe, South Asia, and beyond.

The security environment is further challenged by the emergence of a **"virtual caliphate"** and increased access and activity in the cyber domain. Ready access to the Internet, social media, and other messaging platforms has enabled a new generation of extremists to spread their radical Islamist views, incite widespread violence, and recruit new followers to their cause. As we have seen with the ongoing campaign to defeat ISIS, diminishment of the physical organization does not equate to the dismantlement of their virtual presence. To the contrary, terrorist organizations' activities in cyberspace enable them to remain relevant despite setbacks on the battlefield, while reaching out to direct, enable, and/or inspire audiences well beyond the region's geographic borders. Countering the "virtual caliphate" will require a concerted 'whole

of government' effort led by the people of the region. We can support our partners' activities, but their voices and influence will be required to achieve enduring positive results.

We also acknowledge, particularly in the current **resource-constrained environment**, the need to find additional means for countering existing and emerging threats and deterring potential adversaries. No other country in the world has a military with a greater ability than the U.S. to achieve kinetic and non-kinetic effects and sustain those effects. Through the application of "hard" and "soft" power capabilities, including kinetic strikes, raids, and information operations, we have been very effective at degrading and disrupting violent extremist networks in the USCENTCOM AOR and elsewhere around the world. It is an important and a necessary competency. However, a solely military response is not sufficient. We must continue to look for ways to further enhance our effectiveness through the application of military and non-military activities. Ultimately, we want to increasingly involve other elements of the U.S. Government and the International Community, recognizing that it is only through a **combination of capabilities** that we will achieve and sustain our strongest deterrence posture.

This is especially true today given the **changing character of warfare**. For much of the past 15+ years our Nation has increasingly operated in the "gray zone" of military confrontation—that range of activities short of conventional conflict; a dangerous space in which miscalculation can easily occur, leading to escalatory conflict and misunderstanding. In the "gray zone," adversaries employ unconventional methods that include cyber warfare, propaganda, and support to proxy elements in an effort to achieve their objectives while minimizing the scope and scale of actual fighting. At the same time, **these unconventional methods increase tensions between**

partners by emphasizing competing priorities that detract from support for our common objectives (e.g., Turks and Syrian Kurds). To be successful in this ambiguous environment, we must find alternate ways to compete against our adversaries in the “gray zone” short of conflict, while collaborating with our partners to achieve our desired end-states.

We must – *and will* – continue to pursue the many **opportunities** that exist today throughout the Central Region, recognizing that by pursuing these opportunities we will achieve improved stability and security in that challenged part of the world. As Sir Winston Churchill wisely stated, “*Difficulties mastered are opportunities won.*” The key to success is ensuring that we remain ready and capable of effectively countering all threats. We need to make sure that we have an accurate understanding of the situation. We must take care to build and cultivate strong **relationships**, here at home and abroad. We need to be **responsive** to our partners and always listen and strive to understand their points of view and priorities. We also need to be properly **postured** with the necessary capabilities, resources, and appropriate authorities to protect and promote U.S. and partner nations’ interests.

In recent years, we have been encouraged to see many of our regional partners take a more active role in providing for the security of their sovereign spaces. Ultimately, we want to **empower our partners and allies** by helping them build additional capability and capacity while strengthening relationships and improving cooperation and interoperability among nations. This is – *and will remain* – a top priority for the USCENTCOM Team at our headquarters in Tampa, Florida, as well as among our Component Commands, combined/joint task forces, and forward in the region.

U.S. Central Command’s Mission. *“USCENTCOM directs and enables military operations and activities with allies and partners to increase regional security and stability in support of enduring U.S. interests.”*

Our Strategic Approach. Our strategic approach is focused on protecting our national interests and those of our partners. It is designed to reflect our values, align our behaviors, and support the National Military Strategy. It is proactive in nature and endeavors to set in motion tangible actions in a purposeful, consistent, and continuous manner. Each aspect of our approach – ***Prepare – Pursue – Prevail*** – enables the next and collectively contributes to the successful achievement of our goals, objectives, and overall mission.

Prepare the Environment – The volatile nature of the Central Region requires that we be well-postured to protect our enduring national interests. “Well-postured” means that we are ready to execute military tasks; physically and virtually present in the AOR; integrated in all our actions; responsive to the needs of our partners; and, able to provide options for our leadership. Proper preparation in advance of crises creates decision space for leaders and allows for the responsible and effective employment of available resources and forces. Well-prepared and motivated personnel with shared values provide a comparative advantage over our adversaries and competitors. Preparation of the environment – including agreements for assured access, basing, and overflight and the ability to adapt our expeditionary and enduring footprint – ultimately ensures a high level of readiness, increased responsiveness, and strong and productive relationships with partners and allies, all of which serve to enable our success in our various endeavors.

Pursue Opportunities – In a region beset by myriad challenges we must always be on the lookout for opportunities to seize the initiative to support our objectives and goals. Pursuing opportunities means that we are proactive – we don’t wait for problems to be presented; we look for ways to get ahead of them. It also means that we have to become comfortable with transparency and flat communications – our ability to understand our AOR better than anyone else gives us the advantage of knowing where opportunities exist. Pursuing opportunities also means we have to take risk – by delegating authority and responsibility to the right level, by trusting our partners, and being willing to trust our best instincts in order to move faster than our adversaries.

Prevail in Conflict – There are no easy victories or quick wins in the USCENTCOM AOR – ours is an area of protracted struggles and conflicts. Our overriding objective, despite these challenges, is to prevail. Prevailing means winning; coming out on top of our adversaries. We prevail when our national interests and objectives are preserved; when we maintain decision space for our leaders; and, when we maintain and sustain our access, posture, and relationships with our vital partners. We choose to prevail “by, with, and through” our partners. Prevailing in this AOR requires resolve and resiliency – and continued momentum.

U.S. Central Command Priorities.

Ensure an Effective Posture – An effective posture with trained and ready forward-stationed forces and equipment demonstrates our tremendous capability and enduring commitment to our partners and allies in the region. It reassures them; it enables access and influence; and, it positions us to secure our enduring national interests. An effective posture also optimizes

freedom of movement, deters state aggressors, and provides decision space and flexible response options for national-level decision makers.

Strengthen Allies and Partnerships – A coalition approach – at home and abroad – expands our ability to operate on multiple fronts. Strong relationships based upon shared values create greater cohesion and enhance the effectiveness of available resources and capabilities. Integration with partners, within the region and beyond, enriches the benefit of our presence, mitigates resource constraints, and expands the reach of the force. By building the capacity of regional partners, we enable them to assume a larger share of the responsibility for securing their sovereign spaces.

Deter and Counter State Aggressors – Effectively posturing to maintain freedom of movement, freedom of action, and freedom of navigation is essential to securing our enduring national interests and the interests of our partners and allies. We must also actively counter malign influence, and be prepared to confront aggression, while reducing the freedom of action of surrogates and proxies operating in the region.

Disrupt and Counter Violent Extremist Organizations and their Networks – We must protect our Homeland from terrorist threats that emanate from the Central Region. We will accomplish this by degrading and defeating VEOs and their networks, including ISIS and al Qaeda and their associated forces, and by preventing the further spread of sectarian-fueled conflict and VEOs.

Ultimately, our goal is to achieve a Central Region where improved security leads to greater stability, and where regional cooperation counters actors that threaten U.S. interests.

Desired End States. Our efforts in support of partners throughout the USCENTCOM AOR are designed to achieve our desired end states. **These end states include:** USCENTCOM properly postured to protect U.S. interests; free flow of commerce and access to areas in accordance with international law; strong and supportive allies and partners; state aggressors deterred or countered; WMD safeguarded and use prevented; VEOs degraded and their influence eroded; and, lasting increased regional stability and security. **The key to achieving these ends is the effective use of available ways and means to address challenges and pursue opportunities in the region.**

Challenges and Opportunities in the Central Region. Many conditions exist in the strategically-important Central Region that threaten stability, access to the region, and transit via maritime chokepoints. The resulting challenges – to include the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen, rising tensions with Iran, and increased provocative behavior by Iranian-backed elements in and around the Bab al Mandeb (BAM) Strait – clearly demand our attention and directed efforts. Among the dynamics contributing to the complexity of the current security environment are the same socio-political factors that caused the Arab Awakening, fomenting social unrest and creating conditions for sectarianism, violence, and extremism. In parts of the region, reforms have fallen short, politics remain exclusive, economic growth stagnates, education systems under-deliver, and/or social contracts are falling out of balance. Opportunities for youth remain limited. Concurrently, large-scale displaced populations stress

already fragile economies, social welfare systems and security architectures. The resulting instability provides opportunities for VEOs and insurgents and those who actively provide support and sanctuary to them. Competition for water, oil, and other natural resources are other drivers of instability and conflict. **Resurgent geopolitics and the continuation of national rivalries fuels inter-state hostility and may potentially hasten the pursuit of nuclear weapons.** As we look to address the multitude of challenges present today across the USCENTCOM AOR, it is absolutely essential that we understand the conditions and root causes of the instability and turmoil. If not, our efforts are likely to be insufficient or even misdirected and any gains achieved, temporary.

In addition to addressing challenges, **we must pursue the many opportunities present today throughout the Central Region.** Doing so will enable us, working together with our partners, to shape the security environment and increase stability across our AOR. Opportunities manifest in a variety of ways, including bi-lateral and multi-lateral exercises and training programs, Foreign Military Sales (FMS) cases, Foreign Military Financing (FMF) assistance, information operations and messaging, and other cooperative endeavors in support of common objectives. **Most notably, by supporting and enabling partner-led operations we achieve shared goals while limiting U.S. investment and troop presence and increasing regional partners' capability, confidence, and overall stake in providing for the security of their sovereign spaces.** For example, we continue to support the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the Syrian Democratic Forces in their efforts to counter ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Also, in recent months we supported successful United Arab Emirates (UAE)-led operations in Yemen against the al Qaeda affiliate, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). In terms of future opportunities, we need

to find ways to increase information sharing with key partners, like the UAE, to further enable their efforts. Enhanced information sharing with regional partners can also advance efforts against ISIS and other terrorist facilitation networks. We should pursue increasing our support for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), which have demonstrated tremendous return on investment in recent years. The need for improved communication between and among elements, particularly regarding common regional disputes (e.g., Sunni-Shia tensions, Kurdish expansionism) also presents opportunities and should be pursued by relevant elements of the U.S. Government (USG). **The key outcomes achieved through the pursuit of these and other opportunities present in the Central Region are improved awareness and information-sharing, enhanced capability, and increased trust and confidence among partner nations,** all of which are key components underpinning our mission in pursuit of our national interests. Thus, it is essential that we view all challenges with an eye for corresponding opportunities that provide the best means for addressing those challenges and achieving desired end-states.

