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**U.S. POLICY IN SYRIA AND
THE BROADER REGION**

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ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS

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ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS

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U.S. POLICY IN SYRIA AND THE BROADER REGION

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES,

Washington, DC, Wednesday, December 11, 2019.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 10:00 a.m., in room 2118, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Adam Smith (chairman of the committee) presiding.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. ADAM SMITH, A REPRESENTATIVE FROM WASHINGTON, CHAIRMAN, COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

The CHAIRMAN. Let us go ahead and call the meeting to order. I want to start by thanking our witnesses, Secretary Esper and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Milley, for appearing before us to testify.

The purpose of this hearing is to discuss our policy in Syria, particularly in light of the events that happened just a couple of months ago when Turkey invaded and drove the Kurds out of portions of that.

But before I do that I do want to do one other—it is our first hearing since Congressman Brindisi from New York has joined the committee. I want to thank him. We have a lot of new faces on this committee, but now they are a year into it. They are not new faces anymore, but it is good to have another freshman added to the committee. I appreciate him serving. Welcome. Thank you.

As I said, the purpose of this hearing is to look into the events around Syria. And there is a whole bunch of questions. And the other big issue for us is just the ability of the members of this committee to ask questions directly of the key policymakers in an area that is of enormous importance to the committee and to give them an opportunity to learn more about that policy and also express their views. And that is a huge part of oversight role in Congress and I think it would be enormously important.

There are three sort of broad areas that I am interested around this. First of all is where do we go from here? What is now the mission on containing ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] and ultimately defeating ISIS in the region? Because without question, no matter how we got to the point where we got, the Turkish incursion into Syria changed that equation. We had built an alliance with the Syrian Democratic Forces and with the Kurds as a big part of that in the region. And the history is important here. We were trying for years, quite a long time, after the rise of ISIS to find a coalition as they built a caliphate across Syria and across Iraq and threatened our interests and the interests of the region. That was an unchecked expansion for a substantial period of time.

In 2015, the Obama administration was able to cobble together a coalition, primarily of Kurds in the YPG [People's Protection Units] in Syria, but also with Syrian Democratic Forces and then working with Iraqis as well to have a counter-ISIS movement. And whatever else one can say about it, it worked. The caliphate has been broken up because of that plan started by the Obama administration and carried out by the Trump administration. Now as we all know, it did not defeat ISIS. ISIS is still a robust, transnational terrorist threat in that region and beyond. But the breaking up of the caliphate was a huge accomplishment. With the incursion from the north of Turkey, it undermines that.

What is the new plan? What happens here going forward? Because the biggest risk of this plan from the start was the concern that the Turks would have about our alliance with the Kurds and the YPG in particular. And the Obama administration spent a lot of time trying to make sure that Turkey didn't do what they ultimately wound up doing here. And we need a new plan. So understanding what that plan is is important.

But the other piece that I think is important for members is to understand how policy gets made between the Pentagon and the White House and how we can be involved in it because there certainly are a lot of concerns about how this came out. And I would be very curious to have you tell us what actually happened. But essentially, the President sent out a tweet, I think it was a year ago now, in December saying and I don't have it directly in front of me but basically we are pulling out of Syria. And by the way, pulling out of Afghanistan, as well, at the same time.

And in all the meetings that I had and this committee has had the first we heard of that. There had been no discussion about it. So the impression that is given is that it wasn't like he sat down with the NSC [National Security Council] and said hey, what is going on? What is the plan? He didn't sit down with you guys and say, hey, this is a policy objective we need to get to, how are we going to get there? He woke up one morning and decided we were going to do it. That is problematic, to my way of thinking. And we sort of backfilled the policy afterwards.

We need greater transparency. I think the process is important. I trust the job that you guys do. I trust a lot of people at the Pentagon, a lot of people in the NSC. Their input is important in developing a policy, not just sort of throwing it out there and seeing what happens. So we would like to learn more about how that works.

And there are other issues on that. There was recently discussion of aid that we had approved for Lebanon. That aid was held up for some period of time. We attempted to find out why and it was kind of hard, basically. It was eventually released, but we never really heard what was the point? Those sorts of things really matter. I think they matter for the executive branch, but they matter a lot for us, too. Because on this committee, there are a lot of very bright, talented people. We have people who have served in the military, people who have served in the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], State Department, people who are just policymakers, who want to be part of that discussion to help as a co-equal branch of

government work towards a good policy. We want to improve upon where we are at in that relationship.

Lastly, certainly ISIS is a huge concern in the region, but there are other concerns in the region and we want to know how the policies as we are dealing with Syria, with Bashar al-Assad having held on to power and seemingly will for some time, how does that impact the broader region? I personally have just got back from a trip there and Ms. Slotkin joined me on that trip as well with a couple of other members to the Middle East. And while there are certainly challenges, I think there are also opportunities there. There were protests in Iraq and Lebanon against the Iranian involvement which we had never seen before. People in the region are beginning to understand that Iran's influence is malign and undermining their interests. There is an opportunity there because in addition to containing ISIS, that is their other largest goal in the region is to stop Iran's destabilizing influence from Syria to Lebanon to Iraq to Yemen, all across. How can we contain them? How can we build on that and get an opportunity?

Also, the concern about Iran has given us, I think, a historic opportunity to try to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, enormous crisis in the Middle East. There is now a much more of a connection between some key Arab states and Israel because of their concern about Iran. Is there a way to build on that to create a more stable Middle East?

So those are sort of the three broad policy areas that I am interested in. Again, a huge part of this is to give members an opportunity to better understand what the policy is. We are, knock on wood, going to pass a defense bill today. That is our effort and the more informed we are, the better that bill is going to be. And with that, I am pleased to yield to the ranking member, Mr. Thornberry.

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

Mr. THORNBERRY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I want to welcome both of our witnesses. I believe this is the first time that you-all are up here in your current capacities together and we appreciate you taking the time to be here with us.

As we think about Syria, I think all of us—there are those who develop a Syria policy on paper in journal articles and so forth. And it seems relatively simple and straightforward. What you-all have to deal with is the real world including the historical, the cultural, the religious, the ethnic background and complications in this part of the world and that is the world as you found it and as you have to deal with it. It is not quite as simple as putting down points one, two, and three on a piece of paper and assuming that everything will flow easily from that.

You also have to deal with mistakes made by previous administrations. I remember the Obama administration made a big deal about pivoting to Asia, implying that we were pivoting away from the Middle East. Well, it turns out that the Middle East doesn't really let you get away from it with terrorism, and as the chairman points out, the necessities of containing Iran.

I remember the previous administration drawing a red line in Syria and then failing to follow up which many people believe has emboldened not only Assad, but others, to take greater risks, that the U.S. would not follow through on threats or statements that it made.

All of that is part of the quagmire that is Syria today, that you-all have to deal with. But I agree completely, our challenges are how do we reduce the terrorist threat, especially to the homeland, from that region? And how do we contain an aggressive, seemingly increasingly desperate Iran, a revolutionary regime that seems bent on expansion and disruption of key neighbors?

Of course, you-all can't fix the whole problem. What you can do is tell us what your objectives are and what the military role is in this. And we look forward to hearing on both of those things today. Thank you for being here.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. With that, as I understand it, you have one joint statement. Is that correct or are you both—

Secretary ESPER. We submitted one joint statement, Mr. Chairman. We both have separate statements, too.

The CHAIRMAN. All right, then I will yield to Mr. Esper.

**STATEMENT OF HON. MARK T. ESPER, SECRETARY OF
DEFENSE, DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE**

Secretary ESPER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Thornberry, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the security situation in Syria and the broader Middle East.

Before we begin, I would like to thank the committee for its work on the NDAA [National Defense Authorization Act]. I encourage Congress to move swiftly on its passage, along with the defense appropriations bill. This legislation is critical to providing our service members the resources they need to fully implement the National Defense Strategy.

I also want to offer my deepest condolences to the victims and families of the tragic shooting that took place at Pearl Harbor and Pensacola this week. In light of these events, we are reviewing our vetting procedures for all foreign nationals who come to the United States for military training, as well as assessing our installation security procedures to ensure the safety of our military community.

As reflected in the National Defense Strategy, the Department of Defense prioritizes China and then Russia as our Nation's top national security challenges. As we transition our focus towards great power competition, we must also remain vigilant in countering threats from rogue states like Iran and violent extremist organizations such as ISIS. The United States strategy in the Middle East seeks to ensure the region is not a safe haven for terrorists, is not dominated by any power hostile to the United States, and contributes to a stable global energy market.

For the Department of Defense, this translates to the following six objectives. First, utilize a dynamic U.S. military presence with strategic depth to deter, and if necessary, respond to aggression. Second, strengthen the defensive capabilities of regional partners. Third, advance partnerships and burden sharing with allies and partners to address shared security concerns. Fourth, protect free-

dom of navigation. Fifth, deny safe haven to terrorists that threaten the homeland. And sixth, mitigate WMD [weapons of mass destruction] threats.

Although there are a multitude of security issues to discuss in the Middle East, today we will focus on two of the most destabilizing players in the region, ISIS and Iran. Beginning with ISIS, the United States has achieved success alongside our partner forces in Syria and Iraq to destroy the physical caliphate and to liberate 7.7 million people living under its brutal rule. This includes the successful operations that resulted in the death of ISIS's founder and leader, Bakr al-Baghdadi, as well as one of his top deputies.

The Department of Defense remains committed to working with our partners to ensure ISIS is unable to mount a resurgence. Today, U.S. forces remain postured in Syria, operating in close coordination with the Syrian Democratic Forces. Although the recent Turkish incursion has complicated this battlespace, the Department of Defense remains confident that we can continue the mission the President has given us in Syria which is to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS. We maintain our leadership role in the Defeat ISIS campaign which brings together 76 nations and 5 international organizations to provide funding, military capabilities, and political support.

In Iraq, we continue to work by, with, and through the Iraqi Security Forces to enable a strong and independent state. I was recently there to visit our troops and meet with our Iraqi partners. Despite the turmoil at the political level, our train, advise, and assist efforts with the Iraqi military remain strong and continue to show progress.

Moving to Iran, over the past 18 months the Department of Defense has supported the United States economic and diplomatic maximum pressure campaign. These efforts seek to bring the Iranian regime back to the negotiating table for a new and better deal that addresses the full range of threats emanating from Iran. Tehran's efforts to destabilize the region have increased in recent months as it attacked targets in Saudi Arabia, disrupted the commercial shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, shot down a U.S. unmanned aircraft in international air space, and provided support to numerous proxy groups. To address these threats, we are taking a deliberate approach to strengthen our defenses, to enable our partners to better defend themselves, and to refine our response options.

Since May of this year, nearly 14,000 U.S. military personnel have deployed to the region to serve as a tangible demonstration of our commitment to our allies and our partners. These additional forces are not intended to signal an escalation, but rather to reassure our friends and buttress our efforts at deterrence.

We are also focused on internationalizing the response to Iran's aggression by encouraging increased burden sharing and cooperation with allies and partners from around the world. The International Maritime Security Construct which protects freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman and the more nascent integrated air and missile defense efforts led by Saudi Arabia, are two such examples. Through these activities, we are send-

ing a clear message to Iran that the international community will not tolerate its malign activities.

Along with our allies and partners, we remain united in our commitment to regional stability and to upholding longstanding international rules and norms. Importantly, Iran should not mistake the United States restraint for an unwillingness to respond with decisive military force should our forces or interests be attacked.

In conclusion, as the Department of Defense continues to implement the National Defense Strategy, the stability of the Middle East remains important to our Nation's security. As such, we will continue to calibrate all of our actions to deter conflict, to avoid unintended escalation, and to enable our partners to defend themselves against regional aggressors. In doing so, we will preserve the hard-won gains of the past and ensure the security of the United States and our vital interests.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

[The joint prepared statement of Secretary Esper and General Milley can be found in the Appendix on page 55.]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.
Chairman Milley.

**STATEMENT OF GEN MARK A. MILLEY, USA, CHAIRMAN,
JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF**

General MILLEY. Chairman Smith and Ranking Member Thornberry, distinguished committee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the national security challenges we face in the Middle East. And before I begin, I would like to echo Secretary Esper's condolences and sympathies to the victims and the families of the shootings at both Pearl Harbor and Pensacola. On behalf of all the leaders both uniformed and civilians in the United States military our thoughts and prayers are with the fallen and we are thankful for the heroism and the skill of the persons who responded to put themselves in harm's way to save countless lives.

On the topic today on the Middle East, I just returned a few days ago from an eight-country visit to Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Oman. The Middle East remains a challenge to U.S. national security interests. ISIS, al-Qaida, and other terrorist groups thrive on the instability in the region as they try to export violent extremism around the world. We are not finished with that fight. Iran exploits the volatility of the Middle East and asserts itself through malign influence to achieve regional dominance.

Our National Security Strategy, as Secretary Esper outlined, has clear goals: a stable and secure Middle East; a Middle East that is not a safe haven and a breeding ground for violent extremists; a Middle East that is not dominated by a nation hostile to the United States; and a Middle East that contributes to a stable global energy market.

As the Secretary stated, the National Defense Strategy provides military objectives to deter the destabilizing activities of Iran and violent extremist organizations and he outlined those six objectives. The National Military Strategy describes how the joint force achieves those six objectives through our five focus areas of responding to threats, deterring strategic attacks that includes the

proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, deter conventional attacks, assure our allies and partners, and compete below the level of armed conflict.

Specifically, in Syria, we continue combined operations with the Syrian Democratic Forces in order to complete the enduring defeat of ISIS and prevent their reemergence. Iraq has been an essential partner in defeating ISIS in the region and we continue to work by, with, and through Iraqi Security Forces in order to achieve a secure and stable Iraq, able to defend itself against internal security threats of terrorism.

Our military strategy in Afghanistan is to continue to deny Afghanistan as a safe haven for terrorist attacks on the homeland and that has been our objective since October 7, 2001. And we also support the effort to reach a political settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan Government and Afghan-to-Afghan negotiated settlements that ends this war in a responsible way and meets U.S. national security objectives.

And Iran remains the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism and has increased instability in the region through state and proxy actions. As you know, we have increased recently our force posture in the response to Iran's recent attacks against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the continued acts of aggression and malign influence throughout the region. We will maintain the strategic depth of the joint force in the region in order to deter Iran, assure our partners, and if necessary, respond if deterrence fails.

In broad terms, our military strategy in the Middle East is part of an interagency international effort to sustain the conditions-based approach designed to one, defeat violent extremism including the enduring defeat of ISIS; two, to prevent regional dominance by Iran; and three, to assure our allies and partners.

Thank you for your continued support to our men and women in uniform. I look forward to an NDAA later on this afternoon and I appreciate the opportunity to appear here today and I look forward to your questions.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, gentlemen. Now we will move into questions. Our two witnesses have a hard stop at noon which means I am going to be even more aggressive about enforcing the 5-minute clock to make sure that we can get to as many members as possible.

I have had my opportunities before, so I am not going to ask questions. I will yield to Mrs. Davis for the first set of questions, 5 minutes. Thanks.

Mrs. DAVIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to both of you, Dr. Esper and General Milley, for joining us.

I appreciate your statement and I wonder if you will just perhaps in a more refined fashion, why is our military presence essential in Syria? And what can we not achieve actually through other means to fulfill our strategic objectives?

And I wonder if you could in that answer take us into 3 years with that military posture and touch briefly on the diplomatic mission as well. Thank you.

Secretary ESPER. Thank you, Congressman. I will take the first stab, and then let General Milley flesh out operational aspects of it.

In short, the mission remains the enduring defeat of ISIS. We do that through this partnership with the SDF [Syrian Democratic Forces] on the ground. The SDF has been a great partner in the sense of providing very capable ground forces. What we provide for them are the enablers, principally the air support and intelligence, things like that that help us defeat ISIS as we see ISIS pops up.

And Chairman, I don't know if you want to provide more operational details.

General MILLEY. Yes. Why is it necessary? It is because ISIS still exists. ISIS as an entity, as an organization, is more than just an organization. It is also an ideology. It is an inspirational group, and so on and so forth.