Given the trans-regional nature of the current security environment coupled with the competing demands for limited resources and capabilities, it is essential that we find efficiencies and alternative means for accomplishing stated objectives. This includes **building and enabling coalitions comprised of willing partners**, recognizing that collaboration enhances overall capability while providing a stronger, united front against potential adversaries; the sum of the parts is greater than the whole. The **initial building blocks for strong coalitions are relationships**. The **cornerstone for effective enduring collaboration among coalition members is information-sharing** which enables **coalition compliant planning**, resulting in successful execution of campaign goals and objectives. One quick-yield way to enhance the

capability and effectiveness of our partners is by **expanding our intelligence sharing** with them. To date, we have seen significant return on investment each time we have made such allowances in support of our partners.

Key Focus Areas. While the USCENTCOM Team manages a broad range of difficult challenges on a daily basis, **a significant portion of our efforts and resources are necessarily focused in five priority areas. These five areas are: Operation INHERENT RESOLVE (Iraq and Syria), Operation FREEDOM'S SENTINEL and Resolute Support Mission (Afghanistan), Iran, Yemen, and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism.** Below are summaries, highlighting substantial challenges and efforts underway aimed at improving stability and security in each of these critical areas.

Operation INHERENT RESOLVE (Iraq and Syria). The Counter-ISIS (C-ISIS) Campaign has entered its third year and we are on track with the military plan to defeat the terrorist organization in Iraq and Syria. Our “by, with, and through” approach and operational level simultaneity strategy are working, and our partner forces **continue to build momentum across the battlespace** as we **pressure the enemy on multiple fronts and across all domains.** Together we are **forcing the enemy to deal with multiple simultaneous dilemmas** (e.g., ground operations, airstrikes, cyber activities, information operations, and discrete interdictions of resource flows). This is putting increased pressure on their operations and command and control capability while stretching their limited resources.

The strength of the C-ISIS Campaign is the C-ISIS Coalition consisting of all branches of service and our Interagency and international partners, and the many contributions they willingly make to the fight against our common enemy—*“The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”* Without the support of the Coalition, our “by, with, and through” approach would not be doable.

Our stand-off fires, including **Coalition air and artillery, remain another lynchpin of the C-ISIS Campaign.** Improved intelligence has enabled the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) to increase the number of deliberate strikes conducted in recent months, targeting ISIS’s infrastructure, oil revenue sources, etc. **Over the past year, the Coalition’s precision effects campaign has removed dozens more ISIS senior leaders from the battlefield, attrited large portions of the organization’s forces, further disrupted its command and control capability, and greatly degraded its pool of resources and access to replacements and personnel reinforcements.** As the campaign progresses, and as ISIS shifts actions and behaves increasingly like a terrorist organization, hiding amongst civilians as a force protection measure, we will continue to make the necessary adjustments to our air operations. We want to target the enemy effectively, while also ensuring that we minimize collateral damage. International law requires it; and, **when America’s sons and daughters go to war, they go with our values.** **Thus, it is imperative that when we conduct operations we do so in such a way that we limit the loss of innocent lives.**

Over the past year, **ISIS lost a significant amount of capability and large swaths of territory.** The Iraqis are now in control of eastern Mosul, although clearing operations continue in several areas. In Syria, operations are ongoing in three key geographic areas—Raqqa, Manbij, and al

Bab; it remains a very complex fight given multiple simultaneous activities and the management of partners and battlefield effects. In Iraq, in the coming weeks and months we will continue to support the Iraqi Security Forces as they complete the seizure of western Mosul. After Mosul operations are complete, we expect the Government of Iraq to prioritize military operations to recapture Tal Afar, Sinjar, and Hawija, and to secure the border in order to diminish ISIS' freedom of movement and ability to target major population centers. In Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces have almost completed the isolation phase of Raqqa operations and will, in the coming months, begin operations to seize Raqqa, dismantling a key node in ISIS' external operations network. Additionally, we would look to continue our security operations along the Jordanian border to prevent re-infiltration of ISIS remnants.

The cumulative effect of operations in Iraq and Syria has **cut off key lines of communication** for ISIS, while restricting their ability to bring in additional fighters and **curbing their flow of financial resources**. The terrorist organization is struggling financially and is experiencing low morale in its ranks and steady leadership attrition due to coalition airstrikes. There has also been a nearly 75 percent decline in ISIS's media and propaganda as compared to a year ago.

Our efforts, in conjunction with our interagency and international partners' efforts, to **stem the flow of foreign terrorist fighters** – both into Syria and Iraq and also those attempting to return to their countries of origin – continue to bear fruit. The U.S. and Coalition member nations are highly concerned about the threat these experienced fighters present to our respective homelands. We have made considerable progress identifying and targeting fighters and insurgent networks, principally through our Joint and Interagency targeting processes, and this will remain a priority.

These processes will also help to combat the evolving hybrid threat (conventional and irregular warfare). U.S. Special Operations Command has been designated lead for external operations (EXOPs) for the U.S. military efforts and this has contributed greatly to organizing the broader efforts against this threat. Whole of government efforts and collaboration with partners have also played a key role in stemming the flow of foreign terrorist fighters (FTF). Spurred by the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2178 in September 2014, more than 60 nations have enacted laws to restrict FTF travel. The U.S. now collaborates through information-sharing agreements with 59 international partners to identify and track travel of suspected terrorists in real time.

While we continue to make great strides towards countering ISIS trans-regionally, we recognize that **we are dealing with a highly adaptive enemy**. In particular, ISIS' use of chemical weapons and its evolving application of available off-the-shelf technologies that include unmanned aerial systems now used for both observation and to achieve lethal effects, poses a growing threat. For example, ISIS has reportedly used chemicals, including sulfur mustard and toxic industrial chemicals, in attacks more than 50 times in Iraq and Syria since 2014. Although the threat of chemical weapons has not slowed the Counter-ISIS Campaign, ISIS could further develop its chemical weapons capability. We are committed to working with partners to locate, secure, render harmless, eliminate or destroy any chemical and biological weapon materials found during the course of operations in Iraq and Syria, and to effectively remove this threat from our troops and civilian populations.

We will defeat ISIS militarily; however, **a lasting defeat of this enemy will not be achieved unless similar progress is made on the political front.** Instability all but guarantees a resurgence of ISIS or the emergence of other terrorist groups seeking to exploit conditions to advance their own aims. We remain fully committed to the “whole of government” approach and continue to ensure our actions are synchronized with and supportive of the efforts of our partners across the Interagency and the International Community.

This also holds true on the humanitarian front. UN-led efforts to date are having positive impacts and thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) have already returned to their homes. However, tough work remains, given the enormity of the **humanitarian crises in Iraq and Syria and in neighboring countries.** The growing number of displaced persons presents a unique set of challenges that include protection and assistance to civilians caught in the various conflicts, as well as assistance to those seeking asylum in neighboring countries.

Regional actors – There is a significant number of players currently operating in Iraq and Syria with both common and competing interests. While they have been present for many years, several of them have become emboldened and have taken a more active role in addressing regional issues.

In Iraq, we have seen encouraging progress made in the relationship between the leadership of the **Government of Iraq (GoI) and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG).** This past year, for the first time since 2013, Prime Minister al-Abadi met with President Barzani in Baghdad to discuss expanded cooperation between the ISF and the Kurdish Peshmerga. We also

see increased collaboration between the ISF and elements of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). In November 2016, Iraq's parliament voted to fully legalize elements of the PMF, including but not limited to Shia militias. While they are achieving some positive effects, their participation does present challenges, particularly post-Mosul offensive, as Iranian-backed elements of the PMF seek to increase their influence in the country through both military and political channels.

Turkey remains an important NATO ally and Counter-ISIS Coalition member that supports the campaign through its operations and by providing access, basing, and overflight permissions. Some Turkish activities and rhetoric, however, have the potential to impact campaign momentum. Turkey's actions in northern Iraq continue to strain relations between the GoI and the KRG, which serves to further complicate the C-ISIS Campaign. Likewise, in Syria, Turkey has helped clear ISIS from its border, but Turkish-backed forces have also clashed with the Syrian Democratic Forces near Manbij and al Bab and we continue efforts to resolve tensions.

Since Russia's entry into the Syrian conflict *en masse* in 2015, they have negatively impacted the regional balance of power. Russia's primary goal is to maintain Syria as a client state in the future and they have propped up the Assad Regime to support this overarching objective. Also very concerning is the fact that Russia's air operations have targeted civilians and U.S.-supported opposition groups. Without effective de-confliction measures, we see increasing opportunity for miscalculation and potential for unintended, counter-productive engagement between nation states. We are not currently coordinating or cooperating with the

Russians; we are simply de-conflicting our air operations. This has become increasingly difficult in the crowded airspace as our operations come into closer proximity. In recent months, the Russians also introduced a number of new surface-to-air systems which can be employed to impact our freedom of maneuver. While our de-confliction efforts have been effective to date, as the fight expands in northern Syria and the battlespace becomes more congested, we should consider enhancing our de-confliction mechanisms with the Russians.

We continue to see **Iranian malign influence across Iraq and Syria**. While they currently are focused on countering ISIS in Iraq, we remain concerned about Iran's efforts to prop up the Syrian regime against the opposition and its desire to exploit Shia population centers to increase their malign influence, not just in Syria, but also in Arab states across the region. This supports their long-term aspiration to achieve regional hegemony. Moreover, we are watching closely for indications and warnings of decreasing Iranian concern regarding the threat posed by ISIS, leading to a potential shift to targeting U.S. and coalition personnel and infrastructure in an effort to influence a potential long-term U.S. security presence. Furthermore, we must take care to ensure that our actions do not unintentionally strengthen the Iranian position within the region.

The military campaign plan to defeat ISIS is on track in both Iraq and Syria. The coalition's "by, with and through" approach is proving effective. Recognizing that ISIS will be defeated militarily, **we want to ensure that we have an enduring posture in the region to support and enable partners' efforts to preserve security and stability.** Iraq remains an anchor in the region and we would be wise to continue to support their efforts going forward. We have a willing partner in Iraq and Prime Minister al-Abadi has clearly articulated a desire for

continued U.S. support post-ISIS. We are working with the GoI to finalize a Five-Year Plan to ensure enhanced cooperation. This presents an opportunity to preserve gains achieved to date, while strengthening key relationships and countering malign influence in the region.

Operation FREEDOM'S SENTINEL and Resolute Support Mission (Afghanistan). The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) are beginning their third year with full responsibility for security with limited U.S. or coalition support. They continue to take the fight to the Taliban and, despite some territorial losses, have retained control of major population areas and key lines of communication. While the Taliban made gains in 2016, namely in the north and south, in most cases, the ANDSF quickly responded to and reversed some of those gains over the past year. While the balance of power favors the government, neither side is currently able to achieve its stated objectives. Looking ahead, it is **essential that we continue to assist the ANDSF in addressing their capability gaps, particularly in the areas of aviation, casualty evacuation (CASEVAC), personnel management and development, logistics, and sustainment.** Our sustained force presence, over 8,400 U.S. military personnel, will allow us to conduct counter-terrorism operations and meet our requirements for staffing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led Resolute Support (RS) Mission. However, the RS Mission still has a **shortfall of a few thousand personnel needed to conduct the complementary mission of training, advising, and assisting the ANDSF.**

In 2015, U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) worked with the Afghans to develop a **Sustainable Security Strategy based upon three key tenets: "Fight, Hold, Disrupt."** The strategy identifies areas the Afghans will hold, areas they will fight to retain, and areas where

they will conduct an economy of force effort and disrupt the enemy if they appear, Afghan resources permitting. The ANDSF continues to make progress in implementing this strategy, thereby assuming a more proactive stance in addressing multiple threats while securing the population and denying terrorist safe havens. As General Nicholson, the commander of the RS Mission and USFOR-A stated, “[The Afghans’] ability to deal with simultaneous crises ... is a sign of an army that’s growing in capability, [and] that’s maturing in terms of its ability to handle simultaneity and complexity on the battlefield.”

While the ANDSF continues to make progress, they do face a number of significant challenges. Poor leadership and corruption are two key factors that need further improvement and President Ashraf Ghani has made addressing these issues a top priority for the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA). The GIRoA established the Anti-Corruption Justice Center in 2016 with the help of the international community and has already tried, convicted, and sentenced senior Afghan officials for corruption. Below are other challenges and critical capability gaps must be addressed.

ANDSF casualty rates – High ANDSF casualties remain a concern. This can be attributed to several factors, including poor leadership, corruption, tactics, and training. Deficiencies in ANDSF leadership occur primarily because of patronage vice merit-based appointments. The extensive use of static checkpoints and the lack of training on how to defend them, as well as a more aggressive posture – which has resulted in the ANDSF more frequently taking the lead and actively taking the fight to the enemy – have also contributed to an increased number of casualties. The ANDSF also experienced an increase in the number of insurgent attacks on

inadequately protected fixed positions, and poor and corrupt leadership also may have contributed to higher casualty rates. The ANDSF lacked an operational readiness cycle (ORC) to ensure forces are well-rested and well-trained before returning to the fight. During the Winter Campaign this year, many ANDSF units successfully established ORCs, and our advisors have fostered an increased focus on company-level training and leadership development.

Afghan Air Force – The Afghan Air Force (AAF) and Special Mission Wing (SMW) continue to build capability. Their ability to provide airlift, casualty evacuation, and aerial fires has steadily improved as the U.S. provides more aircraft to the AAF and as its pilots and crew gain additional operational experience. The Afghans are proving effective at integrating their AAF aviation assets as evidenced by a number of successful operations conducted over the past year. However, **significant capability gaps remain. The current rotary wing fleet consisting primarily of the Russian-made Mi-17 is both undersized and proving to be more expensive and difficult to sustain than originally envisioned and is experiencing a higher than expected attrition rate.** Going forward, transitioning from Russian to U.S. airframes will ensure Afghan forces have a more sustainable fleet that is interoperable with U.S. forces and will enhance the Afghans’ ability to operate independently of coalition forces. The U.S. government is considering a critical AAF initiative to replace the unsustainable Russian-manufactured aircraft fleet and make up for combat losses in Afghan transport helicopters by providing U.S. UH-60s. The DoD-request of \$814.5M for FY17 for the first year of our plan to recapitalize the Afghan fleet provides funding to procure 53 UH-60s, with refurbishment and modification of the first 18; 30 additional armed MD-530F helicopters; 6 additional A-29 attack aircraft; and five AC-208s. The requested FY2017 Afghan Security Forces Fund (ASFF) budget, including the

additional funds for the first year of this proposed aviation initiative, went to Congress on 10 Nov 2016. The FY17 proposal is pending approval and we appreciate your support in reaching resolution as soon as possible to mitigate the gaps in Afghan aerial fires and lift capabilities. Transition from Mi-17 to UH-60 airframes will eventually eliminate reliance on Russian sourced parts for maintenance requirements. With our support, we can expect the AAF will continue to build needed capability over the next few years and into the future.

Influence of external actors – Stability in Afghanistan is further challenged by the malign influence of external actors. The enablement of violent extremist groups operating inside of Afghanistan and along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, receiving sanctuary or support from outside governments, is of particular concern. **So long as these elements remain, they will threaten our hard-earned gains and regional stability writ large.**

Pakistan's shared border with Afghanistan remains a safe haven for terrorist and violent extremist elements. There are 20 U.S.-designated terrorist organizations present today in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Taliban serves as a facilitator to some of these groups' operations. The death of Taliban Supreme Leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour in a U.S. strike on 21 May 2016 had a disruptive impact on the Taliban and gave a psychological boost to the Afghans. However, the group still presents a formidable threat to stability in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) sub-region. The convergence of these groups and, in particular, the convergence of the Afghan Taliban and its component, the Haqqani Network, and Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, is of particular concern given the direct threat posed to U.S. and Coalition personnel and the Afghan government. Key to improving the security environment in Afghanistan is eliminating sanctuary

of militant groups in Pakistan's territory. The U.S. maintains consistent diplomatic pressure on Pakistan to take appropriate steps to deny safe haven and work to improve the security of the tumultuous Af-Pak border region.

Illicit narcotics production and trafficking – Illicit narcotics production and trafficking continue to flourish in Afghanistan, particularly in areas where state institutions are weak. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimated 2016 Afghanistan poppy cultivation to be 201,000 hectares with a net opium yield of 4,800 metric tons and a farm gate value of \$900M, which is a 57 percent increase in revenue generated from the opium trade. In Afghanistan, a symbiotic relationship exists between the insurgency and narcotics trafficking where traffickers provide weapons, funding, and material support to the insurgency in exchange for protection. Additionally, some insurgent commanders traffic drugs to finance operations. However, trafficking is not limited to insurgent-controlled areas. The narcotics trade undermines governance and rule of law throughout Afghanistan and plays a critical role in underwriting corruption and a loss of confidence by the Afghan people in the GIRoA.

Regionally, USCENTCOM supports law enforcement counterdrug and border security training, equipping of regional partners, construction activities, and information sharing initiatives to build the capacity of our security force partners that aid in the regional response to illicit drugs trafficking. Counterdrug activities are a critical component of USCENTCOM's theater security cooperation strategy; provide for regional engagement and comprise a significant source of security assistance funding in Central Asia. These efforts

improve regional illicit drug detection and interdiction and improve overall border security for the detection of other forms of contraband, including weapons and IED materials.

Amidst the challenges confronting Afghanistan today are many **opportunities**. Most notably, **we have willing partners in the GIROA and ANDSF and our collaboration in support of common objectives continues to pay significant dividends**. Following are three areas in particular where potential “game-changing” opportunities exist and merit our sustained commitment.

Government of National Unity – The Government of National Unity (GNU) survived several political crises in 2016. President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah provided the leadership that has enabled progress to be made in a number of areas, as well as the development of the framework for enduring partnerships with NATO and the United States. Nevertheless, significant challenges still exist and must be addressed. While the NUG provides needed structure and a source of stability for Afghanistan, it remains fragile. Although the ANDSF has remained apolitical so far, failure of the NUG could threaten ANDSF cohesion and the progress achieved throughout the country. Our message to the political elites of Afghanistan has been that “we respect your political progress, but please do not allow political tensions to undo the hard fought gains you have made.”

The International Community’s Demonstrated Commitment to Afghanistan – Thirty-nine NATO allies and partner nations committed more than 13,500 troops to sustain the Resolute Support Mission beyond 2016. **Thirty nations have also pledged more than \$800 million**

annually to sustain Afghan security forces through 2020. Combined with the requested U.S. commitment of \$3.5 billion for FY2017 and additional funding from Afghanistan, a total of more than \$4.3 billion has been pledged for the ANDSF for 2017. Additionally, **seventy-five countries and 26 international organizations confirmed their intention in 2016 at the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan to provide \$15.2B for Afghan development during the 2017-2020 period.** The International Community's strong showing, coupled with the continued commitment of U.S. troops in Afghanistan beyond 2016, has bolstered Afghan confidence and resolve and will surely pay dividends going forward.

Counter-terrorism (CT) Platform – The existence of violent extremist groups in Afghanistan requires a U.S. presence in the region that can monitor and address threats, even as the United States helps to build the Afghans' capability to deter terrorist exploitation of Afghan territory. As we adjust the U.S. CT mission, our support to the NATO TAA mission will also evolve in the coming year. Currently, advisory efforts are at four of the six corps and police zone levels, in addition to the Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) and the AAF. In 2017, we will advise all six corps and police zones to provide critical support where needed to capitalize on the success and continued implementation of the sustainable security strategy.

Although we see encouraging progress being made in Afghanistan, it remains a very challenging environment. While the ANDSF confronts difficulties in a number of areas, they are providing for the security of their country, achieving good effects against the Taliban, and building much-needed capacity and momentum while gaining increasing confidence in what is still a tough fight. Additionally, although it does face significant challenges, the GIROA, under the leadership

of President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, has proven to be a reliable and willing partner. **The U.S. and our coalition partners have invested greatly in Afghanistan over the last 15+ years. The country merits our continued demonstrated commitment given our national security interests in the sub-region, namely protection of the U.S. Homeland.** By strengthening our partners and weakening our enemies we will achieve increased stability in that strategically important part of the world.

Iran. Iran poses the most significant threat to the Central Region and to our national interests and the interests of our partners and allies. We have not seen any improvement in Iran's behavior since the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), addressing Iran's nuclear program, was finalized in July 2015. **Iran aspires to be a regional hegemon** and its forces and proxies oppose U.S. interests in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Gaza, and Syria, and seek to hinder achievement of U.S. objectives in Afghanistan and some Central Asian States. They also are working to subvert the GoI by establishing a long-term presence within Iraq's security forces. Of note, Iran exerts influence and a degree of control over the majority of the nearly 100,000 Shia militias within the PMF. Furthermore, **Iran has expanded cooperation with Russia in Syria** in ways that threaten U.S. interests in the region.

The JCPOA removed a key threat posed by Iran for at least a number of years. Unfortunately, the agreement has led some to believe that we have largely addressed the Iranian problem set and that is not the case. **In addition to its nuclear weapons potential, Iran presents several credible threats.** They have a robust theater ballistic missile program, and we remain concerned

about their cyber and maritime activities, as well as the activities of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Qods Forces (IRGC-QF) and their network of affiliates.