They have been defeated, the caliphate, the physical entity, the proto-state called the caliphate. That was destroyed, defeated. But the organization itself still exists. There are still members and they are generally, more or less, not 100 percent, but generally in the lower Euphrates River Valley. In order to provide for the enduring defeat and working by, with, and through allies and partners, Iraqi Security Forces in Iraq and the SDF in Syria, that enables us to continue to maintain intelligence collection and strike capability to continue to rip apart the remnants of what is ISIS. If we fail to do that, ISIS will reemerge. The conditions will come back and they will reemerge as a capable threat to the region and our interests.

Mrs. DAVIS. And so what are the conditions then that would allow us to withdraw? Does that mean that ISIS would absolutely have to be defeated? And we obviously know that the situation in Afghanistan is very critical in that way as well.

Secretary ESPER. So one thing I will add first and then I will answer your question directly. We are fighting ISIS right now all the way from Africa into Afghanistan. We have operations conducting there against ISIS and its derivatives.

The metric that we have set out for this in terms of when we could consider redeploying, if you will, would be when we feel confident that local security and police forces are capable of handling any type of resurgence, if you will, of ISIS. I think the defeat, if you will, will be hard because it is an ideology. I don't think we ever—it is hard to foresee any time soon that we would stamp it out, but when we get to the point where local police and security forces can handle the actual threat of ISIS activities, then that would be a metric.

Mrs. DAVIS. And looking to Turkey and Syria, what can we see in the next few years in terms of their handling those objectives that you have outlined?

Secretary ESPER. Well, I think Turkey and Syria have different objectives. This is our priority with regard to Syria. Turkey's objective, and I hesitate to speak for them, but in my discussions with the Turks, their number one concern are Kurdish terrorists, the PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party], coming into Turkey and conducting attacks on the Turkish people.

Close behind that is the presence of 2 to 3 to 4 million refugees in Turkey and their ability to sustain that, so their focus is a little bit different than what ours is right now on that front.

Mrs. DAVIS. Could you speak to the whole-of-government approach there, as well, because obviously, this is the Armed Services

Committee, but we also know that if we don't have a full picture of where the State Department is in this and their capacity at this time to be dealing with it, that that is a real problem for us.

I am not asking you to be the Secretary of State, but please.

Secretary ESPER. Secretary of Defense is challenging enough. The State Department, in the context of Syria, the State Department is working through a U.N. [United Nations] process we call the Geneva process that brings the key players in Geneva to discuss a resolution to the war in Syria, the civil war in Syria. That process has had its ups and downs over the years and I am sorry, but I can't give you a current update as to where things stand. Progress has not been sufficient enough for our likes, if you will.

Mrs. DAVIS. And General Milley, could you comment as well on your optimism, pessimism, in terms of the support of the diplomatic mission there?

General MILLEY. I wouldn't characterize it as optimistic or pessimistic. I just think that we, the U.S. military, have a requirement not just in the Middle East but throughout the world to support diplomatic efforts. In the words of a previous Secretary of Defense, it is much better that foreign countries deal with the Department of State than the Department of Defense. So we want to act in support all the time of diplomatic efforts.

With respect to Syria or Iran for that matter and the topics of today, there are a variety of diplomatic efforts ongoing and we are directly in support of those.

Mrs. DAVIS. Thank you very much.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Mr. Thornberry.

Mr. THORBERRY. Mr. Chairman, I will yield to Mr. Wilson.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you, Mr. Thornberry. And I thank both of you for being here today. America is fortunate to have such leadership and I know military families appreciate, Mr. Secretary and General, your service. It is so meaningful.

And Mr. Secretary, I appreciated earlier this year, I had an opportunity to welcome you to Fort Jackson. I saw your empathy in relationship with the military, the troops. It was so positive and I fully supported the promotion that you received to be Secretary of Defense and it is just reassuring again to our allies, to the American people, to military families. So thank you.

And with that, I am grateful to be the ranking member of the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism Subcommittee of the Foreign Affairs Committee. We understand any strategy in Syria should be both diplomatic and political. And so what is the relationship of the Department of Defense and State Department to try to promote stability in the region?

Secretary ESPER. Well, thank you for your comments, Mr. Wilson. We collaborate constantly with State Department at all levels to include myself speaking often with Secretary Pompeo. We are brought together in the NSC process where we have committee deputies, principal committee meetings to discuss these issues. And so in each of them we were hand in glove.

As the Chairman mentioned, as I have stated before, part of our job is to enable our diplomats. I want to do that as much as possible. In some cases maybe providing security, if you will, for the distribution of humanitarian aid. In other cases, it is making sure

that we are using our military presence to reassure and reinforce allies and partners which is what we have been doing in Saudi Arabia with Saudi Arabia. So those are just two examples of the close coordination that happens between us. And by the way, other players in that realm as well, whether it is Treasury, USAID [United States Agency for International Development], all the key players, a whole-of-government approach.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you very much. I am very grateful you pointed out USAID, too, because they play such a vital role.

I believe that ISIS materialized, Mr. Secretary, because of the vociferous withdrawal from Iraq under the previous administration which followed the unfulfilled red line. This premature decision based on a timeline rather than conditions based, led to the re-engagement to have to defeat ISIS.

With the President's recent comments about pulling our troops out of Syria and keeping quote a peacekeeping force, how will this force accomplish any of the six objectives that you and General Milley have highlighted in your statements?

Secretary ESPER. Mr. Wilson, the force, the residual force in Syria right now is not a peacekeeping force. It is a force focused on the enduring defeat of ISIS. They are working closely day in and day out with the SDF to perform a number of tasks underneath that overarching goal and strategy. So that is their mission. That is what they are deployed to do and they are conducting those operations day by day.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you. And General Milley, again, thank you for your service. It is so reassuring to military families.

You have already cautioned that a reemergence of ISIS is possible. Can you cite further the assessment of ISIS capabilities and potential to reemerge absent a U.S. presence?

General MILLEY. My assessment at this point is that if we do not retain a capability, an intelligence capability that allows us to collect and see and then act with a strike capability on ISIS in Syria, then the conditions for reemergence of ISIS will happen. It will take some time. It will probably take maybe 6 to 12 months something like that, but ISIS would reemerge if the United States went to zero.

Now having said that, there are other forces in the area that also have interest in attacking and suppressing ISIS. But left unattended whatsoever, I think they would reemerge, absolutely.

Secretary ESPER. I would add that in Syria, we are also there with allied forces which we can't discuss in this session, but we have partners there as well, that are working with us and working, supporting the SDF and that is very important to our efforts as well.

Mr. WILSON. Well, thank you, because to me this provides sadly safe havens for terrorists to attack American families around the world and back home. So thank you for what you are doing.

And then General, the plan for the ISIS detainees held by the Syrian Democratic Forces, what is the status of maintaining the detainees as where they are or encouraging their return?

General MILLEY. The current status is that there are 24 detention center prisons that are manned by the SDF throughout different parts of Syria and they are still under adequate control

based on the reporting that I have. So there is no risk at this point that I can see of some mass escape, that sort of thing. The SDF clearly has them under their control.

In the Turkish incursion zones, it is the responsibility of the Turkish Government in that 30-kilometer incursion zone in the northern portion of Syria, northeastern, that is the responsibility of the Turkish Government, but in the rest of Syria, the SDF has control.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you. We have faith in both of you. Thank you very much.

Secretary ESPER. I would just add, this is where the 81 members of the ISIS campaign helps because they provide funding for the SDF to do that.

The CHAIRMAN. One thing I didn't mention up front is I try to keep it to the 5 minutes, not to ask a 4 minutes and 59 second question. I will give you a chance to wrap up, but when you see the clock go off, if you could wrap up, that would be great.

Mr. Langevin.

Mr. LANGEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Secretary, General Milley, thank you for your service. Thank you for your testimony here today.

To follow up on that question, that was one of the main things I wanted to get to in terms of the status of the 11,000 ISIS prisoners. Obviously, the thing that most worries me is the threat to the homeland and obviously their escape would be very troubling for our security, as well as that of our allies.

I appreciate the answer you gave, but is there any intention to transfer any of these prisoners to another entity? And if so, how would the U.S. ensure an orderly transfer of custody?

Secretary ESPER. I will take the first stab at that, Mr. Langevin. First of all, if you look at the 10,000, if we went into closed session and we were able to provide, I would tell you most of them are not the threat that we might think they are in terms of fighters. There is a hard-core group that I think we watch closely. So I want to make sure you understand this is a spectrum of fighters. Some are more violent, if you will, than others.

That said, of the 10,000, if I remember my statistics right, 2,000, 2,200 or so are foreign fighters. We are trying to work with our allies and partners to have them repatriated and brought to justice. I have had numerous discussions with our European allies on this fact. I have discussed it with our Iraqi partners and others. And so we continue to engage on that front. Beyond that, there is no plan to—no other plans to transfer them anywhere other than to repatriate them back to their nations of origin, their home nations.

Mr. LANGEVIN. And Secretary Esper, what additional changes to the disposition of U.S. forces in Syria are planned for the next 6 months and are there changes to disposition plans for the region?

Secretary ESPER. Right now, there is no disposition plans that I am tracking. Of course, that could change if a threat changes or the commander needs to make changes on the ground, but I will defer to General Milley to see if he has anything to add.

General MILLEY. That is correct. The current disposition is what we anticipate for the next 6 months depending on unless there is

some kind of significant change in conditions. But right now, we don't anticipate that.

Mr. LANGEVIN. And Mr. Secretary and General Milley, what do you anticipate will happen to the Syrian Democratic Forces given the President's decision to withdraw U.S. forces from the Syrian-Turkish border? They were strong allies, partners with us and I am concerned about what is going to happen to them now.

Secretary ESPER. My current assessment is that the situation up there is generally stabilized. There is—you know, the no cease-fire is perfect, if you will. I think the wild card is always the Turkish surrogate forces that are out there, but, generally, my sense is that things have roughly stabilized in northeast Syria. But again, the Chairman was just in the region. He may have heard something different.

General MILLEY. I haven't heard anything particularly different. I think it has settled down a little bit, but I would also caution that it is probably a little bit early to tell. These things take a while to unfold. The 30-kilometer or so buffer zone that was established by Turkey in the center and then by Syria and the Russians on either side of that, that is still an area of dynamic movement back and forth between those forces. We are watching it all very closely. With respect to what will happen with the SDF, the SDF has already made adjustments in that particular area. We are still working with them in the eastern portion of northeast Syria and then they are working with Russian and Syrian regimes in other parts of Syria. So they are continuing their cause and their fight against various entities that are inside Syria.

Secretary ESPER. I would like to add one thing now that I have thought a little bit more about your question. I think the other thing we have to watch out for here in the coming months is as Turkey begins to resettle the internally displaced persons within Turkey, like I said, 2 to 4, more like 3 million Syrians, what is that going to cause in terms of disruptions with the Kurds as they move them back into Kurdish areas and what not. So there will be some turmoil, I expect as that happens. That is beginning to happen now and I think we are going to watch that very carefully.

Mr. LANGEVIN. Thank you. And lastly, do we expect any escalation in Iran's activity in terms of intelligence reports that we are receiving? What do we expect within the next 6 months? Are we tracking anything in particular that we need to be ready for?

Secretary ESPER. Obviously, we can't discuss intelligence matters in this open session, but we see a lot of regime under stress right now, both through the maximum pressure campaign. We see a lot of turmoil in the streets of many cities of Iran, suppression through various means that are happening. So you know, you hope for the best, but we are planning for the worst and as we see things happen or we see upticks in activity, we certainly will adjust our forces, adjust our posture accordingly.

Mr. LANGEVIN. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Mr. Turner.

Mr. TURNER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Secretary, you have a tough job. Syria is both a difficult and a contested environment. Washington is both a difficult and contested environment. The House recently passed a resolution disagreeing with the President's

decision to withdraw troops from Syria. On the same day, the House would have been unable to pass a resolution authorizing keeping troops in Syria.

You do not have an authorization for use of force to counter Russian influence in Syria, to hold back Iran's influence in Syria, to support the Kurds, to support the Syrian Democrat Forces in their civil war against Syria, to protect civilians and how they are being attacked by the Syrian Government itself, or to counter the Assad regime. But yet, those are criticisms that you receive every day that you are not accomplishing in your goals of Syria.

How difficult is it for you to operate and formulate policy when you don't have an updated authorization use of force for the changing environment that you have in the Middle East?

Secretary ESPER. Mr. Turner, we think we have sufficient authorities right now under the 2001 and 2002 AUMFs [Authorizations for Use of Military Force] to conduct what—to do what we need to do in Syria. Those are holding up fairly well and so we think we can do what we need to do at this point in time.

General MILLEY. I would echo that. I mean the 2001 AUMF allows us to conduct offensive strike operations against terrorists, al-Qaida, et cetera. ISIS, we all should remember, is a direct derivative of al-Qaida and it is al-Qaida in Iraq rebranded as ISIS. Zarqawi was its leader at one point. So the AUMF grants us the authorities to conduct operations and continue operations for the enduring defeat of ISIS.

Mr. TURNER. Well, it has been a significant debate, both in the House and in the Senate, as to whether or not the scope of what you currently have. I agree with you that the scope, I think, allows you to vigorously pursue ISIS and I appreciate you doing that. I do believe that there are a number of goals and objectives that are being placed upon you that do not cover the goals and objectives of the original AUMF, Authorization for Use of Military Force, and I don't think that their policy objectives are currently within your assignment.

With that, I yield the rest of my time to Don Bacon.

Mr. BACON. Thank you, Mr. Turner, and thank you, gentlemen, for being here.

My question to you is when is enough enough when it comes to Iran? When is our restraint being interpreted by them as weakness?

We look back to 1979 with the taking of our hostages for over a—or diplomats for over a year. Beirut barracks bombing, Khobar Towers where I lost a friend. USS *Cole* bombing. I think there was a recent analysis out of the Pentagon that 608 Americans were killed in Iraq by Shia militias or proxies of Iran. We can go on and on.

At what point do they interpret this as weakness or lack of restraint? I would love to hear your thoughts.

Secretary ESPER. Thank you, Mr. Bacon. It is a great question. It is one thing, it is something that we wrestle with in the inter-agency and the Chairman and I discuss it a lot because your assessment of that determines how much force you put on the ground or the activities you do in order to deter further aggression. And if deterrence fails, then how do you respond? So obviously, we have

a great intelligence community that helps us with that. We talk a lot with our friends and allies. The Chairman just came back from the region. I was in the region 4 or 5 weeks ago listening to them. And also sending messages through them, sending messages publicly. And I will repeat it again, the Iranians should not mistake our restraint for weakness. We are prepared to act if our forces or our interests are attacked. So the question you are asking is a key one and we think about it every day.

General MILLEY. We all think about Beirut and Khobar Towers and lots of other things and I commanded in Iraq and lost soldiers to Iranian-supported surrogates with various munitions that were provided by the Iranians. So there is no illusion on any of our part about the malign influence of Iran.

But when is enough enough? I firmly believe that the use of military force should be a last resort, not a first resort, and that diplomatic efforts should be exhausted and all non-military methods to resolve a given problem should be used first.

Secondly, I think that you have to have clear, unambiguous objectives. Thirdly, I think you have to have a reasonable prospect of success if you are going to use military force.

So we have to be careful, deliberate, thoughtful. And I think restraint in this particular situation is an appropriate response up until this point. The ball is in the Iranian court. It depends on what they do, how big, size, scope in the future and that will determine what we do.

We are in a—as one of the other Congressmen said, we are in a period, I think, of heightened risk with respect to Iran and I know this is a public hearing and we are not going to talk intel, but I would caution Iran publicly to be very, very cautious as to how they proceed.

Mr. BACON. Thank you, gentlemen.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired. I do want to follow up with Mr. Turner's point and I know to some degree he hates when I do this, but I agree with him on the AUMF issue. I just want to put a little more flavor on it.

I don't think it is acceptable—

Mr. TURNER. Can we put that in the record twice that you agree with me?