Iran implements its strategy primarily within the “gray zone,” the space short of conventional conflict where miscalculation can easily occur, leading to escalatory conflict and misunderstanding. Iran fosters instability by funding and promoting a threat network that employs provocation, violence, and covert arms transfers that serve as the stimulants for a range of conflicts across the region. It complements this subversive arm with conventional military provocation and overt threats to close key maritime sea lanes, especially at critical international economic chokepoints, namely the Strait of Hormuz and the BAM Strait, which puts global political stability and economic prosperity at risk.

Recognizing that **Iran poses the greatest long-term threat to U.S. interests in the Central Region**, we must seize opportunities to both reassure our allies and shape Iran's behavior. In order to contain Iranian expansion, roll back its malign influence, and blunt its asymmetric advantages, we must engage them more effectively in the “gray zone” through means that include a strong deterrence posture, targeted counter-messaging activities, and by building partner nations' capacity. Through both messaging and actions, **we must also be clear in our communications and ensure the credibility of U.S. intentions**. Iran must believe there will be prohibitive consequences if it chooses to continue its malign activities designed to foment instability in the region. The U.S. Government should also consider communicating directly with Iran's leadership to improve transparency and lessen the potential for miscalculation.

To further strengthen deterrence against Iran, we must also take the necessary proactive measures to build the capacity of partners and allies in the region. Ideally we want to improve interoperability, expand communication, and enhance security mechanisms. **Stronger, more capable partners, able and willing to assume a greater role in countering Iran, will serve to further enhance deterrence and improve stability in the region.**

In addition to ready military actions, we must support the broader USG strategy with regard to Iran which should include new diplomatic initiatives that provide Iran with viable alternatives to its present course. While Iran continues to pose the most significant threat to regional security, we remain optimistic and believe that by taking proactive measures and reinforcing our resolve we can lessen Iran's ability to negatively influence outcomes in the future.

Yemen. Yemen remains a critically unstable state engrossed in a civil war that has produced a significant humanitarian crisis and growing instability ripe for exploitation by VEOs, most notably al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the ISIS affiliate, IS-Yemen. The lack of a comprehensive peace agreement that leads to a durable resolution of the conflict under a unified Yemeni government further contributes to continued uncertainty in the country.

The civil war between the Republic of Yemen Government (RoYG) and the alliance of Former President of Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh- and Huthis has entered its third year with little progress made towards achieving an enduring resolution despite concerted efforts by the United Nations, the broader International Community, and regional stakeholders. **While the United States is not directly involved in the civil war, we are providing limited assistance to the Kingdom of**

Saudi Arabia (KSA)-led coalition in an effort to help protect their territorial integrity and sovereign borders. Huthi forces have seized and attacked military border outposts inside KSA territory and continue to occupy Saudi lands. Ballistic missile attacks launched from Yemen have struck deep into the country causing casualties and potentially threatening the Islamic holy sites in Mecca. We will continue to work to resolve the conflict as an ending to the war through a comprehensive political agreement provides the surest security of Saudi's Arabia's border and territorial integrity , enables us to conduct counter-terrorism operations, allows the population to receive food and medicine, and blocks Iranian malign activities. Until the war is over, we will assist Saudi Arabia in its efforts to defend against these attacks and restore the territorial integrity of their country.

Our primary focus in Yemen remains protecting the U.S. homeland from threats posed by VEOs operating within Yemen's ungoverned spaces, while **ensuring freedom of navigation and commerce** through the southern Red Sea and the Bab al Mandeb (BAM) Strait. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has indicated clear desire and ability to conduct attacks on the U.S. Homeland. Ongoing U.S. unilateral counter-terrorism operations and determined efforts by UAE in leading RoYG and Yemeni tribal forces, as demonstrated during the Mukalla offensive in April 2016, have degraded and disrupted AQAP's operational networks and reduced their access to sources of financial support. Despite the complexity of the environment, our efforts aimed at degrading AQAP remain critical to protecting our national security interests in the region and must continue.

In October 2016, **the Iranian-supported BAM Maritime Threat Network (BMTN)** demonstrated the ability to threaten freedom of navigation by successfully attacking a UAE vessel and a Saudi warship, and attempting to attack U.S. Navy warships in the southern Red Sea. We responded swiftly and decisively, destroying several Huthi coastal defense radar sites. While the origin of these attacks is found in the ROYG-Huthi conflict, the threats posed by the BMTN to the safe passage of vessels, either through deliberate action or unintentional acts, has the potential for significant strategic and economic impacts throughout the region. We continue to closely monitor the BMTN and remain prepared to promptly and decisively respond to any threats.

Going forward, our efforts against violent, non-state actors and support for similar efforts by our regional partners will remain our primary focus in Yemen. At the same time, we continue to do what we can to enable ongoing diplomatic efforts aimed at achieving a resolution to the hostilities that pose an enduring threat to stability in the country and the region writ large.

Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism. The Central Region remains the global epicenter for terrorism and violent Islamist extremism and the resulting turmoil continues to bleed across geographic combatant command “seams.” **Terrorism and violent extremism represent trans-regional threats, where malign actors seek to exploit ungoverned and under-governed spaces and vulnerable, disenfranchised populations worldwide.**

One aspect of this threat that makes it particularly challenging is the **terrorists’ and VEOs’ ability to operate across multiple domains and in both physical and virtual spaces.** Today,

the unprecedented global access achieved through the use of the Internet and various social media platforms enables terrorist and violent extremist groups to promulgate their radicalized ideologies while reaching a vast pool of potential recruits, many willing to conduct lone wolf-style attacks on behalf of these groups. Also, as we have seen with ISIS, the ability of violent extremist groups to **operate effectively in the virtual battlespace, makes them more challenging to defeat due to the nature of that domain.** As we degrade their physical capability, groups often shift focus to the virtual battlespace while their forces consolidate and regroup. We must continue to identify attributable and non-attributable methods and techniques for combatting groups in the virtual domain.

We must also find ways to address the drivers of instability that create the conditions that allow these groups to flourish. The root causes of instability must be dealt with if we hope to achieve a lasting defeat of terrorist and violent extremist groups operating in the USCENTCOM AOR. **The people of the region must lead this effort; we cannot do it for them.** However, we can and will continue to support and promote their efforts wherever possible.

We cannot allow terrorist groups and violent extremist organizations to operate uncontested, enabling them to grow stronger and expand their global reach. **By working together with our Interagency Partners and the International Community, operating from multiple strategic platforms around the globe and across all domains, we will reduce the gaps and “seams” exploited by these groups and better protect our interests against this common threat.**

Our Partner Nations in the Central Region. Below are synopses of the current state of affairs, including challenges, opportunities, and status of our military-to-military (mil-to-mil) relationships with partner nations, except Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Yemen which were addressed in the previous section, “Key Focus Areas” (see pages 13-31).

The Gulf States – The Gulf States are among our best partners in the region. The Gulf Cooperation Council’s (GCC) willingness to provide basing and access for U.S. forces is crucial to our ability to operate militarily in the USCENTCOM AOR. The GCC countries provide critical nodes for achieving operational objectives and continued success against ISIS. Their troops and aircraft continue to play a key role in the ongoing fight against this terrorist organization. At leader-level summits in 2014 and 2015, the GCC countries committed to pursue collective defense initiatives, including joint counter-terrorism and ballistic missile defense; however, progress towards those ends has been relatively slow. Nevertheless, the GCC’s desire to create a unified military command and more closely coordinated economic policy could create opportunities for greater interoperability between GCC and coalition forces over the medium- to long-term. While individual GCC nations’ sometimes divergent foreign policies present an obstacle to achieving a unified defense posture, we remain committed to helping them achieve this desired end state through senior leader engagements, combined exercises, and more standardized equipment and training. As agreed upon at the May 2015 Camp David Summit, we have increased cooperation on maritime security, military preparedness, arms transfers, cybersecurity, counter-terrorism, and logistics interoperability. Our total GCC FMS open case portfolio is valued at over \$150B and continues to help our partners defend their sovereignty and economic interests against emerging threats. As Gulf countries look to the United States for

military equipment, training, and assistance, it is essential that we reinforce efforts to include them in our joint endeavors to defeat regional threats posed by violent extremism and Iran's malign influence. Through our continued support for and collaboration with our GCC partners we will positively impact stability and security in the strategically important Central Region.

Bahrain is an important partner in the region, hosting USCENTCOM's naval component, U.S. Navy Central Command (NAVCENT) and U.S. Fifth Fleet Headquarters and Combined Maritime Forces in Manama at the Naval Support Activity Bahrain and Isa Air Base, respectively. The Bahrainis have actively supported coalition operations against ISIS in Syria since the start of the C-ISIS Campaign in September 2014, primarily by allowing us continued use and access to these facilities. They also continue to support Saudi-led operations in Yemen. We are making strides in our collaborative efforts to enhance the Bahraini Coast Guard's capacity, which aim to enable Bahrain to expand its role in countering piracy and violent extremism in the region's maritime domain. Internally, the Bahrainis are dealing with a tough domestic economic hit by low oil prices and a persistent, low-level threat from Iranian-backed militant groups, and we continue to provide appropriate assistance to help them address the security threat. While we have historically enjoyed a strong mil-to-mil relationship with our Bahraini counterparts, the slow progress on key FMS cases, specifically additional F-16 aircraft and upgrades to Bahrain's existing F-16 fleet, due to concerns of potential human rights abuses in the country, continues to strain our relationship. We continue to urge the Government of Bahrain to reverse steps it has taken over the past year to reduce the space for peaceful political expression in its Shia population and have encouraged the Bahrainis to implement needed

political reforms in the country while reassuring them of our strong commitment to our valued partnership.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is undertaking potentially far-reaching economic and related reforms under the banner of Vision 2030 and the National Transformation Plan. The goal of these measures is to diversify the Saudi economy and generate increased economic growth in the wake of low oil prices, as well as expanded opportunities for the nation's burgeoning youth population. The Kingdom is a key regional leader, calling upon partner nations to join them in addressing regional challenges, including Iranian malign influence. Having actively supported the fight against ISIS in the early stages of the campaign, KSA shifted its priority of effort to Yemen in 2015 where it leads the coalition against the Saleh- and Iranian-backed Huthis, who continue to pose a threat to Yemen's internal stability, security in KSA's southern border region, and the flow of commerce through the Bab al Mandeb Strait. The Saudis also are concerned about the threat posed by VEOs operating in Yemen, including the al Qaeda affiliate, AQAP, and the ISIS affiliate, IS-Y. We are principally focused on helping KSA to improve its target development and accountability processes in order to reduce incidence of civilian casualties, while also providing them with focused logistics and intelligence sharing support. Our long-standing partnership with KSA remains critical to maintaining stability in the region given their influence in the GCC and among many Muslim-majority countries. Our mil-to-mil relationship represents the strongest component of that partnership and continues to serve as the foundation for productive collaboration. By continuing to provide opportunities for the Saudis to enhance their defense capabilities, mainly through our substantive training and exercise program and

robust FMS valued at \$109B in open cases, we aim to improve interoperability while effectively addressing challenges in pursuit of our shared security goals and objectives.