The CHAIRMAN. There is a little bit of disagreement which we will get to in a second here, but I don't think it is a good idea for us to be relying on the 2001 and 2002 AUMF in 2019. We can talk about what is in the 2001 AUMF and how it applies to now. I think that thing has been stretched beyond all recognition. But the 2002 AUMF, it's just ridiculous that we are still saying that this is an authority. I was here and I voted for that. The 2002 AUMF was to remove Saddam Hussein from power and stop the threat that he posed.

The idea that now, today, the Pentagon is using that as the authority for military action, to say that that was legislatively approved, most of these people here don't even know what the hell I am talking about. They weren't here, didn't apply to it. So I think it is really important that we update that and that is the part where I am with Mr. Turner.

And Chairman Milley, you made a very good point when we have spoken before that public support for what you are doing matters enormously. We are representatives of the public for good and for ill and if we are not saying anything about it, it gets further and further away from that public. I think we really need to update what we are doing here, as difficult as it may be, and not simply rely on authorities that I think are being twisted. So I want to work with Mr. Turner and others to figure out how we can do that in a more sensible way.

With that, I will yield to Mr. Garamendi for 5 minutes.

Mr. GARAMENDI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. In 2018, the administration issued the National Defense Strategy. And in that strategy they talked about big power competition, China and Russia, and specifically raised the issue of Russia's influence. Russia seeks veto authority over nations on its periphery in terms of their governmental autonomy and diplomatic decisions, to shatter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and change Europe and Middle Eastern security and economic structures in its favor.

The withdrawal of American forces in the northern portion of Syria led to Russia occupying American bases as we withdrew after we had bombed our own bases. And it is now clear that Russia and Syria are very tight allies. Russia is improving its air bases and its naval bases in Syria, and apparently has a nice, cozy relationship with Iran, so much so that they are now providing very advanced missile air defense systems to Turkey.

I am wondering if, in fact, the Department of Defense has abandoned the National Defense Strategy as laid out in the 2018 National Defense Strategy.

So Mr. Esper, could you please tell us if, in fact, we are engaged in countering Russia in the Middle East?

Secretary ESPER. Sure. Thank you, Mr. Garamendi. I think Mr. Smith, Chairman Smith said it in his opening remarks. History matters. So the relationship between Russia and Syria goes back, of course, to the Cold War, when it was the USSR [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics]. They have a base at Tartus for many years. That relationship in the post-Soviet Russia was reinvigorated—

Mr. GARAMENDI. Excuse. This history lesson will take several months. But specifically today—

Secretary ESPER. I promise I will get there in 20 seconds. The relationship was reinvigorated in 2013 or 2014 when Russia moved in under Assad and began working closely with Syrian forces. So look, back to your question about the National Defense Strategy [NDS], the principal way that I see us countering Russia consistent with the NDS is through our NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] alliance, through our partners. We have seen a lot of good success there. I was just at the London meeting last week. The NATO allies are spending \$140 billion more annually than they had been before. We are focused on the NATO Readiness Initiative which—

Mr. GARAMENDI. Excuse me, sir. Can you please focus on Syria, Turkey?

Secretary ESPER. Sure. My biggest concern with Syria and Turkey is actually Turkey-Russia. The concern is that Turkey is moving out of the NATO orbit, as I have said publicly on several occa-

sions. I think our challenge is to figure out how we can get them back closer into the NATO alliance because I think they are a critical and longstanding 70-year, nearly 70-year partner of ours.

Mr. GARAMENDI. And the withdrawal of American troops from the northern Syria, how did that help carry out the goal you have just stated?

Secretary ESPER. So I think when you look at the situation at the time, we faced maybe one or two scenarios. One would have been to allow our troops to stand there in the face of a Turkish onslaught which both Chairman Milley and I agreed wasn't worth risking our soldiers' lives.

Option two would have been an incredible option which is fighting a longstanding NATO ally.

Mr. GARAMENDI. I think you missed one step that preceded that and that is the President's decision to withdraw. How did that address the big power competition? Did that allow Russia to exert its influence in the area, including its troops, displacing American troops?

Secretary ESPER. The decision to withdraw was precipitated by months of events leading up to that. It culminated in President Erdogan speaking to the President and saying very clearly that he is going into Turkey. He is going into Syria.

The CHAIRMAN. I am sorry, Mr. Esper. I think we may be talking about the decision—not the decision to withdraw the last couple of dozen, but the decision 8 months earlier to withdraw period. That decision, the signal that sent.

Mr. GARAMENDI. Actually, the decision you just described preceded the ultimate decision that did lead to the withdrawal of American troops and the replacement of American troops by the Russians and the Turks and the Syrians. My question really goes to the heart of the National Defense Strategy which presumably is big power competition in which case we have seriously lost a major element of our position in the region.

Secretary ESPER. So I think, I am a little over time, but if I could—

The CHAIRMAN. Just quickly, yes.

Secretary ESPER. I think the bottom line—I have said this privately, I have said this publicly—is I am looking at everywhere we are in the world to include the Middle East, to withdraw forces, to draw down forces responsibly, so that we could reallocate them toward great power conflict in Europe and principally in Asia, INDO-PACOM [United States Indo-Pacific Command].

Mr. GARAMENDI. And then—

The CHAIRMAN. I am sorry, we are over time. I think that is an excellent point. The great power competition isn't just in Europe and Asia.

Mr. Rogers.

Mr. ROGERS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I thank both of you for being here and for your service and sacrifice for our country.

Secretary Esper, in your opening statement, you said that the stability of the Middle East remains vital to our national interest. And you also listed it as a priority to—or the mission priority was to deny safe haven to those who would do us harm.

Now there are some in the Congress and on this committee, who believe that it is time to immediately pull out all of our troops from Afghanistan. What would be the consequence to those two priorities if we did, in fact, remove all troops?

Secretary ESPER. In the context of Afghanistan—and I don't want to upset negotiations that may be happening presently with the Taliban and others—I would say this much. We have an important counterterrorism mission in Afghanistan. That means that we have got to make sure that Afghanistan never becomes again a safe haven for terrorists to strike the United States.

Our commanders, I have spoken with them, General Milley has, so that we could reduce our force presence there and still be able to conduct that mission. I am interested in reducing our force presence for the same reason I just outlined for Mr. Garamendi. I want to reallocate forces. So I think we need to make sure we can do that and the best way forward in Afghanistan is through a political agreement that allows us a long-term, sustainable path that ensures that the government in charge does not allow that safe haven to exist.

Mr. ROGERS. Thank you. General Milley, in our work on the Homeland Security Committee, we have been tracking a group that goes by HTS, which stands for Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. This group seems to be primarily composed of Nusra Front fighters and has publicly broken with al-Qaida.

Can you tell us much about this group and their capabilities?

General MILLEY. In an unclassified session, they are a small bunch of groups of al-Qaida that is operating in the region. They are quite dangerous. They are quite violent. And they are quite ideologically committed to their cause and they are willing to die for their cause. They are probably an irreconcilable group. Some groups, like the Taliban, who we negotiated with and we will see where that negotiation goes. Other groups like al-Qaida, ISIS, HTS, and so on are very deeply committed to their cause and there is really only one way to deal with them and that is to kill them or to capture them. And HTS falls into that category.

Mr. ROGERS. Thank you very much. Mr. Chairman, I yield the balance of my time to Banks from Indiana.

Mr. BANKS. I thank the gentleman for yielding. While we are focused today on Syria, the situation in the Middle East, the fight against ISIS today, I want to talk about the future for a moment. As both of you know, I am co-chairing the Future of Defense Task Force with Mr. Moulton on the other side of the aisle.

Secretary Esper, could you talk for a moment about the new capabilities that we will have and be able to use when JEDI [Joint Enterprise Defense Infrastructure] goes live and why that is so important and why delays would be costly in our fight against terrorism specifically?

Secretary ESPER. Sure. First of all, we have migrated many things to many clouds so far. The key piece about the next element, the JEDI piece, is that you can get a lot of the warfighting capabilities if you are into the cloud. And once you are able to do that, where you have that cloud base, you have two things. First of all, you have better security. But secondly, is you can then put on top of that AI, artificial intelligence, and allow you to think and act a

lot more quickly when you are in a warfight and through multiple domains. So it is critical that we move to the cloud as quickly as possible.

I underwent an education process, if you will, and I entered this job again in July and took a couple of months and I have had a chance to talk with many of you about JEDI. It is vitally important that we move to the cloud quickly, particularly this cloud. Again, that is underway and we will continue to move that.

Mr. BANKS. Can you elaborate on what further delays will cost us?

Secretary ESPER. Well, first of all, we will lose ground to the likes of the Chinese in terms of their ability to act, think, and fight us quicker than we are able to fight them. Secondly, if we don't move this piece quickly into the cloud, what we may force the services to do is to go in their separate directions with separate clouds or uncoordinated IT [information technology] plans. So that is why it is very important that we move as quickly as we can and onto the JEDI.

Mr. BANKS. Can you talk for a moment about the current contest by Amazon. You are still moving forward in the contracting process so that we don't afford further delay, is that correct?

Secretary ESPER. My understanding is that we are still moving forward. I don't want to comment any further because obviously another lawsuit has been raised, so it probably would be imprudent for me to say anything.

Mr. BANKS. But the bottom line, as you have said already, any further delays are costly, not just in our strategic competition with China and Russia, but in the fight against terrorism?

Secretary ESPER. Yes, sir. Absolutely, and I think there is bipartisan agreement that we need to move quickly in terms of into the cloud and into this next domain of warfare.

Mr. BANKS. Thank you. I yield back.

Mrs. DAVIS [presiding]. Thank you. Ms. Speier is next.

Ms. SPEIER. Thank you both for being here. Secretary Esper, how many troops did we have in Syria before the President's conversation with President Erdogan?

Secretary ESPER. I can't recall the specific numbers, but over a thousand.

Ms. SPEIER. Over a thousand.

Secretary ESPER. A little over a thousand.

Ms. SPEIER. And then the President had the phone call, then Turkey began its Operation Peace Spring. The President said we were removing all of our troops on October 14th. And then it was said that we were only going to stay in Syria to guard the oil. And how many troops were going to be there to guard the oil?

Secretary ESPER. Well, first of all, the initial plan was to retain some troops at An-Tanf garrison down south. So that was never off the table, if you will. We can talk in closed session about that number.

The current number in northern Syria is somewhere between 500 and 600 at this point.

Ms. SPEIER. Now are we there to guard the oil or are we there to repel ISIS?

Secretary ESPER. We are there to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS, so a subtask of that is we have directed to our commander on the ground is to deny ISIS's access to the oil because whoever controls that oil controls the resource that allows them to buy weapons, equipment—

Ms. SPEIER. I understand that.

Secretary ESPER [continuing]. Fighters, to provide for their communities, et cetera.

Ms. SPEIER. Ambassador Jeffrey and Amnesty International have indicated that there are isolated war crimes going on in Syria by Turkish troops. Can you speak to the ethnic cleansing that I think all of us have been concerned about going on there by the Turkish forces?

Secretary ESPER. I am not aware of any of those in particular. I will tell you the first week that the Turks moved in I spoke out publicly that if there were reports on the battlefield coming through the media that war crimes may have been committed and I said very clearly those should be investigated and persons held accountable.

Ms. SPEIER. Persons being the Turkish—

Secretary ESPER. Well, whoever. First of all, whoever committed them on the ground and then whoever sanctioned them or directed them in the chain of command.

Ms. SPEIER. So you haven't been in contact with Ambassador Jeffrey about the incidents that they have reported?

Secretary ESPER. No, I have not.

Ms. SPEIER. All right. Chairman Milley, you referenced earlier in your comments that you want to see Afghan-to-Afghan talks taking place in terms of a ceasefire. So my question is why aren't the Afghans at the table and negotiating with the Taliban?

General MILLEY. It is really, I think, Congresswoman, the other way around. It is my understanding anyway that the Taliban is refusing to formally negotiate with the Government of Afghanistan because they don't recognize the legitimacy of the government. So the Taliban is not going to negotiate. They have got this three-way negotiation happening with the United States being the third partner. And then there are other players involved as well.

So the direct negotiations, the formal direct negotiations between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban, to my understanding is not happening not because the government doesn't want to do it, but because the Talibans don't want to do it. But I think, and I don't want to presuppose outcomes here, but I think we are closer rather than further away on that particular task happening on Afghan-to-Afghan negotiations. And that would be a good thing because the war must come to an end and the only responsible way to do that is Afghans talking to Afghans.

Ms. SPEIER. So you will make sure that there are female Afghans at the table then?

General MILLEY. I am not running the negotiations. That is part of the Department of State and Zal Khalilzad is the ambassador to do that and we are not—we are supporting with military operations on the ground, but we are not part of those negotiations. So we don't have the responsibility to do that.

Ms. SPEIER. All right. I think there has been a lot of concern about discipline and the respect for the law of war as a reason to keep our troops safe and maintain command authority needed to fight effectively. Yet, last month, the President pardoned three war criminals. Chairman Milley, how does that impact our ability to maintain discipline in the ranks?

General MILLEY. Well, let me, first, all three cases are different. Only one of them, Lieutenant Lorange, was convicted of war crimes and served 7 years in prison for those war crimes. The second case, Gallagher was convicted of a war crime taking a photograph of a dead body. He was not convicted of murder. That was an allegation. So he wasn't convicted in a court of law of that. In the third case, Golsteyn, he never went to trial, so we don't know if he was convicted or not because he never went to trial. In this country, you are innocent until proven guilty and he was never proven guilty. So I mean each one of those is different and I don't want to group them and say they are, in fact, war criminals because you have to be proven that in a court of law. That is point one.

Point two, I think for all of us to remember and I have mentioned this to all of us in uniform, the President of the United States is part of the process. He is the Commander in Chief. So he has the full authority under the Constitution.

The CHAIRMAN [presiding]. I apologize. We are over time and I will just take a stab. That is not what she is asking. She is asking how does it affect overseas, the way you phrased it. I am sorry.

General MILLEY. Well, I was getting there. As part of the process, and good order and discipline is maintained in a lot of different ways, but one of them is to maintain adherence to the process and the President of the United States is part of the process. And we are maintaining good order and discipline within our military.

The CHAIRMAN. I am sorry, we have got to move on. It is an important topic, but it was brought up before.

Ms. SPEIER. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Lamborn.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And before I ask my question, I want to commend you and the ranking member for an agreement on the NDAA. We have all worked hard, but the two of you have put in countless hours and we appreciate that. No one ever gets everything they want, but I think we have a product that we can all be proud of. So I want to thank you for that.

And I also want to thank Representative Wilson for his work on the widows' tax, in particular.

Okay, my question is about Iran. Conventional wisdom has it that Iran, the Persians, if you will, control four Arab capitals in the region. And there is a lot of angst about what they are doing in Syria. What are they doing militarily in Syria and what are we doing about it? For both of you, please.

Secretary ESPER. Well, thank you, sir, for that question. Clearly, Iran has a lot of influence in many capitals in many parts, and not just the Middle East, but also Africa, in Afghanistan as well. It is hard to discuss that in this session. We would have to go to closed session, but you know, it is everything from monetary support, payment of fighters, arms, arms trafficking. It is political support as well, so that is to just kind of give you the wave tops of what that

looks like. But I will say the maximum pressure campaign and again, we can't get into this in this session, but as the revenues have dried up as a country, it has also affected their ability to pay and do some of those things. And that is a good thing.

Mr. LAMBORN. General Milley.

General MILLEY. As the Secretary mentioned, there is not a lot we can actually say specifically here in this session, but Iran is very, very active with their various special forces and other capabilities, not only in Syria, but also in Iraq.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you. I am going to yield the balance of my time to my friend and colleague who has the honor of representing Pensacola, Representative Matt Gaetz.

Mr. GAETZ. I thank the gentleman for yielding. Mr. Secretary, I want to thank you and I want to thank the President for instituting a review of the Saudi program. I also wish I had more time to reflect on the heroism of the sailors who ran toward gunfire and who also informed on the location of the shooter during this terrorist attack. During this review that you are conducting is the program paused? Are we going to be taking in new Saudi students?

Secretary ESPER. So first of all, my condolences to your constituents. And you are right. There was a lot of heroism on the ground that day, a very tragic day for everybody.

So yes, we have directed, if you will, a standdown that would limit Saudi participation in our U.S.-based training to classroom training only until we can do expedited vetting of all Saudi students here in the United States.

I spoke to the Deputy Defense Minister yesterday, by the way, a graduate of Pensacola Naval Air Training. He agreed. He fully supports this. They are going to do parallel vetting as well to make sure we understand—

Mr. GAETZ. During that time, new incoming students or not new incoming students?

Secretary ESPER. I can't answer that affirmatively, but I would have to get back to you on that.

[The information referred to was not available at the time of printing.]

Mr. GAETZ. Mr. Secretary, this is an issue of great importance to my constituents.

Secretary ESPER. It is a very fair question, but—

Mr. GAETZ. I would hope that very soon, perhaps within the day, you would be able to make a public statement as to whether or not we are taking in new students while you are undergoing that vetting process.

Secretary ESPER. I think I know the answer, but I don't want to tell you something. I want it to be affirmative when I tell you. I think it is a very reasonable thing to do, right?

Mr. GAETZ. Thank you. There are a number of Saudis that are currently with us on your base, NAS [Naval Air Station] Pensacola. Who currently has access to those people during the investigation?

Secretary ESPER. Of the dozen or so that were immediate friends, acquaintances, et cetera of the alleged killer, the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], Department of Justice [DOJ] has control of them on the base.

Mr. GAETZ. So who has access to those people? I specifically want to know are embassy personnel, clerics, others speaking with, talking to, perhaps providing communication with these people who we are holding for questioning.

Secretary ESPER. I don't know exactly. I want to say a Navy Muslim chaplain they have access to them. Certainly, the FBI, DOJ does.

Mr. GAETZ. Do any other Saudis have access?

Secretary ESPER. I think the Saudi commander has access to them. He is the one who is keeping them restricted onto that site.

Mr. GAETZ. How about embassy personnel, Saudi embassy personnel?

Secretary ESPER. I don't know.

Mr. GAETZ. That is also really important because to me, this is—

Secretary ESPER. I can assure you, somebody knows. I just don't know right here as I sit here. We will get back to you on that, too.

[The information referred to was not available at the time of printing.]

Mr. GAETZ. I appreciate your prompt attention to this because again, that is something that I think deeply informs on what we can do as policymakers to try to improve this relationship with the kingdom. Because at some point, there is only so much of this that we are going to be able to take or the kingdom tells us there is some quirky part of the royal family, you know, that is off doing some different thing.

These Saudi students, they are connected folks when they end up in Pensacola and I would appreciate your great effort and I look forward to those answers. I thank the chairman for his indulgence, and I thank the gentleman for yielding.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, and I want to echo those concerns. I mean certainly the tragic event in Pensacola deserves our attention and sympathy and admiration for the people who responded. But the broader issue Mr. Gaetz gets at, the vulnerabilities that we might face from Saudi presence in the U.S., is something we need to address now and be as transparent as possible. So I appreciate your answers on that and look forward to the followup as well.

I am sorry, Mr. Secretary?

Secretary ESPER. And just to expand. Of course, I agree with what we are saying here, but to expand, we are going to look not just—we are going to look at all foreign nationals coming into the United States to make sure we have the best, strongest vetting procedures we have so we are confident that regardless of where folks come from, we know who is coming to our country. It is a very important program. We just have got to get it right. We have to do it better.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Mr. Moulton.

Mr. MOULTON. Thank you. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Secretary Esper, I would like to start with you. Regarding Iran, my understanding is the administration's three objectives for Iran are to limit their nuclear weapons capabilities, to deter regional aggression, and to bring Iran back to the negotiating table to get a stronger deal. Is that correct?

Secretary ESPER. I am going to cast it a little bit differently. Our overall goal is to get Iran to be a normal country that behaves normally. The key aspects that we are focusing on, actually four things. Nuclear weapons; they can't have access to nuclear weapons and the means to produce them. Number two, missiles. Number three, their aggressive, malign behavior throughout the region and beyond. And then number four is hostage taking.

Mr. MOULTON. Okay, so hostage taking has never been stated before, but let us focus on the first three.

Secretary ESPER. Sure.

Mr. MOULTON. That we can all agree on. Since President Trump pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal, against the best advice of Secretary Mattis, Secretary of Defense; Chairman Dunford, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; literally hundreds of military and national security professionals, even many who were opposed to signing the deal initially, but recognized the national security risk of pulling out and breaking our word as a country, breaking our word to our closest allies in the world. Since doing that, have you seen any evidence of success for the administration's strategy?

Secretary ESPER. Yes, I have, in the context of maximum pressure campaign has denied them resources because of the dramatic effect it has had on their economy. We have seen the Europeans make movements in our direction. You saw Europeans expressing concern about how Iran has been violating——

Mr. MOULTON. I am sorry, but Europeans were not listed as part of the goals of the administration's strategy. These are the goals. The goal is to limit their nuclear weapons capability and Iran is now advancing their nuclear weapons capability. They are much closer to having a nuclear bomb than they were under the deal. International and American inspectors verified they were following the deal. Since pulling out, Iran has advanced their nuclear weapons capability.

Now the second point was deterring aggression. Now Iran was attacking us before. Iran attacked Americans in Iraq. I have friends who were grievously wounded and killed by Iranian weapons in Iraq. Iran has now rejoined those attacks and we have gone through all the ways in which Iran's regional aggression has picked up. But it was pretty quiet under the deal. There was no question that those attacks have picked up as we have pulled out.

Secretary ESPER. I am not sure. What we saw after the deal was consummated and money was returned to them, we saw action uptick in activities and in terms of their missile program as well.

Mr. MOULTON. Oh wait, so you would say that there is less activity now than when we had the deal? I mean they weren't attacking Saudi oil fields. That is just an absurd conclusion. It is obviously not true.

Now on the third point, getting Iran to the negotiating table, we were with them at the negotiating table. We had lines of communication with them while under the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action]. We do not have those lines of communication now. Have you seen any evidence that they are coming back to the negotiating table to negotiate a stronger deal to further limit their nuclear weapons capability?

Secretary ESPER. No, but that is the——

Mr. MOULTON. Thank you.

Secretary ESPER. Well, but there is more of an answer to this question.

Mr. MOULTON. No, no, no. I understand the administration wants to talk about the maximum pressure campaign and all the ways it is hurting their economy and everything. But I am just holding you to your stated strategy, to your stated strategy. And on all three points the administration's strategy is failing. The administration is worse off. We are worse off. We are less safe than we were under the JCPOA.

Secretary ESPER. I am not sure—

Mr. MOULTON. I have only a minute left so I want to—

Secretary ESPER [continuing]. I am not sure you can make that statement. I think strategies take time to play out and I think if you look, not everybody agrees to include the United States—

Mr. MOULTON [continuing]. You might be right in the future, but we are talking about today. There is no evidence that this is working.

The CHAIRMAN. Let us have one person talking at a time if we could.

Mr. MOULTON. General Milley, I think I will just go on to you. Thank you for your earlier clarifications about the three servicemen because to your point innocent until proven guilty, only two of them have been convicted of war crimes. So we have two out of three who are war criminals.

Now I received a text from a sergeant major of the Marines. This happened. And he said Trump involving himself in all the cases of these guys who conducted themselves inappropriately in a combat zone like Eddie Gallagher is appalling, basically setting a precedent that the rule of law in a combat zone doesn't apply. It encourages folks to start burning villages and pillaging like Genghis Khan. That, and if you don't like your ruling, just tell Trump personally and he will overturn it. The man has greatly marginalized the positions of the service leaders.

Is this sergeant major of Marines wrong?

General MILLEY. I think that the Uniform Code of Military Justice, and the means by which we maintain good order and discipline, are a critical element in order to maintain that capability in some level of humanity in combat zones. I think it is critical. I understand where the sergeant major is coming from. And I know the advice that was given which I am not going to share here, but the President of the United States is part of the process and he has the legal authority to do what he did and he weighed the conditions and the situation as he saw fit. He is part of the process.

We do maintain and we will maintain good order and discipline. We will not turn into a gang of raping, burning, and pillaging throughout as the sergeant major implied. That is not going to happen or anything else.

Mr. MOULTON. I appreciate the effort. Let us just be careful here. This is a sergeant major of the Marines. He has got a Purple Heart and Navy Cross.

General MILLEY. Yes.

Mr. MOULTON. And we are defending the actions of a draft dodger.

General MILLEY. I am not defending—

The CHAIRMAN. I am sorry. Mr. Moulton, this could go on for a very long time and—

General MILLEY [continuing]. And I respect your views and the sergeant major's views.

Mr. MOULTON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. I think I would just say, yes, the President is part of the process. But what we are concerned about is the way he is being part of the process right now is unhelpful, as Mr. Moulton describes.

Mr. Scott.

Mr. SCOTT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Gentlemen, when we have these meetings, I bring my computer so that I can pull up the map of the Middle East and every time I pull that map up it reminds me of the need to have partners that have common values and common interests. And we seem to have very few that have both of those. We obviously have Jordan. We have Israel. But when I look at the others, I will tell you that I think that the vote of disapproval or whatever the proper term is with regards to the withdrawal of the troops, I trust your judgment on that, even though I voted for that resolution. I think that was—my vote as many votes was indicative of the fact that we believe that the Kurds have been a good partner and we believe that as of today, Turkey is a partner of necessity, but not a good partner. And I think that we recognize that we need Turkey to be a good partner. And we hope that that happens sooner rather than later.

I have been to the refugee camps in Turkey. I have been to the ones in Jordan. It is a tough scenario. It is basically—the Middle East is a kaleidoscope. Every time one thing changes, a whole bunch of other things change.

I do have a little bit of an issue with the statement on the AUMF. I think that the AUMF does absolutely give us, give you the authority on behalf of the United States to strike terrorists and terrorist cells where you see them. I do not believe that the AUMF of 2001 and 2002 gives us the authority to base in countries uninvited. And I think that is a further discussion that Congress needs to have and whether or not we are allowed to base uninvited in countries almost 20 years after an Authorization for Use of Military Force that did not include those countries was passed.

So with that said, if I can focus more narrowly on one thing. General Mattis, who I have a tremendous amount of respect for, wanted to move to preparing for China and Russia. One of the victims of that was the JSTARS [Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System] program, the E-8C. They are no longer flying in CENTCOM [United States Central Command]. They have just been removed.

My question is are the ground forces in the CENTCOM area of responsibility receiving the proper intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance [ISR] coverage they need to detect and counter the ground threats and what additional things do you need from this committee to make sure that the forces have the adequate coverage?

General MILLEY. The commander, General McKenzie, he has not requested additional ISR. In fact, CENTCOM for the last many,

many years has the preponderance of ISR of the U.S. military. PACOM [United States Pacific Command] gets a lot and EUCEM [United States European Command] gets a lot, but CENTCOM gets a lot. So I don't think they are at a lack of adequate ISR, that which we have. There is not a commander out there who doesn't want more ISR. Everybody wants more all the time, but General McKenzie has not come up on the net and said hey, I need this, that, or the other thing immediately sort of thing. And if he did, we would give it to him.

Mr. SCOTT. Mr. Secretary, I understand that the E-8C, the recap [recapitalization] of the JSTARS was not a system that we would have necessarily used against Russia and China or near-peer competitors. But I do believe it was a mistake to not go forward with the recap of that program. It is a low-cost program that we could have used certainly anywhere in the Western Hemisphere it would have helped us, and Africa, we could have used it in the majority of the areas where we are currently operating. And while I recognize this decision was made under a previous Secretary, I just wanted to express my belief that it was a mistake not to go ahead and recap. I think that it will be seen as the same mistake as canceling the F-22 buy before the replacement system, before the F-35 had proven itself.

So I respect both of you. You know, I do think the committee needs to look at whether or not the AUMF from 2001 and 2002 gives us the authority to base in a country uninvited. With that, I yield the remainder of my time.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Mr. Brown.

Mr. BROWN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to return to Syria and certainly express my concern that that was a grave mistake that the President's decision to relocate our forces to the northeast region of Syria and to essentially abandon our partners, the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces. I think it runs counter to your work, your effort, your responsibility, our responsibility in the counterterrorism fight, but I also think it runs counter to our objectives as stated in the National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy which is to prepare for a great power competition, and in this case, competition presented by Russia.

Just this Sunday, the commander in chief of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, he wrote "we know that we would have to make painful compromises with Moscow and Bashar al-Assad if we go down the road of working with them," certainly expressing his lack of confidence in our support to him and his forces. He goes on to say but if we have to choose between compromises and the genocide of our people, we will surely choose life for our people. We are seeing Russian flags that are flying outside of the Turkey-Russia patrol area. We know that Russia now has taken possession of military bases built by U.S. taxpayers and Russia is essentially supporting the Syrian Government in regaining control over the entire country and establishing itself a sphere of influence for Russia.

Can you please tell us what concerns you have about Russia's increasing presence in Syria?

Secretary ESPER. Well, as I look at the global situation, somebody mentioned before we compete with Russia all around the globe, principally in Europe, but in other places, the Middle East

we discussed, and even Africa. My principal concern with regard to the Kurds and the SDF specifically was that the mission was the—

Mr. BROWN. Actually, let me just fine tune it. It is Russia. Are you concerned about Russia's growing influence in Syria and what impact that will have in their ability to have even an expanding influence in the entirety of the Middle East? I am concerned about Russia.

Secretary ESPER. I am concerned about Russia in other parts of the Middle East.

Mr. BROWN. Are you concerned about Russia in Syria?

Secretary ESPER. Not as much because they have had a pretty solid footprint there now for 4 or 5 years since they first moved in.

Mr. BROWN. Do you see that footprint expanding?

Secretary ESPER. It has expanded in the last month and a half.

Mr. BROWN. Does that concern you?

Secretary ESPER. Some, but I am more concerned about Russian expansion into Egypt, into Saudi Arabia, into other places, if you will. There is only so many resources and time you can focus on and the bigger issue with Russia was the nexus with Russia and Turkey. That is what really concerns me, is the Russia-Turkey nexus.

Mr. BROWN. And I don't have much time here. I have 2 minutes left. So let me turn to Afghanistan and both of you mentioned Afghanistan in your opening comments and the presence of ISIS in Afghanistan. You know, I traveled to Niger where we have about 800, 900 troops there. In Syria, our number was about 900. And using the various authorities, [section] 127 Echo, Triple 3 [section 333], we seem to have been effectively supporting local partners in the counter-VEO [violent extremist organization] efforts.

So we have got 14,000 troops in Afghanistan. Have you developed, have you considered an option where we have a minimal footprint purely for the purposes of counter-VEO operations regardless of the stability and the viability of the Afghan Government and their forces?

Secretary ESPER. I will take the first stab, but again, the Chairman, just have him come back, more in his lane. I will say the short answer is yes. The commander on the ground will tell you that in some ways you can't disaggregate the CT [counterterrorism] from the train, advise, and assist mission, if you will, because the Afghans are playing an increasingly important role. And, of course, we have to protect our intelligence people out there and that is probably as far as I can go on that matter right now, right here.

Chairman.

General MILLEY. The short answer is yes. We have multiple options. That is one of them.

Mr. BROWN. And in the classified setting, would you be able to brief us on what that minimal footprint looks like?

General MILLEY. Yes, we can do that.

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

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Mr. Wittman.

Mr. WITTMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to thank Secretary Esper and Chairman Milley for joining us today. Secretary Esper, I wanted to focus on the outcome of my trip to Tur-

key last year. I had some conversations with Erdogan defense officials, Erdogan administration defense officials, defense committee members from parliament. And we talked about a lot of different issues, but one of the areas we talked about was the relationship between Turkey, PKK, and YPG or really lack thereof, and what that was doing to the U.S.-Turkey relationship and how they saw things that were happening there.