Kuwait continues to be one of our strongest allies in the Central Region. Owing to the generous provisions of the Defense Cooperation Agreement, the Kuwaitis provide one of the most permissive environments in the USCENTCOM AOR with respect to access, basing, and overflight in support of U.S. and coalition presence in theater. Kuwait hosts the forward headquarters of USCENTCOM's army component, U.S. Army Central Command (ARCENT). Kuwait is also the most active combat support logistics hub globally and plays a critical role in support of ongoing operations in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Kuwait utilizes its leadership role in the GCC to help mediate internal GCC rifts while promoting a regional response to crises. Kuwait has also led the GCC in helping to address the regional refugee crisis emanating from Syria and been an invaluable partner in supporting the Iraqi government's C-ISIS efforts. Our mil-to-mil relationship with the Kuwaitis remains strong. Going forward we will look to pursue additional opportunities for joint training and further collaboration in support of common objectives.

The relationship between the United States and **Oman** remains strong, strengthened by our shared interests in the region and expanding access to Omani bases and ports. Oman is consistently viewed as a source of stability in the Gulf Region, and its neutral stance has enabled it to serve as a key interlocutor, most notably with Yemen and Iran. Of note, in October 2016, Oman's leadership facilitated the release of two U.S. citizens held by the Huthis in Sanaa, Yemen. Additionally, Oman's strategic location on the Arabian Sea, outside of the Bab el

Mandeb Strait and the Strait of Hormuz provides USCENTCOM with access to key logistical, operational, and contingency capabilities that are crucial to maintaining open sea lines of communication. While Oman does face significant challenges, namely a growing threat from VEOs in neighboring Yemen and a declining economy that could potentially impact its youth population, the leadership of the country is taking appropriate steps to address these and other issues. We enjoy a good relationship with the Omani military and will continue to work closely with them in support of shared interests.

Qatar remains a highly valued partner, providing critical access and basing in support of coalition forces and operations being conducted in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in the Central Region. The country hosts more than 10,000 U.S. and Coalition service members at Al-Udeid Air Base, home of USCENTCOM's Forward Headquarters, our air component, U.S. Air Forces Central Command (AFCENT), and its Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC). Qatar's Armed Forces also continue to support external operations in Syria and Yemen. In Syria, given their relationships with a wide range of actors, including more moderate elements, the Qataris are well-positioned to play an influential role in facilitating a political resolution to the conflict. Like most GCC countries, they continue to demand the removal of Bashar al-Assad as part of any resolution. Qatar has indicated a strong desire to enhance its partnership with the United States, both in terms of training engagements with U.S. forces and procurement of U.S. military equipment. Our continued role in their military modernization and development presents an invaluable opportunity to help expand their capability while strengthening our mil-to-mil relationship with a key and critical partner in the region.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is one of our most steadfast and capable partners in the USCENTCOM AOR. The Emirates have clearly demonstrated a willingness and ability to take an active role in shaping outcomes in the Central Region. The country hosts more than 4,000 U.S. service members and provides critical support for U.S. operations, goals, and objectives. The UAE was among the first countries to join the Counter-ISIS Coalition in 2014. While their primary focus has since shifted to support the ongoing KSA-led military campaign in Yemen, UAE continues to provide support to several of the C-ISIS Coalition's key lines of effort, including counter-messaging, counter-financing, and stemming the flow of foreign fighters. In Yemen, the UAE serves as the leading ground element in ongoing operations against the Saleh- and Iranian-backed Huthis. The Emirates are also supporting our efforts to counter the al Qaeda affiliate, AQAP. In April, using local fighters and tribal militias, the Emirates played a critical role in liberating Mukalla, driving AQAP elements out of the port city and thereby denying them a key source of revenue. In conjunction with its military efforts, the UAE is heavily focused on providing humanitarian assistance to ease the crisis facing Yemen's population. We value our strong relationship with the Emirates and seek to build upon our robust mil-to-mil relationship, including by concluding a new Defense Cooperation Agreement that could serve as a foundation for expanded, mutually beneficial defense cooperation. We will work to expand our collaboration, specifically in the areas of security cooperation and foreign military sales. Additionally, we will work with the Emirates to promote their leadership role among partner nations in the region.

The Levant – The Levant represents the epicenter of ethno-sectarian tension and conflict in the USCENTCOM AOR. Partner nations in this sub-region continue to struggle with the impacts of

the fight against ISIS, as well as the ongoing civil war in Syria, which is an “engine of instability” in and of itself. The persistent conflict and resulting widespread unrest have caused an expanding humanitarian crisis with ramifications that reach far beyond the USCENTCOM AOR. Stability in the Levant is further complicated by competition for influence therein from outside actors, principally Iran and Russia. Many of the challenges present today in the Levant originate from or affect neighboring countries and thus are trans-regional in nature and require cross-COCOM coordination. We routinely work closely with our colleagues in U.S. European Command, U.S. Africa Command, and other USG agencies and organizations to ensure that our various efforts are complementary and well-synchronized.

With its strategic location, control of the Suez Canal, enduring peace treaty with Israel coupled with a religious and cultural Pan-Arab influence, **Egypt** remains a stalwart partner in pursuit of shared Middle East policy objectives that include counter-terrorism, counter-violent extremism, and improved regional stability. Of particular concern is the threat posed by the ISIS affiliate, IS-Sinai which conducts frequent attacks against the Egyptian Armed Forces (EAF) and security services. While the EAF has managed to contain violence in the Sinai Peninsula without a comprehensive strategy to defeat IS-Sinai, we have a vested interest in helping them to effectively address this threat to ensure that the Sinai does not become a safe haven for extremist elements, including by providing additional bilateral military and security training. Egypt is further challenged by a weak economy and widespread unemployment or under-employment, as well as an aggressive approach to countering internal threats which makes its population highly susceptible to radicalization by extremist elements. Continued U.S. support to Egypt is crucial to our strategic partnership, and our long-standing, resilient mil-to-mil relationship represents a key

pillar of that partnership. Over the past several months, we have expanded our collaboration while taking steps to bolster our force protection measures and rebalance the Multinational Force Observer (MFO) mission in the Sinai. In the coming months, we will continue to work closely with the EAF to further enhance their counter-terrorism capabilities and improve the security of their borders through continued engagement and our robust assistance and security cooperation programs.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is one of our strongest and most reliable partners in the Levant sub-region. Jordan provides access, basing, and overflight equal to or greater than that provided by any other partner in the USCENTCOM AOR. The Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) and the Royal Jordanian Air Force (RJAF) continue to make key contributions in support of the Counter-ISIS Campaign. With U.S. and coalition assistance, the JAF have fortified Jordan's borders with Iraq and Syria, while enabling the International Community's ongoing efforts to address the burgeoning humanitarian crisis manifesting inside of Jordan (~650,000 refugees) and in two camps located along the border in southern Syria (~55,000-65,000 IDPs). It is imperative that we remain actively engaged with our Jordanian partners. Jordan provides a much-needed moderate Islamic voice in the region and is a trusted intermediary in efforts to advance progress between the Israelis and Palestinians. Our strong mil-to-mil relationship and continued demonstrated support for the Government of Jordan, the JAF, and the RJAF remains critical to ensuring that Jordan is able to effectively manage the broad range of challenges facing the country and the region now and in the future.

Lebanon remains a key partner in our efforts to counter violent extremism in the Central Region, and their ground forces offer one of the greatest returns on investment in the region. They are routinely countering groups that include ISIS and Al Nusra Front, denying them freedom of movement, and strengthening the country's border defenses with our continued support. U.S. security assistance to Lebanon has enhanced the Lebanese Armed Forces' (LAF) ability to counter malign influences and terrorist elements operating within the country. A strong and capable LAF acts as a counterweight to the militant arm of Lebanese Hezbollah (LH), while diminishing LH's claim as the sole "resistance" in Lebanon. While LH has been preoccupied with its involvement in the fight in Syria in support of the Assad Regime, the LAF has gained increasing credibility among the Lebanese populace as the most respected institution in the country. On 31 October 2016, the Lebanese parliament ended the over two-year presidential vacancy with the appointment of President Michel Aoun, a Maronite Christian and leader of the Free Patriotic Movement Party. While this positive development ended political gridlock and restored government functions, significant challenges remain, exacerbated by the civil war in neighboring Syria. Of particular concern are the approximately 1+ million Syrian refugees in Lebanon. This population presents political, economic, and security challenges to Prime Minister Hariri and his newly formed government. In addition to straining national resources, the Syrian refugee population is mostly Sunni and thus could threaten the fragile sectarian balance of power in the country. The humanitarian burden facing Lebanon will require significant international assistance to bolster limited local resources. Our continued support for this valued partner is both merited and has proven to pay tremendous dividends as the LAF has routinely demonstrated the ability to make best use of U.S. assistance to increase its capability and capacity and bring about positive, measurable results.

Central and South Asia – Our primary interests in the Central and South Asia (CASA) sub-region are to prevent the establishment of terrorist safe havens, assure continued U.S. access, and support the sovereignty and independence of partner nations. Our engagement strategy is focused on these three interests and strengthening our bilateral relationships with the seven partner nations. We also encourage multi-lateral cooperation amongst these same seven nations, and our annual CASA Chiefs of Defense Conference serves as a mechanism for facilitating expanded dialogue and increased cooperation. This past year, we also held the highly successful inaugural CASA Directors of Military Intelligence Conference. The increased participation and elevated levels of mil-to-mil discussions clearly convey increased appetite for further U.S.-led engagement.

Despite increasing Russian, Chinese, and Iranian pressure designed to limit U.S. influence in the sub-region, the U.S. maintains its regional position by focusing on security cooperation areas where we have a comparative advantage such as counter-terrorism, border security, defense institution building, and professional development. Several CASA governments support transit of supplies to U.S. troops in Afghanistan through the Northern Distribution Network. We anticipate a continued need for these access routes. In this regard, our CASA partners have been and continue to be strong partners in our efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. Other areas of shared interest include countering violent extremism and counter-narcotics. Our training and exercise programs in the CASA sub-region clearly demonstrate our strong commitment to addressing these and other common challenges. For example, Exercise STEPPE EAGLE, traditionally a trilateral exercise with the U.S., U.K., and Kazakhstan, has become more regional in scope with Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic also now taking part. Additionally, we are increasing

multilateral collaboration with our CASA-wide annual USCENTCOM Exercise REGIONAL COOPERATION.