I wanted to get your perspective on how do you think we reconcile what appears to be an inconsistent approach in training Syrian YPG forces that potentially as things ramp down or they spread out from Syria could actually go back and join the fight with PKK forces within Turkey which is really inflammatory towards the Turks in how they see that. So is there a way that we can tailor that policy to best suppress ISIS forces in Syria without subsequent negative consequences for Turkey? Because they look at it and just say how can you support these folks that are perpetrating terrorism in Turkey. And of course, what we are saying is listen, let us help defeat ISIS in Syria and then we will make sure we turn back around. But I wanted to get your perspective on that.

Secretary ESPER. I think the fundamental difference, Mr. Wittman, and thank you for the question, is that we have fundamentally different views, we being the United States and our NATO allies, on whether or not the YPG is a foreign terrorist organization. We don't think they are, nor do many, if not all of our NATO allies. But the Turks do. That is one reason why they are holding up some actions in NATO right now to the detriment of the alliance. So I think we have to reconcile that. The State Department has the lead in terms of how we designate foreign terrorist organizations.

I think you rightly noted, too, and it is fair to say there is fluidity on the ground between people in these groups. And it is hard to pin that down. But we make our best assessment as to who we think really is a terrorist organization and who is not. And Turkey wasn't happy with the SDF either because it included members of YPG, but other groups as well. But the fact that YPG members were part of that broader coalition was one of the reasons why they didn't like the SDF. They didn't like the SDF along the border, et cetera, et cetera.

Mr. WITTMAN. Yes, I think their concern was and they said listen, we have clear evidence that YPG forces and even SDF are infiltrating into PKK. We believe that they are part of perpetrating those attacks within Turkey. So that is the basis of their concern. I know that and we said the same thing that you said and that is we are trying to distinguish forces that are sympathetic to U.S. causes versus those that may perpetrate harm against Turkey.

Secretary ESPER. And we try to take those considerations and address them. That is why we were working hard up and to the point of the incursion to establish the safe zone, if you will. And it was still unsatisfactory to the Turks with regard to what we were doing. They had clear ambitions as to how far they wanted to go, the depth, and the extent of their operation, and what they wanted to do afterward.

Mr. WITTMAN. Thank you. I am going to yield the balance of my time to Mr. Waltz.

Mr. WALTZ. Thank you, Mr. Wittman. Gentlemen, are you familiar with the case of Staff Sergeant Robert Bales, convicted of the Kandahar massacre in 2012?

General MILLEY. Yes.

Mr. WALTZ. That was a sergeant who literally lost his mind, walked into an Afghan village, and machine gunned 16 Afghans. He is now convicted of that crime, of that war crime. He is in life in prison. Do you have any indication that the President is considering releasing, pardoning, Staff Sergeant Bales for his war crimes that you know of?

Secretary ESPER. No.

Mr. WALTZ. I would submit to my colleagues that is a war criminal and we need to be very careful about very loosely throwing around that term. In the case of Navy SEAL [Sea, Air, and Land teams] Chief Gallagher and by the way, I would remind my colleagues, was acquitted of murder. He was convicted for taking a photo with a dead body. He is now retiring. He is no longer commanding SEALs. He is not going to be promoted. Is it within the President's authority, given the balance of his service, his multiple valor awards, his numerous combat tours, to say that retiring, no longer commanding SEALs, not being promoted, but also not being demoted, is that within his authority?

Secretary ESPER. Just to clarify, he was promoted, but he is now retired. And all that was within the President's authority.

Mr. WALTZ. Do you believe that he deserves to be called a war criminal?

Secretary ESPER. I would have to review the crime that he was charged with which was appearing with a corpse. I would have to read it and understand it. I can come back to you on that.

Mr. WALTZ. But he was acquitted of the murder charge and in fact, another SEAL admitted on the stand pretty dramatically that he was the one that killed, and a mercy killing, knowing that that ISIS fighter was—

Secretary ESPER. He was acquitted of the murder charge, but convicted of holding up the corpse. That would be a violation of the law of armed conflict as I understand it during my time as a military officer.

The CHAIRMAN. We are over time. The gentleman's time has expired. Mr. Khanna.

Mr. KHANNA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Secretary and General, for your service.

I want to follow up on the exchange you had with Representative Speier. And I understand your position is that the 2001 AUMF gives us the authority to fight ISIS and that we are there to protect the oil because we don't want ISIS to get it.

I disagree with that theory, but I want to bracket that and see if you would at least acknowledge that we don't have the authority to do what the President is calling for. President Trump on October 27th stated clearly, "we are leaving soldiers to secure the oil. Now we may have to fight for the oil. That is okay. Maybe somebody else wants the oil in which case they have a hell of a fight. It can help us because we should be able to take some also and what I intend to do, perhaps make a deal with Exxon Mobil, one of our great companies."

Would you acknowledge that this Congress has not authorized in any way the United States to go in and steal Syrian oil and make money off of it?

Secretary ESPER. I am not aware of the Congress granting any authority along those lines. I am also unaware of what inherent authorities the President does or does not have in this regard. I am focused on the military tasks denying ISIS access to the oil.

Mr. KHANNA. Can you assure us at this point that there are no plans for us to try to take the oil and sell the oil?

Secretary ESPER. All I can tell you is that I am not aware of any plans right now.

Mr. KHANNA. The second question I have is regarding the bombshell Washington Post report on the Afghan Papers. I imagine you read that. The bottom line is that top military officials and civilian officials have known that the Afghan war has been unwinnable and have been misleading the American public for 20 years. Your predecessor, Secretary Rumsfeld, is quoted there as saying I have no visibility into who the bad guys are.

Are you embarrassed by Secretary Rumsfeld's comments and the other people quoted? And do you believe they owe the American public an explanation and an apology?

Secretary ESPER. Congressman, I haven't read all the stories frankly, and so before I comment on what Secretary Rumsfeld purportedly said or didn't say, I would want to read all of that and understand it and actually talk to him. But I do know this much, the stories spanned multiple administrations.

Mr. KHANNA. Certainly.

Secretary ESPER. Multiple uniformed and civilian officials. And I think it is good to look back. I think at this point where I am looking is forward and forward tells me is the path to success, the win, is a political agreement between the parties on the ground.

Mr. KHANNA. But don't you think we have to have some accountability so we don't make the mistake again?

Would you support this committee holding hearings on the Afghan Papers and calling in front of Congress every official who has misled the American public about whether this war was winnable and all or not? Would 2,400 American soldiers dead, 775,000 Americans deployed, don't you think people owe this country an explanation?

Secretary ESPER. Many of those dead are my friends and maybe some of my former soldiers, but look, it is the committee's responsibility to determine what it has hearings on. I don't think you want the executive branch making that call.

Mr. KHANNA. Mr. Chairman, I would request that this committee hold hearings on the Afghan Papers and call before Congress, with subpoena, every person who has misled this country. And just like in the Pentagon Papers, I think that should be one of our highest priorities in examining what has come out in that bombshell report.

The CHAIRMAN. If I may, Mr. Khanna, we will pause your time for the moment. I think it is appropriate to have hearings. I will tell you right up front, just to set expectations correctly, I am not going to call every single witness who has anything to do with this.

I do not believe that would be a productive use of the committee's time.

I do think it is something we should take a look at and then get explanations from because I agree with the overall point. But I don't want to set unrealistic expectations about how the committee should approach it. So—answer your question.

Mr. KHANNA. I respect that. And, certainly, at least having some of the prominent people come and explain to the American public.

My final question concerns Yemen, and I appreciate that the administration has voluntarily suspended the refueling of the planes. But we have had a situation, of course, now our own bases in Representative Gaetz's district, we have Saudi nationals who are being trained and are attacking Americans. And the question, I guess, that the American public is asking is why in the world would we be providing the Saudi Air Force with any possible logistical help to conduct bombing in Yemen when 10 million civilians possibly face famine?

Secretary ESPER. So, Congressman, we are not providing the Saudis logistical help with regard to their activities in Yemen. We are providing Saudis and 152 other countries training in the United States. Why, because we have a distinct advantage over Russia and China who don't have allies and partners. And I think that it is important that we continue these programs so that we have a broad network. That's what ensures our security—

Mr. KHANNA. But could you commit that we won't help the Saudi Air Force to either logistically or in maintenance to do anything in terms of their bombing in Yemen?

Secretary ESPER. Well, you can define help pretty broadly, right? We probably train Saudi personnel to do maintenance here in the United States. I don't know, but.

Mr. KHANNA. Could we stop doing any maintenance of the Saudi aircrafts in Saudi Arabia and help—and not any of our men and women assist the Saudis in their mission into Yemen?

Secretary ESPER. Yeah, I would have to come back to you and let you know what we are or are not doing with regard to the Saudis and what the impact would be on not just the Saudis, because keep in mind those same Saudi aircraft might be the same Saudi aircraft we call upon to help us blunt an Iranian assault in order to—or help us respond to it, an Iranian attack. So you have got to be thoughtful in terms of how we think through what actions we take or don't take.

The CHAIRMAN. And the gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. Gallagher.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think the previous administration struggled to effectuate a pivot to the Pacific because its foreign policy got sucked into a black hole in Syria. I think, despite a dramatically different approach to Iran in this administration, we face a similar grand strategic challenge, which is to say if we do not identify a high-impact, light footprint approach in CENTCOM, it will suck up the majority of resources, time, and attention and INDOPACOM will not get the priorities and the resources that it needs. In other words, we won't implement the NDS.

So with that in mind, I would like to ask a few questions about China, not Syria, but the two things are linked in my mind as I know they are in yours.

Secretary ESPER. Sure.

Mr. GALLAGHER. The first is that on September 11th, Representative Gallego and I joined Senator Cotton and Schumer in sending you, Mr. Secretary, a letter about what is called section 1237 of the fiscal year 1999 NDAA. It requires a regularly updated list of Chinese Communist Party—Chinese military-affiliated companies operating in the United States. We are still waiting on a response. It is 20 years late. We would really appreciate you delivering a response to this letter as soon as possible.

Secretary ESPER. Sure. I am sorry, but I am not tracking that but we will get on it. It is a good question. I think it is one of the things that concern me as somebody who has studied China now for a quarter of a century. We need to be very careful about all their activities in the United States and you have touched on one of them.

Mr. GALLAGHER. I think given your background on the China Commission, you are very well situated to talk about these issues and, indeed, did talk very eloquently at the Reagan Defense Forum. I salute you for that.

Almost one year ago, on February 2nd, Secretary Pompeo announced that we would be exiting the INF [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces] Treaty following NATO's unanimous determination of Russia's material breach of its obligations under the agreement. We formally withdrew on August 2nd. Since then, I believe there has been only one INF-range demonstration test with another coming up shortly.

Secretary ESPER. Right.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Both of which stem from great work being done by SCO [Strategic Capabilities Office]. What are you doing, Mr. Secretary, to ensure that the two INF-range capabilities under development by SCO are being incorporated by the services into their fiscal year 2021 budget?

Secretary ESPER. Yes, sir. We are supporting those activities with money and technology and all the right people. Having that capability is essential and not just to counter what the Russians have already deployed in Europe, but also maybe more importantly vis-a-vis China. China has thousands of intermediate-range missiles along their periphery, along their eastern coast, if you will. And our ability to either blunt or respond to that will rely on intermediate-range missiles of our own. And other ranges, too, but I think we need to move out on that as well as with hypersonics and other means. And if the commanders need it, we will deploy it.

Mr. GALLAGHER. And just to follow up on that, there was a fiscal year 2020 NDAA prohibition on INF-range procurement and deployment that I think could be mitigated because the Department's current schedule for INF-range capabilities. But if there was—in other words, you are not going to actually deploy those missiles in the next year or so. But if a similar provision were adopted for fiscal year 2021, what would be the impact on the Department's ability to actually execute the NDS?

Secretary ESPER. Well, I think you made the technical point, it would depend on our current development and deployment timelines. And again, I am assuming the commanders would need the weapons. And if they do, I want to provide those but it would take a tool out of our hands. Look, I don't see any possibility that we are going backward. The NATO allies are unanimous in terms of us getting out of INF and at this point our means to either address it with our own system and also to be able to defend against Russian systems.

Mr. GALLAGHER. And then back to where I started. You know, CENTCOM's needs are obvious and apparent every day, sort of open up a newspaper. But also, in EUCOM we have established a European Deterrence Initiative [EDI] that has directed about \$17 billion in funding. We don't have a similar—we have an authorized account for INDOPACOM, but we haven't actually funded it in the way we have done for EDI. Given the NDS priority on INDOPACOM and China, would a similar dedicated funding mechanism for INDOPACOM be a useful step going forward?

Secretary ESPER. Yes, sir. Maybe. It depends on where you take the money away from. You know, part of our efforts in both Europe and INDOPACOM is to look at how we change our footprint on the ground, so it gets to your point in that sense, in that principal point, yes. But we are also trying to, with regard to the allies and partners that can afford to, is help them help us—

Mr. GALLAGHER. Yeah.

Secretary ESPER [continuing]. As we expand that footprint.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Well, in a resource-constrained environment we will have to make choices.

Secretary ESPER. Yes, sir.

Mr. GALLAGHER. And if I believe the logic of the NDS, as I do, INDOPACOM should be the priority. We will have to assume risk in other theaters.

Secretary ESPER. Yes, sir. If I had to pour concrete in some locations, if you will, build bases, I would rather prioritize, should be prioritizing INDOPACOM over other locations.

Mr. GALLAGHER. One final question, and I know this is about Syria, but I don't often get the opportunity to talk directly to both of you. It is my understanding that current DOD policy prohibits the U.S. from exercising with the Taiwan Navy. Not as a result of any decisions we made in the 1970s or 1980s, but this has just been the policy for the last decade. Is it still the policy of the Department of Defense to prohibit bilateral naval exercises between the United States Navy and the Republic of China Navy?

The CHAIRMAN. And beyond a yes or no, that is going to have to be for the record unless you can get it done with a yes or a no.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Yes or no will be fine.

Secretary ESPER. I will have to get back to you.

[The information referred to was not available at the time of printing.]

The CHAIRMAN. Okay.

Mr. Keating.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to thank Dr. Esper and thank General Milley for being here and for your extraordinary service. General Milley, your service is not only ex-

traordinary, but lengthy. If I am not correct just looking back briefly on your bio, it goes back to maybe being in Princeton in the ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps]; is that correct? And right around 1980, and then——

General MILLEY. That is correct, Congressman, about almost 40 years now.

Mr. KEATING. Yeah. Thank you. It is extraordinary in length. And I have a question for you, quickly, in that regard. During that almost four decades, or four decades of service and several Presidents, having served our country during that period of time could you share with us other instances where Presidents have pardoned war criminals in your experience since you have been in the military during that time?

General MILLEY. Presidents have pardoned individuals many, many times. As you know, for example, President Nixon, a very famous case, pardoned Lieutenant Calley who murdered 130-some-odd women——

Mr. KEATING. Yeah, during your time though, during your four decades.

General MILLEY. Yeah, in my 40 years——

Mr. KEATING. Long time.

General MILLEY [continuing]. Someone who was alleged to have committed war crimes——

Mr. KEATING. No, but someone that was——

General MILLEY [continuing]. Or was convicted of war crimes——

Mr. KEATING. Yeah. Can you share with us?

General MILLEY [continuing]. I do not know of one that comes to the top of my head.

Mr. KEATING. I can't think of one either, General.

General MILLEY. But it has been done, historically.

Mr. KEATING. I know, but that 40 years and several Presidents, a long time.

General MILLEY. Correct.

Mr. KEATING. So thank you for that.

In your joint statement, both of you said you are focused on internationalizing the response to Iran's provocative activities by encouraging increased burden sharing and cooperation with allies and partners. It is a very important issue.

And I also serve on the Foreign Affairs Committee, and very recently we had a Special Representative for Syria, Mr. Jeffrey, testifying. During that testimony, he did say and I agree with him a hundred percent that it was a mistake, when he was referencing the pullout of Syria without informing our allies. And to me that is a critical point, because we have something that probably the country that is our greatest threat, China, doesn't. We have something they don't have. We have something Russia doesn't have. We have this extraordinary coalition. I think it is one of the biggest difference makers that we have. And Special Representative Jeffrey, myself, a lot of other people, we are concerned. Those allies weren't even informed about what our actions would be even though they had troops on the ground there. And I am concerned about——

General MILLEY. Yeah.