We share two primary concerns with our CASA partners regarding stability and security in the region: 1) persistent worries about the long-term stability and viability of Afghanistan and 2) the threat posed by returning foreign fighters. The United States and NATO's continued commitment to the ongoing Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan is helping to assuage these concerns, primarily by bolstering the Afghan security forces' ability to defend their security interests. At the same time, we continue to pursue opportunities that would allow for increased information sharing, improved border security, and enhanced training and multi-lateral collaboration to support our shared interests.

While our efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan continue to require significant investment, elsewhere in the CASA sub-region we have clearly demonstrated the ability to achieve good effects with modest investments in terms of building partner nations' capabilities, improving multi-lateral cooperation, and addressing common security threats. Going forward, we intend to strengthen relationships and build on previous accomplishments while working together with our Interagency Partners to explore and pursue new opportunities in this strategically important part of the world.

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 continues to focus on institutional reform of its NCO corps, training management, human resources administration, and

professional military education system. This progress continues despite enduring Russian influence and a Kazakhstani economy that is still recovering from the recent downturn in oil and gas prices. Kazakhstan remains the most significant regional contributor to Afghan stability, donating money to the ANA Trust Fund, continuing to provide educational opportunities to Afghans, and offering technical support services. Kazakhstan is also moving closer to a United Nations peace-keeping operations deployment with a unit that has been trained with U.S. assistance. Looking at future opportunities to strengthen our partnership, Kazakhstan has expressed interest in working with the U.S. to improve its logistical, medical, and engineering military branches. Kazakhstan also partnered with the Arizona National Guard through our State Partnership program, providing us the ability to assist in this effort.

The Kyrgyz Republic, Central Asia's sole democracy, faces a number of challenges including economic and border security issues. The Kyrgyz Republic sees political pressure from its larger, more powerful neighbors, including Russia, hosting a small Russian airbase outside the capital, Bishkek. Despite ongoing challenges in our bilateral and security cooperation, we continue to seek opportunities to improve our mil-to-mil relationship. After a lengthy period of time during which few bilateral activities occurred, the Kyrgyz military may be increasingly receptive to higher level military engagements and expanded cooperation in the areas of border security, counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, and countering violent extremism. Furthermore, we continue to assist the Kyrgyz in building a deployable peace-keeping (PK) hospital capability that should be ready to support United Nations PK operations in the near future. Looking ahead, we intend to pursue opportunities for increased cooperation while taking steps to strengthen our relationships with the Kyrgyz.

Pakistan remains a critical partner in the counter-terrorism fight. Twenty U.S.-designated terrorist organizations operate in the Afghanistan-Pakistan sub-region; seven of the 20 organizations are in Pakistan. So long as these groups maintain safe haven inside of Pakistan they will threaten long-term stability in Afghanistan. Of particular concern to us is the Haqqani Network (HQN) which poses the greatest threat to coalition forces operating in Afghanistan. To date, the Pakistan military and security services have not taken lasting actions against HQN. We have consistently called upon the Pakistanis to take the necessary actions to deny terrorists safe haven and improve security in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. We have seen some promising coordination between the Pakistan and Afghanistan militaries aimed at addressing instability in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. The Pakistan military in particular continues to conduct counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations in the FATA and facilitate, via ground and air lines of communication, the sustainment of coalition operations in Afghanistan.

This past year we became increasingly concerned about the growing threat posed by the ISIS affiliate, Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K). Although their operational capacity has diminished as a result of U.S., Afghanistan, and Pakistan military operations, we remain focused on defeating the group in both countries. Of note, we were encouraged to see the Pakistani military plan and execute a recent named operation in which they set up simultaneous multiple blocking positions along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border in order to reinforce ANDSF efforts to disrupt IS-K activities.

We also continue to see ongoing tensions between Pakistan and neighboring India. India remains concerned about the lack of action against India-focused militants based in Pakistan and even responded militarily to terrorist attacks in India-held territory earlier this year. We assess that these types of attacks and the potential reactions, increase the likelihood for miscalculation by both countries. Furthermore, India's public policy to "diplomatically isolate" Pakistan hinders any prospects for improved relations. This is especially troubling as a significant conventional conflict between Pakistan and India could escalate into a nuclear exchange, given that both are nuclear powers. Additionally, Pakistan's increased focus on its eastern border detracts from its efforts to secure the western border with Afghanistan from incursion by Taliban and al-Qaida fighters. Security along the western border will nevertheless remain a priority for Islamabad, as the Pakistani military seeks to expand border control and improve paramilitary security.

While there are challenges with respect to the U.S.-Pakistani relationship, we have endeavored to maintain a substantial level of engagement with our Pakistani military counterparts. We continue to execute a robust joint exercise program. Most recently, the Pakistani Air Force sent airmen and aircraft to participate in Exercise RED FLAG and GREEN FLAG at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada this past summer. The Pakistani military also continues to support our efforts elsewhere in the region; most notably, the Pakistani Navy is the most consistent and longstanding participant, second only to the United States, in Combined Task Force (CTF)-150 (counter-terrorism operations) and CTF-151 (counter-piracy operations) led by U.S. Naval Forces Central (USNAVCENT). Our relationship with Pakistan remains a very important one. We look forward to continuing our engagement with the Pakistani military leadership, to include

the new Chief of the Army Staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, in the days ahead as we work together in pursuit of shared interests.

Our mil-to-mil relationship with **Tajikistan** is deepening despite Moscow's enduring ties and the presence of the 201st Military Base near Tajikistan's capital of Dushanbe, Russia's largest military base outside of its borders. China has also initiated a much stronger military cooperation partnership with Tajikistan, adding further complexity to Tajikistan's multi-faceted approach to security cooperation. Tajikistan's long border with Afghanistan remains the nation's top concern, as the Taliban intermittently fights for control of Afghanistan's Kunduz province, which is less than 160 miles from Dushanbe. These border concerns remain a focus area for U.S. security cooperation as we continue to develop the Tajiks' capacity to address violent extremism, terrorism, and narco-trafficking; enhance border security; and, confront other trans-regional threats.

Turkmenistan's UN-recognized policy of "positive neutrality" presents a challenge with respect to U.S. engagement. Our efforts to date have focused primarily on training, including in the areas of counter-narcotics and medical services. Due to Turkmenistan's shared border with Afghanistan, the Turkmen remain concerned about the continuing instability in Afghanistan and, separately, the potential for the return of foreign fighters. We are encouraged somewhat by Turkmenistan's expressed interest in increased mil-to-mil engagement with the U.S. within the limits of their "positive neutrality" policy.

We are cautiously optimistic about the possibility of **Uzbekistan's** improved relations with its neighbors in the region following the first presidential succession in the nation's 25-year history. This is a promising development given Uzbekistan's central and strategic geographic location, in the heart of Central Asia and bordering Afghanistan. President Mirziyoyev has reaffirmed the country's unwillingness to allow other nations to establish military bases in Uzbekistan, its restriction against aligning with foreign military or political blocs, and its self-imposed restriction against any type of expeditionary military operations. Despite these limitations, our bilateral mil-to-mil efforts are focused on helping the Uzbeks improve border security, enhance their counter-narcotic and counter-terrorism capabilities, and prevent the return of foreign fighters into the country, which are shared U.S. interests in the region. We remain committed to these security assistance efforts. We also are helping the Uzbek military, which is the largest military in Central Asia, to professionalize its forces through advisory support and assistance to its professional military institutions.

Required Programs, Capabilities and Resources. The security environment in the Central Region remains complex and highly volatile. To ensure we are able to effectively achieve our mandate to protect our national interests, we must be properly postured with the necessary capabilities and resources to pursue opportunities in support of our goals and objectives, and to prevail in our various endeavors throughout USCENTCOM's 20-country area of responsibility. Below are the programs, capabilities, and resources most critical to our success.

Building Partner Capacity. Building Partner Capacity (BPC) is essential to achieving our objectives in the Central Region. To improve stability in the USCENTCOM AOR and mitigate

the need for costly U.S. military intervention, we must be forward-leaning and empower our partners to meet internal security challenges and work collectively to counter common threats. BPC is a lower-cost alternative to U.S. boots on the ground, has longer-term sustainability, and is necessary for interoperable, combined coalition operations. As such it represents a high return investment in the future of the Central Region. **By building capacity and enabling partners to assume a larger role in providing for the stability and security of their sovereign spaces, we will enhance regional stability while still maintaining our critical access and influence in the region.** Other tangible by-products achieved through our BPC efforts include enhanced interoperability, improved security for forward deployed forces and diplomatic sites, continued access and influence, and more professional regional militaries comprised of forces learning the importance of rule of law and compliance with human rights norms. **Continued support of key partners engaged in the ongoing military campaign to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria is particularly important.** As important as long-term regional stability is BPC's focus on the threat environment and shaping the region is critical to better prepare and deter and counter state and non-state aggression. Our key partners' ability to procure U.S. weapons and equipment and increase interoperability with U.S. and coalition forces is critical to our success. Any reduction of U.S. assistance risks undermining our allies and creating a security vacuum for exploitation by state and non-state actors with counter-U.S. or violent intentions.

Foreign Military Financing and Foreign Military Sales. For decades, U.S. security assistance provided to countries including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Yemen, Kuwait and Egypt, has helped create lasting partnerships and improve regional stability. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) assistance and the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program enable countries to meet their defense

needs, while also promoting U.S. national security interests by strengthening coalitions and enhancing interoperability between and among U.S. and coalition forces. **When we provide defense systems through U.S. security assistance, we are not just providing our partners with capabilities, we are committing to a long-term relationship that includes sustainment of those capabilities.** The complex and technical nature of advanced defense systems often require continuous collaboration between countries. This may include training and support in the use of the equipment, maintenance assistance, and, in some cases, continuing help to update and modernize the equipment throughout its life-cycle.

Nevertheless, **we must better anticipate our partners' requirements and find ways to improve our FMF and FMS programs' processes to better meet demand in today's high-paced global security environment.** Delays in procurement and delivery can, over time, jeopardize relationships with buyer nations and the potential for future FMS and FMF transactions. It is imperative that we make the FMF and FMS processes more responsive to partner needs.

In recent years we have seen an increase in restrictions placed on assistance provided to partner nations, limiting their ability to acquire U.S. equipment based on human rights and/or political oppression of minority groups. While these are significant challenges that must be addressed, **the use of FMF and FMS as a mechanism to achieve changes in behavior has questionable effectiveness and can have unintended consequences.** We need to carefully balance these concerns against our desired outcomes for U.S. security assistance programs – both DoD and State-funded – to build and shape partner nations' capability, interoperability, and self-reliance in

support of broader U.S. foreign policy. We should avoid using the programs as a lever of influence or denial to our own detriment.

USCENTCOM Exercise and Training Program. The USCENTCOM Exercise Engagement Training Transformation (CE2T2) program enhances U.S. capability to support contingency operations while improving readiness and maintaining presence and access to the region. At the same time, the program indirectly increases partner nations' operational capability; demonstrates mutual commitment to regional security; ensures an effective coalition posture; strengthens relationships; and, improves combined command, control, and communications interoperability (C3I). More importantly, in light of the fact that today's conflicts are increasingly trans-regional, all-domain, and multi-functional in nature, bi-lateral and multi-lateral exercises support the unity of effort requirement for coalition operations.

The USCENTCOM CE2T2 program continues to grow in complexity and relevance with expanded participation throughout the USCENTCOM AOR during FY2016 and into FY2017.

Last year, the command conducted 45 USCENTCOM- and/or Component-sponsored bilateral and multi-lateral exercises with 41 partner nations and spanning seven

Geographic and Functional Commands. These exercises shape the perceptions of key audiences in the USCENTCOM AOR to support U.S. strategic goals of reassuring partners and deterring aggressive and malign behavior. Exercise objectives and outcomes include maintaining key relationships while demonstrating multilateral, as well as unilateral, capabilities. They also enable increased cooperation and interoperability with our partners and

help to reinforce a strong military posture in the region. This helps counter any false perception of the U.S. “abandoning” the region.

Continued, robust, and reliable funding is necessary to fully support exercises as planned. For example, insufficient resourcing of component requirements can result in curtailment or even cancellation of efforts like Exercise EAGER LION, an annual multi-lateral training event in Jordan. This sub-optimization of the USCENTCOM exercise and training program ultimately will affect U.S. Joint and Combined Force readiness and create a perceived lack of commitment to our coalition partners. Combined with BPC, FMS, and FMF, the USCENTCOM CE2T2 program also actively promotes and supports regional stability through increased partner action and capability. These engagements not only build interoperability at the highest levels of command, but the benefits derived at the lowest, tactical levels of command and logistics manifest in long-term professional and personal relationships among participating country staffs.

Information Operations. Information Operations (IO) will continue to serve as a key element in shaping the environment to reduce or avoid conflict and as a force multiplier in the information space during and after major combat and counter-insurgency operations. **We have an enduring responsibility to employ IO to counter trans-regional threats.** By utilizing IO as a comprehensive, long-term capability to degrade VEOs’ effectiveness and counter state-sponsored destabilizing activities across the USCENTCOM AOR, the USG helps to improve regional stability while reducing the requirement for deployed U.S. forces. The Department of Defense (DoD), in concert with other USG agencies, has developed several IO campaigns, leveraging the latest technologies, which operate in the information domain. These campaigns

include counter-propaganda messaging in print media, radio, television, short message service, Internet, and social media, and take a proactive approach to coordinating these activities with the country teams and embassies in our AOR. The nature and scope of threats prevalent today in the USCENTCOM AOR necessitates a robust response, and **IO is a cost-effective application of DoD resources to deter aggression, counter destabilizing behavior, and decrease the potential for kinetic operations in order to protect USG and partner nation interests in the Central Region.**

Cyberspace Operations. USCENTCOM cyberspace operations are built on the foundation of cyber readiness and include both Department of Defense Information Network (DODIN) Operations and command-centric Defensive Cyberspace Operations. **Our top cyberspace priority is mission assurance; the goal is to preserve freedom of maneuver in cyberspace to assure access to both U.S. and foreign assets critical to military operations.** Efforts include, but are not limited to, helping to set priorities and contributing to the desired end-state of denying adversaries the ability to operate on our networks and impact our missions. We recognize the importance of maintaining a holistic approach to this evolving capability that emphasizes the need for a synchronized effort across the whole of government. While the full and proper implementation of all available USG/DoD technical defenses plays a vital role, the human element is the most important factor to protect and defend from malicious cyber activity. Looking ahead, USCENTCOM will continue to adapt our network defenses to detect, deter, and better react to known or anticipated threats.

Anti-Access Area Denial. Potential adversaries are actively investing in competitive responses that include anti-access/area denial (A2AD) systems to minimize U.S. influence and abilities. Adversaries are also pursuing “layered defenses” to directly challenge U.S. diplomacy and presence. An enemy may use combinations of kinetic (e.g., ballistic/cruise missiles, moored/floating mines, small boat swarms, submarines, aircraft, drones, irregular warfare using proxies, terrorism, WMD) and non-kinetic (e.g., GPS jamming, spoofing, cyber hacking, EMP, underground facilities, dispersal/camouflage of weapons/assets, shielding from aerial/satellite surveillance, decoys) capabilities to inhibit projection of force and/or precision strikes.

Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance Assets. USCENTCOM holds daily requirements for over 2,800 hours of full-motion video, thousands of still images, thousands of hours of signal intelligence, and other key intelligence collection sources. **These requirements do not reside only in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, but span the entirety of the USCENTCOM AOR. It is the layering, synchronization, and prioritization of national, theater, and tactical ISR capabilities that enable USCENTCOM force protection of transition, stability, and combat forces.** This critical capability also performs several key functions including: battlespace awareness for partner and U.S. operational commanders, as well as indications and warning to guard against strategic threats and miscalculation; identification of fixed ground networks and facilities; location and tracking of adversary operational elements and units; mapping and development of adversary command and control; interdictions of facilitation entities, suppliers, and supply routes; and, characterization and targeting of funding centers and other support nodes. Our greatest difficulties in this fight remain in the development of enemy networks, groups, cells, and nodes that fight from within the populace. There are critical airborne ISR

functions that must be present to map this unconventional threat. In priority order they are: 1) full-motion video, 2) signals intelligence, and 3) geospatial intelligence. **USCENTCOM's requirements consistently outpace theater airborne ISR capacity and capability and the demand will continue to grow.** We are able to address some of the shortfall through cross-CCMD and partner-nation coordination and capacity development. We also need to explore innovative ways to develop capabilities for persistent ISR through experimentation and technology maturation and demonstration projects. **Additionally, we need to address the shortfalls associated with processing, exploitation, and dissemination of collected intelligence.** For the foreseeable future, in the absence of additional much-needed ISR assets, maintaining operational awareness on threats, risks, regional stability, and humanitarian crises will require constant attention, creative application of ISR, hard choices on the prioritization of resources, and the determination of acceptable risk to mission and forces.

Precision Munitions. Highly accurate munitions are vital components of our kinetic strike and integrated air and missile defense capabilities, to dominate and counter our adversaries' increasingly sophisticated networks of coastal and air defenses coupled with precision ballistic missiles. Missile interceptors, air- and sea-launched cruise missiles, precision air-to-ground and air-to-air missiles, and long-range precision ground-to-ground missiles work in concert to counter the growing threats we face today. **We appreciate Congress' continued support for the procurement/replenishment, development, and forward positioning of precision and specific purpose munitions that are critical to the way we currently fight** – in urban areas, with very specific rules of engagement designed to protect civilians and limit damage to infrastructure. \

Counter Unmanned Aerial Systems (C-UAS). The enemy Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) threat and employment in the USCENTCOM AOR is rapidly evolving. Numerous non-state actors including ISIS, al Qaida, Taliban, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Fatah al-Sham are using both commercial-off-the-shelf and military drones to conduct operations against U.S. and coalition forces. This threat has evolved from reconnaissance and surveillance missions to weaponized drone attacks resulting in battlefield casualties. State actors continue to increase the sophistication of their UAS with all countries in the USCENTCOM AOR utilizing various classes of UAS for operations. **Given the evolving threat, the need for an effective Counter-UAS capability that can defeat all classes of UAS remains a top priority.** To address this problem, USCENTCOM is working with various Defense agencies and Industry through the Joint Urgent Operational Need (JUON) process to develop and acquire an effective system to employ against UAS. The ability to rapidly respond to this emerging threat is critical to mission success and requires increased funding to promote innovative solutions with expedited testing and rapid acquisition.

Joint and Interagency Partners. To ensure success in the pursuit of shared goals and objectives, our Joint and Interagency Partners must also be properly postured with the necessary capabilities and resources. Below are two key partners that play a significant role in support of USCENTCOM's mission and merit continued Congressional backing.

Joint Improvised-Threat Defeat Organization (JIDO) – JIDO, an element of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, is an invaluable organization that is even more important as we fight by, with and through our partners with fewer resources, but more exposed U.S.

personnel and equipment in the fight. Their ability to rapidly respond to emerging threats is essential to enabling our efforts to counter improvised threats (e.g., counter-facilitation, counter-tunneling, counter-UAS) and build partner capacity in support of our deployed warfighters. The expert JIDO personnel embedded within our formations at USCENTCOM's headquarters in Tampa, forward deployed, and across the globe, provide mission-critical analytical, planning, and rapid acquisition support. Having this invaluable joint organization that can expose the broader counter-IED network, identify future disruptive threats, stay in front of technological changes, and integrate our efforts across the Interagency to rapidly implement solutions is essential to our ability to protect our forces, defeat threat networks and build partner national capacity.

Global Engagement Center – The best way to defeat an idea is to present a better, more appealing idea to vulnerable and undecided audiences. **The State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) effectively coordinates, integrates, and synchronizes messaging to foreign audiences designed to undermine the disinformation espoused by violent extremist groups,** including ISIS and al Qaeda, while offering positive alternatives. The Center is focused on empowering and enabling partners, governmental and non-governmental, who are able to speak out against these groups and provide an alternative to ISIS's nihilist vision. To that end, the Center offers services ranging from planning thematic social media campaigns to providing factual information that counters disinformation to building capacity for third parties to effectively utilize social media to research and evaluation.

Required Authorities and Appropriations. Fluid environments require flexible authorities with sustained and timely funding to respond to changes in conditions and maintain momentum of operational forces. **We sincerely appreciate Congress' continued support for key authorities and appropriations needed for current and future operations and response to unforeseen contingencies.** The required authorities and resources listed below enable USCENTCOM to accomplish its mission and stated objectives in support of U.S. national interests and the interests of our partners in the Central Region.