Mr. KEATING [continuing]. Not having that kind of notification. What can we do, going forward, to really make sure we have great-

er communication? I know that wasn't a decision that you made or the military made. It was the Commander in Chief——

General MILLEY. Well, but if I may, I know that I personally called our allies and I believe, I won't speak for the Secretary, I believe he did as well, and I believe some people in the Department of State, perhaps Secretary Pompeo. I don't know about the rest of them. But I know I personally called our allies that were involved in Syria as soon as decisions were made.

Mr. KEATING. How much time was that?

General MILLEY. It was very quick.

Mr. KEATING. Like what?

General MILLEY. It was quick.

Mr. KEATING. Like what is quick?

General MILLEY. Fast.

Mr. KEATING. What is fast?

Secretary ESPER. My——

General MILLEY. I would have to go back and check the phone records. It was very, very quick.

Mr. KEATING. Days?

General MILLEY. No, much faster than that.

Mr. KEATING. A day?

General MILLEY. Yeah, it was inside of that.

Mr. KEATING. Inside of a day.

General MILLEY. Absolutely.

Mr. KEATING. That is not what I call having—not that it is your fault—great cooperation and communication.

Secretary ESPER. I wanted—I just know——

Mr. KEATING. I think it so important going forward to have this.

Now you are also referencing in your joint statement, you know, some of the other countries that are dealing with maritime and navigation issues. And I am looking at the list and there is U.K. [United Kingdom] and Australia, Albania, Saudi Arabia, UAE [United Arab Emirates], Bahrain. There is certain countries that are usual allies in many of these activities with us. Are there instances or can you share this with us where we have reached out or communicated to other allies and they haven't done what they quite often do and join us in these? I am just concerned.

Secretary ESPER. I can speak to that, Congressman. On both the International Maritime Security Construct and the Integrated Air and Missile Defense effort, I personally made calls to many allies in both Asia and Europe and asked for assets and was told either not possible or we will think about it, and you can see how many are there right now.

Mr. KEATING. I can see how many who aren't there too, who usually are there.

Secretary ESPER. That is exactly——

Mr. KEATING. That is a concern I have. My time is running out.

Secretary ESPER. But that is not—I will tell——

Mr. KEATING. I want to thank you. I just want to highlight this.

General MILLEY. Your point of allies and partners is critical. We, the United States of America, depend upon for access basing and other things in military operations, allies, and we want to keep allies close. War is very hard——

The CHAIRMAN. And we will have to leave it there where we are getting late, sorry.

General MILLEY [continuing]. And we are done, so.

Mr. KEATING. Countries that have given blood too. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Gaetz.

Mr. GAETZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I want to make sure that your call and Mr. Khanna's call for hearings on the Afghan Papers is a bipartisan one. I believe that those are issues that we ought to look into and I trust given your thoroughness that we will address that. We have been trading the same villages back and forth in Afghanistan for 20 years and I think the American people deserve answers.

Mr. Chairman, I also want to thank you and the ranking member for your work on the NDAA and I intend to vote for it, but I am deeply disappointed that it doesn't include the amendment that Mr. Khanna and I worked on to constrain any Authorization for Use of Military Force in a regime change war with Iran.

The CHAIRMAN. And just for the record, I share your disappointment. But we do have to work with the Senate and the President, so—

Mr. GAETZ. I know that you worked hard on it.

The CHAIRMAN [continuing]. And they opposed it.

Mr. GAETZ. But it just is crazy to me in Washington, Mr. Chairman, that something that passes the House with a very robust majority, every Democrat, dozens of Republicans, it is up in the Senate, more people vote for it than against it, but I guess given the ways of Washington it can still not be in the bill. And it just seems a little swampy to me.

The CHAIRMAN. If the gentleman would yield for a second, I think you have a much better relationship with the person who is responsible for that than I do, so I would urge you to work on that relationship. The President does have to sign the bill.

Mr. GAETZ. I work to be a positive influence on everyone I have a chance to speak with, Mr. Chairman. And I also would suggest that a practical, restrained, and realistic view of foreign policy is entirely consistent with the Trump doctrine.

And in that light, Mr. Secretary, it may be a minority view in the Congress, it may be a minority view on this committee, but I fully support the administration's decisions in the Syria and Turkey theater. It is my belief that we ended up in this mess in Syria as a consequence of the prior administration being all over the place on regime change wars in Syria that created second- and third-order effects that the Trump administration is now having to deal with.

And as I see things, in a very challenging and complicated environment where there has been a great deal of war for a great deal of time, you have done all you can to balance regional interests, reduce U.S. risk and the U.S. footprint, and then secure the resources that will function as the leverage for the Kurds to have the greatest opportunity to have a say in their own future.

And this notion repeatedly reflected in this committee on both sides of the aisle that because we are an ally with a group of people in one instance, because our interests align in that case, that that somehow morally binds us to every conflict they have past, present,

or future, is crazy to me. And if we accept that doctrine it will not enhance the utility of our future alliances, it will diminish them because we will not be able to engage in those alliances given the complicated world in which we live today.

I do want to go back to Pensacola for a moment because it is very essential to the thinking of many of my constituents. I understand that with the Saudi Government we have a status of forces agreement that set this program up. That status of forces agreement has within it, you know, various accommodations for access. But to me, when the uniformed military of another country, you know, attacks and kills my constituents wearing the uniform of our country, maybe we don't have to be as faithful to a contract regarding access, but we should be more concerned about ensuring that we contain the terrorism and hold those responsible.

So perhaps you can inform me on what role the status of forces agreement is playing in the ongoing diplomatic stand-off or negotiation that we are currently having with the kingdom regarding those people currently in custody.

Secretary ESPER. Sure, Congressman. It is a fair question. Sorry. It is a good question. Honestly, I am not up to speed in terms of what the SOFA [status of forces agreement] says with regard to this case. I would have to get back to you on that.

[The information referred to was not available at the time of printing.]

Mr. GAETZ. Well, it is my sincere hope that that is not limiting the work of the FBI or creating unique challenges by having the kingdom make demands to have their embassy personnel interact with people that we are currently holding.

And this is a question I get a lot from my constituents, maybe you can elaborate on it. You know, when people who are the active duty military of another country attack our military in our country, why is that viewed as like a law enforcement event rather than an event like more akin to an act of war where we would hold these people as prisoners of war, people in conflict, rather than like, you know, giving them the full complement of the rights articulated in the status of forces agreement?

Secretary ESPER. Well, I will just say up front I think we need to let the investigation play itself out. But in this case I would say, obviously, Saudi Arabia is a partner. We are not in war with them. We don't actually have any hostility with them whatsoever, so in this case, I look upon it as the act of an individual at this point. Now we need to find out whether there was more behind it or not, but I certainly—it was not a state-sponsored action as best I can tell at this point.

Mr. GAETZ. Yeah, I am not saying it is. But I don't think that the statement that this is the work of an individual is going to age well, Mr. Secretary.

Secretary ESPER. No, I said at this time that is all I am willing to say is we know it is one. We need to let the investigation tell us what else is out there.

Mr. GAETZ. At this time, I—

The CHAIRMAN. And that is another argument that we will have to leave at that point. But I think that is something worth investigating.

Mr. Crow.

Mr. CROW. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate both of your testimony today and your accessibility. I found both of you under your tenure to be very accessible to the committee and I do appreciate that.

Notwithstanding some of my colleagues on this committee's attempts here today to exercise some revisionist history with regard to blaming issues on the prior administration, you know, the bottom line is that this administration really has no overarching policy in the Middle East and with respect to Syria. It appears just to be a series of fairly ad hoc decisions stumbling from one decision to the next.

And there is no greater illustration of the fact that the first week of October I led a congressional delegation to the region where we met with and discussed security issues with numerous intelligence and military and diplomatic officials, none of whom by the way had any idea that we were about to exercise a precipitous withdrawal from northern Syria. And that brings me to my first question, General Milley. Several of those officials expressed a grave concern about the security of those ISIS prisoners in the prisons in northern Syria and I just wanted to clarify what I heard you say today, that you don't have any concern, currently, even though the situation seems to be less secure now than it was in early October given our much lower footprint in that area. But you don't have any concern about the security of those prisoners; is that accurate?

General MILLEY. South of the 30-kilometer buffer zone the reports I have indicate that the SDF is still securing the 24 prisons for which they are responsible for. Inside the 30-kilometer buffer zone we don't have that level of visibility, so I can't say one way or the other. I think there were seven, if I am not mistaken, from memory, seven facilities inside that 30—

Mr. CROW. And, General, did we have that visibility before our withdrawal? Did we have that visibility on those prisons that you just indicated before our withdrawal and now we do not?

General MILLEY. Sure, of course. I mean they were—were co-located in some respects and the SDF had those detention facilities. Since the Government of Turkey went into that incursion zone it is their personal, or it is their legal, internationally legal responsibility.

Mr. CROW. So from the first week of October, we are in a less—we are in a worse position with respect to oversight of those prisons than we were or are currently now than we were 2 months ago?

General MILLEY. I would say we have less visibility.

Mr. CROW. Okay.

General MILLEY. Because the Turkish Government has responsibility and we don't have the visibility on those detention facilities.

Mr. CROW. Next question is, there have been several public media reports about Iranian drones called suicide drones conducting overflight operations of our forward operating bases in Syria, Iraq, and potentially Jordan. Standing here today, if there is an Iranian drone attack on one of our forward operating bases in those three countries, do those forward operating bases and do

our soldiers have the necessary materiel, equipment, and intelligence to defend against those attacks?

General MILLEY. I would say, first of all, it is a very serious threat. We are aware of it and in some cases we have some capabilities to mitigate the threat. But to say that we can eliminate the threat, that would be a false statement. So, no, we don't have everything we would absolutely want that technology can provide.

Secretary ESPER. I would add that our ability to respond is not unique to Iranian drones, it is a challenge we face writ large. And that is why I recently reassigned the responsibility for counter-UAS [unmanned aerial systems] systems to the Army as the executive agent. We need to get ahead of this because the offensive technology is changing more quickly than our defensive means to deal with it.

Mr. CROW. Okay. Thank you, Secretary Esper.

Last question, General Milley, you are a Special Forces officer and have worked with local forces a lot throughout your career. There is bipartisan concern on the Hill about our lack of kind of standing by our Kurdish and Syrian allies who fought with us in northern Syria. And as a result of that several of us have led a bipartisan bill called the Syrian Partner Protection Act that would create an SIV [Special Immigrant Visa] program for those fighters and their families and allow them to come to the U.S. if they are in danger.

Could you speak very briefly as to the impact, the positive impact that SIV programs have, you know, not only in Syria but in Afghanistan and Iraq on our ability to demonstrate that we will stand by our partners and continue to recruit partners like that throughout the world?

General MILLEY. Well, I think for the United States as we go forward, regardless of where it is in the world, maintaining allies and partners in both nation-states but also indigenous partners like the SDF are important to fulfill our national security objectives and anything that we can do to assure them and maintain good faith with them is a positive.

Mr. CROW. Okay, thank you. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. I thank you, Mr. Crow.

Mr. Waltz.

Mr. WALTZ. And I am proud to join my colleague, Representative Crow, in that expansion of the SIV program which I think is critical to our local allies and to our ability to move forward.

Mr. Chairman, I have a unanimous consent request to submit to the record a letter from the commander in chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces to this committee.

The CHAIRMAN. Without objection, so ordered.

[The letter referred to was not available at the time of printing.]

Mr. WALTZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to return very quickly to this issue of pardons and war crimes, and one of the—the third case in First Lieutenant Lorange, I would just kind of conclude that that line of thinking and the previous conversation that Lieutenant Lorange did serve 6 years. I would submit to my colleagues, we need to be very careful in equating mistakes, perhaps bad judgment calls, calls that may even get you relieved of command, with a war crime.

And I too have received many texts and a lot of outreach since these pardons and most of them said “that could have been me.” And these split-second decisions in the heat of combat, again, making a mistake does not necessarily equal a war crime and I do think we have to be careful with the signals that we send, and in this case a very chilling signal that if you make a bad call that you could go to jail for 20 years. And I would just ask both of you to consider that as we deal with these going forward.

General Milley, I am glad that you mentioned that we are and clarified that we are fighting ISIS from Africa to Afghanistan. This is, in my view, a global insurgency by extremists against American leadership of a world order based on Western values and that includes Iran in that support of extremism. Would you both agree with that characterization?

Secretary ESPER. Yes.

General MILLEY. Yes.

Mr. WALTZ. And that we are dealing with a multigenerational war against extremism, against an ideology much like the war that we fought against the ideology of Communism and that we need a whole-of-government strategy to undermine the ideology, everything from girls’ education to women’s empowerment, economic opportunities, in addition to the military aspects of that. Would you agree that we need that and, frankly, that it has been lacking in the last 20 years of that whole-of-government approach?

General MILLEY. Absolutely, I do. You have to get at the root causes and delegitimize the ideology, absolutely.

Secretary ESPER. I think we need it. I am not sure to what degree. I would have to look back and understand whether it has been lacking or not or where and when it has been lacking. But the third piece of that is you have to have a culture of people willing to accept those ideas as well and you have to have—it has to be organic that some part of that population has to be receptive to those ideas, so that is critical.

Mr. WALTZ. So what we are talking, I mean we are talking about individual battles here from Syria to Iraq to Afghanistan in that I think that broader conflict where we do need that whole-of-government approach. Do you believe, General Milley, in your military opinion, do you believe that ISIS and al-Qaida can and will resurge, will regain capability and has the intent to attack the homeland if we allow it?

General MILLEY. The second one first, do they have the intent to attack the homeland? Yes, they absolutely do. We know that with certainty. But do I believe they will resurge if we withdraw all of our capabilities and support to the indigenous government and we don’t continue to operate by, with, and through them, then I believe that the conditions will be set for resurgence.

Mr. WALTZ. So you do not believe then, just approaching it another way, that the Syrian Democratic Forces whether that is in Syria, the Afghan National Security Forces in Afghanistan, the Iraqi Security Forces, currently have the independent capability without U.S. support to prevent that resurgence?

General MILLEY. I don’t believe they have the independent capability right this minute. That is true.

Mr. WALTZ. So in the near term, a full withdrawal would endanger the homeland?

General MILLEY. It is my belief that is correct.

Mr. WALTZ. Okay, Syria in particular, I just want to focus on that a moment. It just seems to me that we have discordant objectives here. On the one hand, our objective is ensuring the defeat of ISIS and the enduring defeat of ISIS, yet would you agree that the Assad regime backed by Iran, backed by Russia, with the war crimes that they have committed in bombing hospitals and refugee camps are essentially driving Sunni recruits to ISIS?

I mean on the one hand, by allowing Assad to continue its streak of murderous attacks across Syria, we are furthering ISIS. So my question is, what is our policy? And you can submit that for the record. What is our policy toward Russia, the Assad regime, and Iran—or, actually, I still have 20 seconds.

Secretary ESPER. I will just say broad-based—this was asked a couple times—our overarching goal with regard to Syria is to come up with a U.N.-sponsored political settlement between the parties that ends the civil war and hits those three topics I have mentioned before, objectives: not a safe haven for terrorists; not dominated by any power, in this case Iran, hostile to the United States; and contributes to a global security, strategic energy market.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mr. WALTZ. Thank you. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. You can submit the rest for the record.

[The information referred to was not available at the time of printing.]

Ms. Slotkin.

Ms. SLOTKIN. Hi, gentlemen. Thanks for being here. You know, I want to go back to this decision, the President's decision to allow the Turks to go into northern Syria. And I would offer, Mr. Secretary, that the only reason you are sitting here today is because General Mattis resigned almost exactly a year ago today on the basis of the President threatening this very decision, so I think it makes perfect sense that we are talking about it.

Can I just ask, you know, I think this issue really resonated with voters back home in our districts. Not because they understand every in and out of where Syria is and who the Kurds are and all the players; they understood that the American handshake has to mean something and that when we shook hands with the Kurds we gave them the commitment at the three- and four-star level that we would work with them. And when they died with us on the battlefield that that meant something to us and we wouldn't create a situation where they are running for their lives and their families are an internally displaced people.

So, let me ask you a question. Is our plan in Syria and in fighting terrorism from Africa to Afghanistan still working by, with, and through local partners?

Secretary ESPER. Yes, Congresswoman, it is. But let me go back to what—

Ms. SLOTKIN. No, I am sorry. No.

Secretary ESPER. But this is too important. You made a—

Ms. SLOTKIN. Mr. Secretary, no. Mr. Secretary—

Secretary ESPER. But you made a statement that is inaccurate.

Ms. SLOTKIN [continuing]. You have said that that—you working by, with, and through—

Secretary ESPER. It is, but you made an inaccurate statement and I want to clear—

Ms. SLOTKIN [continuing]. And what I want to understand—what I want to understand is in the future of our terrorist fights in West Africa, in all these places, the demonstration of going to the Kurds and telling them that we are leaving them, does that make it easier or harder to find partners to work by, with, and through for the next terrorist threat? Just harder—be honest.

Secretary ESPER. I am being honest.

Ms. SLOTKIN. Be straight. And Secretary Mattis was as straight as they come. Be honest.

Secretary ESPER. The—

The CHAIRMAN. Ms. Slotkin, I am sorry. If you have a statement to make—

Ms. SLOTKIN. I am sorry.

The CHAIRMAN [continuing]. You may make a statement.

And that is—

Ms. SLOTKIN. Does it make it easier or harder?

The CHAIRMAN. I will give you more time in a second. Yield for just a moment. If you have a statement to make, you make the statement. I don't want witnesses badgered up here. You asked him a question. You have to give him a chance to answer. If you want to make a statement, perfectly within your right, but don't badger him when he is trying to answer the question.

Go ahead.

Secretary ESPER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The handshake with the Kurds, with the SDF in particular, was a handshake that we would ensure the—we would defeat ISIS. It was not a handshake that said yes, we would also help you establish an autonomous Kurdish state. It was also not a handshake that said yes, we would fight Turkey for you. That is the difference there I am trying to make, the point we are trying to make. Whenever we make these handshakes with by, with, and through, which is our strategy, I think we need to be clearer going forward as to what the extent of that relationship actually is.

Ms. SLOTKIN. Will that be harder or easier if you are in Mali or Burkina Faso or other places? Do you think that these partner groups would feel like they could trust us?

Secretary ESPER. If we are clear and explicit with what the relationship is up front, yes.

Ms. SLOTKIN. You are the Secretary of Defense and I know folks have talked about the authorization of military force and I agree with most of my colleagues here that it desperately needs revision and that is actually Congress' responsibility, which they have shirked. Can I ask right now, do you, as Secretary of Defense, believe that you have authorization based on any AUMF on the books, to go to medium- or long-term war with Iran?

Secretary ESPER. We always have the right of self-defense, but to attack Iran, no. Not under—that is not as a state-on-state attack, no.

Ms. SLOTKIN. Okay, thank you. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

I know we are a little over time, if you will indulge me for just a minute here.

Ms. Sherrill.

Ms. SHERRILL. Thank you, Secretary Esper and General Milley, for being here today. I myself served in Pensacola, so I do look forward to hearing about your investigations into the foreign nationals on that base.

General Milley, you stated that our objective is a secure Middle East. Given that we have defeated the physical caliphate but knowing how important it is to protect those gains because as Secretary Esper stated, we haven't defeated ISIS, and given our relationship with our Kurdish allies who have certainly done a great deal of fighting for our shared objectives, and now given that we are still conducting combined operations presumably with the, roughly, I think you said 500 troops that we have remaining to fight in the region, I guess I fail to see how the President's tweet to remove troops without coordination with the Pentagon or our own Kurdish allies aids our objective of a secure Middle East. So have you found that tweet, did you find that tweet to be helpful?

General MILLEY. I am not sure which tweet we are talking about. To say that the President made a decision without coordination with the Secretary and I is not true. He did.

Ms. SHERRILL. So he tweeted out that we were going to remove troops from Syria and the Pentagon didn't know, but you were both aware that he was going to make that tweet?

General MILLEY. I wasn't aware of a specific tweet, but the sequencing, I am not exactly clear which tweet you are talking about.

Ms. SHERRILL. I am talking about the most recent tweet when he said he was going to remove the troops from Syria, not the months ago when he said we were going to do that under—when Secretary Mattis resigned. I am talking about the one after that.

General MILLEY. You are talking about the one in October when we pulled troops out?

Ms. SHERRILL. When we pulled troops out.

General MILLEY. Yeah. I think that tweet, I believe that that tweet happened after we talked, but I am not sure. I would have to go back and check. I guess my point is this. There was coordination and there was discussion between senior advisors and the President prior to him making a decision.

Ms. SHERRILL. So these senior advisors knew, but none of our allies across the world. I mean Mr. Crow, you know, was just talking about his—

General MILLEY. Yeah.

Ms. SHERRILL [continuing]. Discussion with allies—

General MILLEY. Right. Right.

Ms. SHERRILL [continuing]. Who right before that tweet had no idea that was coming. I will tell you, many people in the Pentagon had no idea that was coming. But you had all discussed it internally and decided to do it without working with the Pentagon or our allies.

General MILLEY. I can assure you there were discussions and deliberations done by members of the National Security Council with the President of the United States.

Ms. SHERRILL. Did you recommend that you pull out of Syria?

General MILLEY. I personally recommended that we pulled out 28 Special Forces soldiers in the face of 15,000 Turks that were going to invade—

The CHAIRMAN. I'm sorry, would the gentleman yield? Will the gentleman yield for just one quick second?

General MILLEY. Yes.

The CHAIRMAN. Because this is a question that's enormously important, and that's great.

General MILLEY. Yes.

The CHAIRMAN. In December—now, you were in different jobs at the time, but you were both in jobs—

General MILLEY. December, a year ago, you mean?

The CHAIRMAN. Last year.

General MILLEY. I thought you were talking about October, this past October.

The CHAIRMAN. I'm going to a different place. It is a simple yes or no question. Just bear with me.

General MILLEY. Okay. Yes.

The CHAIRMAN. In December, when you were the Secretary of the Army, and you were the Army Chief of Staff, to your knowledge, did anyone in the Pentagon, before the President sent out his tweet saying that we were going to pull completely out of Syria and Afghanistan, did anyone in the Pentagon know that that announcement was coming when the President tweeted it, to your knowledge?

General MILLEY. I don't know. I don't think I—

Secretary ESPER. Chairman, I can't speak to that because I—

The CHAIRMAN. All I'm asking—you can speak to that. To your knowledge, as the Secretary of the Army and the Chair of the—to your knowledge, did anyone in the Pentagon know that that announcement was coming?

Secretary ESPER. I don't know, and I am not trying to dodge because it is not a yes or no. As a service—

The CHAIRMAN. It is to your knowledge. Is it yes or no?

Secretary ESPER. But as a—I can't tell you. As a service secretary I don't have—

The CHAIRMAN. You don't know what you know?

Secretary ESPER. As a service secretary, no. Not—the service secretaries do not have an operational role.

The CHAIRMAN. I just asked a very narrow question.

General MILLEY. I don't know.

The CHAIRMAN. You talk to people in the Pentagon. You are telling me that you are the Secretary of the Army, and you are the chairman—you're the Army Chief of Staff, you are hanging out in the Pentagon—oh, we are pulling out of Syria?

General MILLEY. A year ago, I don't know if anyone was told. October—

The CHAIRMAN. That is all I am asking.

General MILLEY [continuing]. I guarantee there were deliberations.

The CHAIRMAN. I know about that. But the earlier decision is the really important one here, in my opinion.

I am sorry to interrupt, Ms. Sherrill, please go ahead.

Ms. SHERRILL. Well, I am also confused, because now—so it is my understanding that you were deliberating with some number of people and you suggested then the President pull out 28 troops?

General MILLEY. Let me review the bidding here. There were a variety of intelligence reports going back as far as early August of a considerable build-up of Turkish forces and capabilities with the intent to invade northern Syria and establish a buffer zone. President Erdogan went to the United Nations and held up a map and did declaratory policy and said he was going to do that.

When I became the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, one of the very first calls I made was to the CHOD [Chief of Defense] of Turkey to say, what are you doing? And he said we are going to do this and we cannot guarantee the safety of the American forces that are in the way. Those reports went to the Secretary of Defense, the President—

Ms. SHERRILL. So, sir.

General MILLEY. Hang on.

Ms. SHERRILL. So our NATO allies said we are going to do this—

General MILLEY. That is correct. That is exactly what they—

Ms. SHERRILL [continuing]. And we are going to run right through American troops.

General MILLEY. That is right. That is exactly right.

Ms. SHERRILL. And we did not talk to our allies and we did not go through—

General MILLEY. We did talk to our allies.

Ms. SHERRILL. Well, they seemed remarkably unaware that we were going to do this.

General MILLEY. I don't know which allies you are referring to.

Ms. SHERRILL. I am talking about Jordan. I am talking about allies throughout the region. I am talking about Israel. I am talking about our allies in the region who seemed to not—

General MILLEY. It is not correct—

Ms. SHERRILL [continuing]. Understand that we were going to pull troops out. Which allies were you talking about, I guess, is my question.

General MILLEY. I am talking about Britain, France, and Israel. And they were personally called about the discussions and the situation and they were all fully aware of the possibilities and the discussions and the situation, the key people. I am not going to speak for every member of the government. And then—

Ms. SHERRILL. Well, I will speak for Netanyahu and—

General MILLEY. I am not going to speak for Netanyahu. I know who I called.

Ms. SHERRILL [continuing]. Who seem to be—

General MILLEY. So, but my point being is there were deliberations and there were 15,000 Turkish soldiers and we had all the intelligence indicators to clearly indicate the orders were written and sent and rehearsals were complete and they were going to attack. There were 28 United States Special Forces Green Berets and I am not going to allow 28 American soldiers to be killed and slaughtered just to call someone's bluff.

There has been a lot of criticism about—

Ms. SHERRILL. I don't understand what these 28 troops that you are referring to. We had a thousand troops, what, and you wanted to pull 28?

General MILLEY. Along the access of advance—

The CHAIRMAN. Sorry, the initial access of advance. I apologize. We—

General MILLEY [continuing]. Of their invasion we had 28 soldiers.

The CHAIRMAN. I apologize. I apologize. And again, I really—if everyone—and I agree. Once the President made the announcement 6 months before in a tweet that we were pulling out of Syria—and this is absolutely what happened. When that tweet was made everyone went, oh my god, what did he do? And you all went, well, we have got to figure this out. And it is my opinion everything you just said, sir, is what Erdogan did after the President, unilaterally, without consulting the Pentagon, to my knowledge without even consulting the National Security Council, said we are pulling out of Syria.

It is my opinion and someone can disavow me of this notion at some point, that was the moment when Erdogan said, okay, I can do this. And then, yes, over the course of the next 6 to 7 to 8 months he planned it out, which then led to the series of events which you have told us and described, and I think it is accurate because the other thing is we had over 3,000 troops in Syria when the President made that announcement.

By the time we got to all that you just described that number was way down and it was way down—I am sorry, I will just say this bluntly. It was way down not because it was in the national security interest of the United States for it to be way down, it was way down because the President was trying to fulfill a campaign promise, and he did not consult the Pentagon before he made that announcement and started us down this path.

Now I am very sympathetic. Once we started down that path you guys had to figure out how to make it work, and you really worked hard at it. I know Secretary Dunford did as well. He desperately tried to find partners who could fill in for us leaving. He did. He was just unable to do it. But that is the discussion I want to have. And I am sorry, it is frustrating for me. We get—there were only 25 troops there. We couldn't possibly defend them. I agree. I completely agree, but that was started before then.

I do have to give Mr. Thornberry a chance to respond to this point and then I do want to get to Ms. Escobar, if I could. I said I would. I apologize. I know you guys are pushing on time, but it is a really important point. And I am not, I am really not trying to make a political point. But if we don't understand that—I want someone to go over to the White House and say we would really prefer you not to do this again, okay, that we have a process; that tweets have far more power than people realize on our policy. Let's try to calm that down. That is what I am trying to accomplish.

Mr. Thornberry.

Mr. THORNBERRY. Mr. Chairman, it is a far more complicated story than that. It is true in December, now a year ago, the President issued his text. There were immediate conversations I know personally between members of the House and the Senate with the

President and others at the White House related to that tweet. And as without going into all of the ins and outs over weeks, it is also true that there were other partners who did step up to assist in the work in Syria. And again, I have personal knowledge of a number of those conversations with partners.

So the bottom line is the President made a tweet. There was a lot of work and conversation. We did not withdraw from Syria and we had partners working with us. I do not believe that it was inevitable that what happened in October was going to come. Now I understand your point that once he said that, it was going to happen one way or another. I can just say it is, I believe it is a more complicated story with a number of people who have been emphasizing to the White House and to partners that we all need to be there together because we had a lot at stake. And there was some success with that and obviously President Erdogan saw an opening.

And just to emphasize, I think the decision made by the Secretary and the Chairman to safeguard American lives when they made it was absolutely the right decision. I have qualms with the original tweet, as you know. I don't think that was right and that is part of the reason I was involved in some of those conversations to ensure that we can continue to safeguard American interests in that region.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much.

Ms. Escobar, I apologize. I thought that was important. If you could—I know we are over time here. Just give you a couple quick minutes. Go ahead.

Ms. ESCOBAR. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And, gentlemen, thank you so much for being here and for your testimony. I am going to pick up where my colleague, Ms. Sherrill, left off and I just, I want to be clear in understanding this.

So, Chairman, you gave the recommendation because you had gotten notice from Turkey that American troops, their safety and security could not be guaranteed by our NATO ally and that they were about to invade and if something happens to American troops, well, something happens to American troops. Am I understanding that correctly?

General MILLEY. That is about right. That is correct.

Ms. ESCOBAR. Okay, so—

Secretary ESPER. I would add that I made the recommendation as well. It was my assessment in discussions I had with my counterpart leading up to, in the weeks leading up to the events of that date.

Ms. ESCOBAR. Was there an effort to negotiate with Turkey to ask them to be, to stand down, to not do it?

Secretary ESPER. Yes.

General MILLEY. Yes.

Secretary ESPER. A very intense effort.

Ms. ESCOBAR. And how long did that effort go on before the decision, before the recommendation was made?

Secretary ESPER. Weeks. We had been working on this for actually months with the Turks to restrain them by going through a number of diplomatic actions, military actions on the ground trying to set up a safe zone. All these things we were trying to do diplomatically, militarily, et cetera, while the build-up was happening

that the Chairman described earlier, to pull them back from crossing into northern Syria.

Ms. ESCOBAR. Was the President involved? Did he pick up the phone? Did he call our ally? Did he make the case himself for Turkey not going forward with its plan?

General MILLEY. I don't know.

Secretary ESPER. Well, I can't—I don't know all the calls the President does or does not make, but even if I knew I wouldn't convey that to you because it is, you know, those conversations are private between me and the Commander in Chief.

Ms. ESCOBAR. I would be interested in a classified setting to learn that information. This is—

Secretary ESPER. I still wouldn't share it with you, Congresswoman.

Ms. ESCOBAR. Okay.

Secretary ESPER. It is just as I wouldn't share a conversation between me and you, publicly, or with anybody.

Ms. ESCOBAR. I think this is an important point to me. Not even as a Member of Congress, but as an American, to know that we have troops that have been working side by side with allies. And you are right. There was a handshake deal, not a specific commitment. However, there is something to be said for a handshake deal for a mutually beneficial relationship that has benefited American safety and security tremendously that has allowed us to push back on terrorism and on ISIS. And so you will have to forgive me, but this idea that—while you are correct that, you know, it wasn't in the fine print that we were going to really be a good, strong ally, that is distressing to me as an American.