Iraq Train & Equip Fund (ITEF). Iraq's ability to defeat ISIS requires professionalizing and building the capacity of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), including military or other security forces associated with the Government of Iraq, such as Kurdish and tribal security forces or other local forces with a national security mission. Most notably, the ongoing Coalition Military Campaign to defeat ISIS relies on indigenous Iraqi Security Forces to conduct ground operations against the enemy and liberate ISIS controlled territory. They have risen to the task and are making progress in this ongoing endeavor. While the initial training and equipping of the ISF focused heavily on developing Iraqi Army (IA) Brigades to conduct offensive operations, future efforts will shift to sustainment of combat capability and hold forces **to ensure that liberated areas remain under the control of the GoI and that these forces are able to counter remaining ISIS pockets and any other VEOs which may emerge and attempt to fill the void created by the defeat of ISIS.** These hold forces will be a combination of local tribal fighters and police forces.

Syria Train & Equip Program. Protecting the United States from terrorists operating in Syria and setting the ultimate conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in that country will require the continued training and equipping of Vetted Syria Opposition (VSO) forces. Additional recruitment, retention, resupply, and support are central to our strategy to defeat ISIS in Syria. Our revised training approach is proving successful, improving the effectiveness and lethality of the force on path to a projected strength of up to 35,000 by the end of fiscal year 2017 and growing to 40,000 in 2018. **Procurement and manufacturing lead times for non-standard weapons and ammunition and delivery from various foreign vendors complicates the already complex train and equip mission, so we appreciate as much flexibility as possible in authorizing and appropriating funds for this effort.** The SDF and VSOs continues to advance in defeating ISIS and holding and defending liberated areas, while also assisting local authorities in providing humanitarian and security assistance to the populace.

The Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF). Since 2005, U.S. provision of funds executed through ASFF has provided training, equipment, infrastructure, sustainment and salaries for a generated force of up to 352,000 Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and 30,000 Afghan Local Police (ALP). **ASFF plays a critical role in enabling the ANDSF to secure Afghanistan with an effective and sustainable force** that is central to the U.S. strategy to prevent a Taliban or al Qaeda resurgence, defeat VEOs, and deny safe haven for external plotting against the U.S. Homeland and U.S. and partner nation interests in the region.

Afghanistan Aviation Transition Funding – The proposed Afghan Air Force (AAF) and Special Mission Wing (SMW) aviation transition program is critical to addressing capability gaps in Close Air Support (CAS) and lift for the ANDSF. **The program is designed to address the shortfall in available aircraft and trained pilots to ensure Afghan forces have the required aviation support and maintenance pipeline to move toward self-sustainment and increased independent operations.** DoD plans to achieve these results by transitioning the AAF and SMW to U.S.-manufactured rotary wing platforms. Although the availability of trained pilots remains a particular challenge for the ANDSF, recent successes are producing capable pilots and the recap plan is designed to ease the human capital burden over time. The additional capability that would be gained through the aviation transition program will provide the Afghans needed overmatch against insurgents and terrorists while improving ground forces' effectiveness and reducing ANDSF's casualty rates.

Coalition Support. The authorities and funding that underpin our ability to effectively conduct Coalition operations, including in support of partners whose contributions are critical, but who lack the resources to participate without our assistance, are key to our continued success. The Coalition Support Fund (CSF) provides the authority to reimburse certain Coalition partners for logistical and military support provided by that nation in connection with Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan operations. The CSF also funds the Coalition Readiness Support Program (CRSP) which authorizes supplies, the loaning of equipment, and specialized training assistance to coalition forces. The CSF relieves the operational burden on U.S. forces and enhances the visibility of Coalition presence. This authority remains critical to our strategic approach to Coalition operations, **including, but not limited to, the ongoing military campaign to defeat**

the terrorist organization, ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and our transition in Afghanistan. The capability and interoperability that CSF funding facilitates is crucial to our bilateral relations, Coalition operations and training with partner nations, and to the success of our broader strategic and trans-regional objectives. The *Global Lift and Sustain* and successor authority further complements this approach by enabling us to provide transportation and life support to select Coalition partners.

Commanders' Emergency Response Program (CERP). CERP is authorized for local commanders to respond to urgent humanitarian relief and reconstruction requirements in Afghanistan, and may be used to make condolence payments for the loss of life, injury, or property damage resulting from U.S., coalition, or supporting military operations. The NDAA for FY2017 provides authority for ex gratia payments in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria for damage, personal injury, or death that is incident to U.S. combat operations. CERP funded projects directly benefit the indigenous civilian populations in Afghanistan and demonstrate the positive effects of our presence, while also providing tangible, quick mitigation when coalition actions result in casualties or property damage to civilians during the course of military operations. CERP is a proven force multiplier and a key enabler in responding to urgent humanitarian needs and promoting security. Going forward, we want to ensure commanders engaged in the Counter-ISIS missions can provide immediate, but limited, small scale humanitarian assistance to ISIS liberated areas, until national and international relief agencies can provide that support. Our responsiveness is critical to quickly stabilizing those areas in order to begin the holding phase of the campaign and to counter ISIS messaging.

Military Construction (MILCON). USCENTCOM stewards constrained resources and maintains an expeditionary approach to posturing capabilities in theater. We leverage existing infrastructure and host nation support and funding where possible, as well as maritime posture and reach back capabilities to meet steady state and surge requirements. In some instances, MILCON is required to establish infrastructure to support forces and equipment in the execution of their missions. Of note, **USCENTCOM requires support for development at Muwaffaq-Salti Air Base (MSAB), Jordan and construction of the new Consolidated Squadron Operations Facility at Al Udeid, Qatar. These two projects are essential to our contingency and steady state operations and support the Defense Strategic Guidance.** The projects will support executing our priority war plans by providing critical dispersed, resilient and flexible capacity to accept both steady state and enduring joint forces, multiple aircraft types and provide critical air C4I (command, control, communications, computers and intelligence) for current and future contingencies, theater and strategic surge and maritime operations within the USCENTCOM AOR. MILCON development is critical to support the realignment of U.S. forces operating from an expeditionary approach at various contingency bases scattered across the AOR to the required enduring posture approach necessary to protect U.S. interests and to sustain key bilateral relationships.

Prepositioned War Reserve Materiel (PWRM). Service Prepositioned War Reserve Materiel and capability sets remain critical force multipliers required to execute USCENTCOM's most dangerous and critical contingency plans. The Services and Defense Agency prepositioned capacity provides a shock absorber in rapidly emerging contingencies, buys critical decision

space for our national leadership, and mitigates the risk associated with the tyranny of distance when we are called upon to rapidly aggregate and reintroduce forces into the region.

The U.S. Central Command Team. The outstanding men and women who comprise the USCENTCOM Team truly are our most important assets. They continue to make tremendous contributions on behalf of our Nation and our partners and allies around the globe. **We must ensure they have everything they need to do their jobs effectively, efficiently, and as safely as possible.**

We also continue to benefit from the unique capability provided by our Coalition Coordination Center, which consists of more than 200 foreign military officers from nearly 60 partner nations. They, too, are important members of our USCENTOM Team and play a critical role in strengthening the partnerships between our nations.

We remain mindful of the fact that **success requires that we work together, not just within the command, but also with our teammates from other Combatant Commands, our Component Commands, established combined/joint task forces, the Central Region's 18 county teams, and various agencies and organizations throughout the USG and the Interagency.** Our close collaboration with counterparts at the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Treasury, CIA, FBI, and JIDO, for example, has 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.

We also are incredibly grateful for the support of our families. They are highly valued members of our USCENTCOM Team and we could not do what we do without them. They make important contributions and tremendous sacrifices each and every day in support of us and on behalf of the command and a grateful Nation.

The upcoming year promises to be a busy and challenging one in the Central Region. You can be assured that the world-class team at U.S. Central Command – *which includes more than 80,000 Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, Coastguardsmen, and Civilians stationed today throughout the USCENTCOM area of responsibility* – is up to the task, and is highly-skilled, motivated, and stands ready to do whatever is necessary to accomplish the mission: defend our Nation and our interests, the interests of partners and allies, and improve stability and security in that strategically important part of the world.

USCENTCOM: 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

MARCH 29, 2017

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MS. STEFANIK

Ms. STEFANIK. In terms of information operations and countering ISIL propaganda efforts—we have seen some tactical success in Iraq and Syria, but I am concerned with about what I perceive to be a larger strategic gap across our government. Can you talk about ways to improve CENTCOM information operations requirements, and how we can improve our ability to counter ISIL's global and strategic propaganda efforts? Is the State Department's Global Engagement Center the right place for DOD to interface for these types of efforts as we try to counter ISIL and state-sponsored actors, and if so, how can we strengthen that relationship? Are you seeing any troubling propaganda efforts within your AOR from state-sponsored actors such as Russia, and if so how are you dealing with this?

General VOTEL. USCENTCOM is part of a much larger effort which includes not only USG departments and agencies, but the governments of our Coalition partners, non-government organizations, and various entities from the private sector. If we are serious about defeating ISIS in the information environment, we must match ISIS' level of intensity, volume and effectiveness in the information environment. We must do the same in response to all adversaries choosing to compete in the information battlespace. The State Department's Global Engagement Center provides a very effective functional mechanism through which we can mass the effects necessary to counter and ultimately defeat ISIS. As the Global Engagement Center continues to mature its capability, USCENTCOM will work through the Joint Staff and OSD to help expand and improve coordination across the Department of Defense and the Interagency. Russia and Iran both are using information operations (e.g., propaganda) to achieve their desired effects in the USCENTCOM AOR. Both have established large, well-resourced information warfare capabilities. Within our authorities and resources, USCENTCOM counters this propaganda. CENTCOM Web-Ops specifically counters allegations of U.S. assistance to ISIS and exposes Russian and PMF violation of the Laws of Armed Conflict, among other activities.

Ms. STEFANIK. Can you provide us with more of your thoughts and concerns about Russian influence within your AOR, beyond what is talked about in Syria? There have been recent reports about Russian collaboration with the Taliban, and Russia increasing their presence and influence in Egypt, as just two examples.

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

Ms. STEFANIK. Describe the threat posed by Al Qaeda, the Islamic State-Khorasan Province, and the Haqqani network. What, if any, limitations exist on your ability to effectively target these threats?

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

Ms. STEFANIK. According to some news reports, Iran has supported the Houthis militia in Yemen. Other reports suggested that there is not a strong link between the two. What is your assessment of the nature of Iranian support to the Houthis in Yemen? How does this impact our strategy? Can we achieve our objectives in Yemen absent a political solution?

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

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY DR. ABRAHAM

Dr. ABRAHAM. Can you discuss the long-term threat Hezbollah presents to U.S. interests, and apart from increased sanctions, how can Congress further help in the fight against Hezbollah?

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

Dr. ABRAHAM. With regard to Turkey: With last year's coup attempt and the potential for political instability ahead of this year's April presidential referendum, what are some of the challenges you have faced and expect to face with U.S. and coalition air support for CENTCOM missions flying out of Incirlik Air Base?

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