Secretary ESPER. And I appreciate that. And, look, we have both been there. But not only was it not in the fine print, it wasn't in the bold print. Never did we put on the table, in fact, I have spoken to our commanders about this. Some of them were very clear that we are not here—we are not going to defend you against Turkey.

Ms. ESCOBAR. And, but—and, Mr. Secretary, I understand that. I think what is equally distressing to me is to hear that a NATO ally was about to run roughshod over American troops and I wonder if the President got involved. So that is a question obviously that you are saying not even in a classified setting you would be willing to answer. Do you all know how many—

Secretary ESPER. I don't know the answer to begin with. I said even if I did, I—

Ms. ESCOBAR. Okay. Well, that is distressing as well because if we are negotiating to protect American troops and to prevent an ally from creating what is now a deeply unsettling situation, I mean 200,000 civilians have been displaced. We have seen genocide occurring. I am now concerned and I would like your opinion. You know, part of what drives people into the arms of ISIS and what promotes terrorism is that instability, this feeling that you don't have a future. If there is anything that I have learned while serving on this committee is that that kind of hopelessness is a breeding ground.

Secretary ESPER. Right.

Ms. ESCOBAR. Is there a breeding ground right now in Syria for ISIS?

Secretary ESPER. I can't comment on that. I just don't know. But let me tell you this, what the Turks would say, and I am not defending the Turkish action, but they would say, look, this has gone on for them for decades, if not a couple hundred years of this conflict between Kurds and Turks.

Ms. ESCOBAR. But, Mr. Secretary, with all due respect, we had a situation that was far more under control before than it is today, would you agree?

Secretary ESPER. Yes and no, Congresswoman. If you will recall from the earliest days when this SDF was first set up under the Obama administration there was unhappiness, vocal, public concern by the Turks about the relationship. And they had made two previous incursions into Syria to address what they thought was a terrorist problem. But none of these—

The CHAIRMAN. And we will—yeah, I don't want to—I know you guys have been very generous with your time, and I think that was a good point. I know you have to go. So I don't want to cut you off, but at the same time I also want to respect your time. And I thank you very much for being here. We are adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:20 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

DECEMBER 11, 2019

PREPARED STATEMENTS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

DECEMBER 11, 2019

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Joint Statement for the Record: HASC Hearing – 11 DEC 19

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Thornberry, and distinguished members of the House Armed Services Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the security situation in Syria and the broader Middle East, and to discuss the Department of Defense's (DoD) strategy in the region.

Before we turn to the topic of today's hearing, I would like to congratulate the Committee on reaching an agreement on the National Defense Authorization Act for the 58th consecutive year. This conference report supports the Department's implementation of the National Defense Strategy and includes key priorities like paid parental leave for our civilian workforce and the establishment of the Space Force as the sixth branch of the military. We look forward to Congress sending this legislation to the President for his signature.

As reflected in the National Defense Strategy, the DoD prioritizes China and Russia as our Nation's top national security challenges. As we transition our focus towards great power competition, we must also remain vigilant in countering threats from rogue states like Iran and violent extremist organizations like ISIS. The United States' strategy in the Middle East seeks to ensure the region is not a safe haven for terrorists, is not dominated by any power hostile to the United States, and contributes to a stable global energy market.

For the Department of Defense, this translates to the following six objectives:

- (1) Utilize a dynamic U.S. military presence with strategic depth to deter and, if necessary, respond to aggression;
- (2) Strengthen and enhance the defensive capabilities of regional partners;
- (3) Advance partnerships and burden-sharing with global allies and partners to address shared security concerns;
- (4) Protect freedom of navigation;
- (5) Deny safe haven to terrorists that threaten the homeland; and
- (6) Maintain a comprehensive counter-proliferation approach to mitigate WMD threats.

Although there are a multitude of security issues to discuss in the Middle East, today we will focus on two of the most destabilizing influences in the region – ISIS and Iran.

Beginning with ISIS, the United States has achieved great success working alongside our partner forces in Syria and Iraq to destroy the physical caliphate and to liberate 7.7 million people living under its brutal rule. This included the successful operations that resulted in the death of ISIS's founder and leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as well as one of his top deputies. The Department of Defense remains committed to working closely with our partners on the ground in Syria and Iraq to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS.

Today, U.S. forces remain active in Syria, working in close coordination with the Syrian Democratic Forces. We maintain a reduced presence in Syria following the partial withdrawal of our forces from the former security mechanism area along the Syria-Turkey border. U.S. forces are currently located at the At Tanf Garrison, as well as in outposts in northeast Syria near the oil fields which served as ISIS' primary source of revenue used to fund its terror. Syrian Democratic

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Forces are now in control of those oil fields, and continue to benefit from those resources to fund local governance, stabilization, and security operations in northeast Syria.

Although the recent Turkish incursion has complicated this battlespace, the Department of Defense remains confident that we can continue the mission the President has given us in Syria, which is to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS. We maintain our leadership role in the Defeat-ISIS campaign, which brings together 76 nations and 5 international organizations to provide funding, military capabilities, and political support.

In Iraq, we continue to work by, with, and through the Iraqi Security Forces to enable a strong and independent Iraqi state. The cohesiveness of the Iraqi Government is currently being tested as rival factions compete for power, including some fueled by Iranian funds and weapons. We remain in close coordination with our Iraqi partners to mitigate the impact of these current events on the long-term stability of the country.

Moving to Iran, over the past 18 months, DoD has supported the United States' economic and diplomatic maximum pressure campaign. These efforts seek to bring the Iranian regime back to the negotiating table for a new and better deal that addresses the full range of threats emanating from Iran.

Iran's efforts to destabilize the region have increased in recent months as it attacked targets in Saudi Arabia, disrupted commercial shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, shot down a U.S. unmanned aircraft in international airspace, and provided support to proxies including the Houthis, Hezbollah, and Shia militia groups in Iraq.

To address these threats, the DoD is taking a deliberate approach to strengthen our defenses, enable our partners to better defend themselves, and refine our response options. Since May of this year, approximately 14,000 additional U.S. military personnel have been ordered to the region to serve as a tangible demonstration of our commitment to our allies and partners. These additional forces are not intended to signal an escalation, but rather to reassure our friends and buttress our efforts at deterrence.

We are also focused on internationalizing the response to Iran's provocative activities by encouraging increased burden-sharing and cooperation with allies and partners from around the world to address our shared security concerns. The International Maritime Security Construct, which promotes freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman, has reached full operational capability and includes contributions from the United Kingdom, Australia, Albania, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. The more nascent international Integrated Air and Missile Defense effort led by Saudi Arabia also contributes to increased security by protecting critical infrastructure throughout the region.

Through these actions, we are sending a clear message to Iran that the international community will not tolerate its malign activities. Along with our allies and partners, we remain united in our commitment to regional stability and to upholding long-standing international rules and norms. Importantly, Iran should not mistake the United States' restraint for an unwillingness to respond with decisive military force should our forces or interests be attacked. Furthermore, as the President has stated, we will not allow Iran to develop nuclear weapons.

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In conclusion, as the Department of Defense continues to implement the National Defense Strategy, the stability of the Middle East remains important to our nation's security. As such, we will continue to calibrate all of our actions to deter conflict, avoid unintended escalation, and enable our partners to defend themselves against regional threats. In doing so, we will preserve the hard won gains of the past and ensure the security of the United States and our vital interests.

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Dr. Mark T. Esper
Secretary of Defense

Dr. Mark T. Esper was born on April 26, 1964, in Uniontown, Pennsylvania. He is a 1986 graduate of the United States Military Academy and received his commission in the Infantry. Upon completion of Ranger and Pathfinder training, he served in the 101st Airborne Division and participated in the 1990-91 Gulf War with the “Screaming Eagles.” He later commanded a Rifle Company in the 3-325 Airborne Battalion Combat Team in Vicenza, Italy. He retired from the U.S. Army in 2007 after spending 10 years on active duty and 11 years in the National Guard and Army Reserve.

After leaving active duty, he served as Chief of Staff at The Heritage Foundation think tank, followed by service as legislative director and senior policy advisor to former Senator Chuck Hagel. He was a senior professional staff member on the Senate Foreign Relations and Senate Government Affairs committees, policy director for the House Armed Services Committee, and national security advisor for former Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist. During the President George W. Bush administration, he served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Negotiations Policy at the Pentagon.

From 2006-2007, Dr. Esper was the Chief Operating Officer and Executive Vice President of Defense and International Affairs at Aerospace Industries Association. He was the national policy director to Senator Fred Thompson for his 2008 presidential campaign, and was a Senate-appointed commissioner on the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. Dr. Esper later served concurrently as the Executive Vice President for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s Global Intellectual Property Center and as Vice President for Europe and Eurasian Affairs from 2008-2010. Before being nominated as the Secretary of the Army in 2017, Dr. Esper was the Vice President for Government Relations at the Raytheon Company.

Dr. Esper is a recipient of the Department of Defense Medal for Distinguished Public Service. Among his many military awards and decorations are the Legion of Merit, Bronze Star Medal, the Kuwait Liberation Medal, Kuwait Liberation Medal-Saudi Arabia, and the Combat Infantryman Badge.

Dr. Esper holds a Master of Public Administration degree from the John F. Kennedy School of Government, and a doctorate in Public Policy from George Washington University. Dr. Esper and his wife, Leah, have been married for 30 years and have 3 adult children.

The Honorable Mark T. Esper was sworn in as the 27th Secretary of Defense July 23, 2019. He served as Acting Secretary of Defense from June 24, 2019, to July 15, 2019. Dr. Esper served as the Secretary of the Army from Nov. 20, 2017, to June 24, 2019, and from July 15, 2019, to July 23, 2019.

GEN Mark A. Milley
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

General Mark A. Milley is the 20th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the nation's highest-ranking military officer, and the principal military advisor to the President, Secretary of Defense, and National Security Council.

Prior to becoming Chairman on October 1, 2019, General Milley served as the 39th Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army.

A native of Massachusetts, General Milley graduated from Princeton University in 1980, where he received his commission from Army ROTC.

General Milley has had multiple command and staff positions in eight divisions and Special Forces throughout the last 39 years to include command of the 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division; the 2nd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division; Deputy Commanding General, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault); Commanding General, 10th Mountain Division; Commanding General, III Corps; and Commanding General, U.S. Army Forces Command.

While serving as the Commanding General, III Corps, General Milley deployed as the Commanding General, International Security Assistance Force Joint Command and Deputy Commanding General, U.S. Forces Afghanistan. General Milley's joint assignments also include the Joint Staff operations directorate and as a Military Assistant to the Secretary of Defense.

General Milley's operational deployments include the Multi-National Force and Observers, Sinai, Egypt; Operation Just Cause, Panama; Operation Uphold Democracy, Haiti; Operation Joint Endeavor, Bosnia-Herzegovina; Operation Iraqi Freedom, Iraq; and three tours during Operation Enduring Freedom, Afghanistan. He also deployed to Somalia and Colombia.

In addition to his bachelor's degree in political science from Princeton University, General Milley has a master's degree in international relations from Columbia University and one from the U.S. Naval War College in national security and strategic studies. He is also a graduate of the MIT Seminar XXI National Security Studies Program.

General Milley and his wife, Hollyanne, have been married for more than 34 years and have two children.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MEMBERS POST HEARING

DECEMBER 11, 2019

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. KIM

Mr. KIM. Addressing the root causes of state fragility in countries like Syria is not just smart for our national security, but is also cost effective—for every \$1 we spend on conflict prevention, we save \$16 in response costs. The Global Fragility Act, legislation that passed the House with broad bipartisan support, identifies addressing state fragility as a U.S. government priority and requires an interagency strategy to tackle this issue in conflict-affected areas such as Syria. Can you share how improved coordination between DOD, State, and USAID to address fragile and conflict-affected states would make a difference for U.S. policy in the Middle East and around the world?

Secretary ESPER. [No answer was available at the time of printing.]

Mr. KIM. In your confirmation hearing earlier this year, you commented on the importance of “leveraging other parts of the government” such as the State Department and USAID to effectively pursue the Administration’s National Security Strategy. This is especially true in Syria, where diplomacy will no doubt be critical to a long-term solution. How have you been working alongside Special Representative for Syria, James Jeffrey, to promote diplomacy in the region, and how important do you see our commitment to the diplomatic side of our engagement?

Secretary ESPER. [No answer was available at the time of printing.]

Mr. KIM. Addressing the root causes of state fragility in countries like Syria is not just smart for our national security, but is also cost effective—for every \$1 we spend on conflict prevention, we save \$16 in response costs. The Global Fragility Act, legislation that passed the House with broad bipartisan support, identifies addressing state fragility as a U.S. government priority and requires an interagency strategy to tackle this issue in conflict-affected areas such as Syria. Can you share how improved coordination between DOD, State, and USAID to address fragile and conflict-affected states would make a difference for U.S. policy in the Middle East and around the world?

General MILLEY. The Global Fragility Act is an important step to assist U.S. policy objectives in the Middle East and around the world. On December 20, the President, as part of the FY2020 spending package, signed the Global Fragility Act into law. The Act directs the development of an integrated ten-year strategy (Global Fragility Strategy), requires synchronization of implementation plans across the USG through the Secretary of State, and provides the appropriations necessary (over \$1B to DOS over five years) for prevention and stabilization efforts in conflict-affected areas. These actions will help ensure DOD efforts support designated priority countries and facilitate interagency synchronization on country plans for prevention and stability.

The Global Fragility Act directs the President, in coordination with the Secretary of State, the Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Secretary of Defense, and the heads of other relevant Federal departments and agencies, to establish a comprehensive, integrated, ten-year strategy. This strategy will contribute to the stabilization of conflict-affected areas, address global fragility, and strengthen the capacity of the U.S. to be an effective leader of international efforts to prevent extremism and violent conflict. The Joint Staff will support the Department of Defense’s participation in the development of this strategy, including the identification of priority regions and countries.

Preventing conflict and reducing state fragility protects U.S. interests and investments by strengthening alliances and partnerships and reducing the need for later costly interventions and efforts. Addressing fragility, conflict, and violence in the Middle East or around the world is critical to help countries achieve self-reliance and reduce dependency on external aid. The Global Fragility Act, combined with the Department of Defense’s new authority in the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act to support DOS and USAID stabilization operations, provides the tools necessary to help bring about this objective.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MS. HOULAHAN

Ms. HOULAHAN. As the number of refugees rises in the wake of the recent Turkish incursion into Syria, what is the Department doing to engage in efforts to counter violent extremism? More specifically, what is the Department doing to engage women in CVE as more and more people are displaced?

Secretary ESPER. [No answer was available at the time of printing.]

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. WALTZ

Mr. WALTZ. Would you agree that the Assad regime, backed by Iran and backed by Russia, are essentially driving Sunni recruits to ISIS? What is our policy towards Russia, the Assad regime and Iran?

Secretary ESPER. [No answer was available at the time of printing.]

Mr. WALTZ. Would you agree that the Assad regime, backed by Iran and backed by Russia, are essentially driving Sunni recruits to ISIS? What is our policy towards Russia, the Assad regime and Iran?

General MILLEY. Pro-regime operations at the outset of the Syrian civil war drove a number of Sunni recruits to join ISIS; however, we have not seen continued evidence of that trend as the conflict evolved over the years. ISIS continues to utilize social media and online propaganda to reach potential recruits in addition to targeting socioeconomically marginalized segments of the population for radicalization. For operational safety purposes, we regularly de-conflict U.S. and Coalition D-ISIS operations with the Russian military when operating in close proximity to Russian and/or pro-regime forces. DOD supports the U.S. policy of reducing Iranian influence in Syria and pressuring the Assad Regime and their Russian backers to support a political resolution to the conflict in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254 in order to create the conditions for greater regional stability.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. GOLDEN

Mr. GOLDEN. The Lead Inspector General Report to the U.S. Congress on Operation Inherent Resolve warned that ISIS would likely exploit a reduction in U.S.-led counterterrorism pressure to reorganize its remaining forces in Syria.

The Report described CENTCOM's September 2019 assessment that "ISIS had been growing its capability to support 'hybrid military operations' and to conduct them 'when consistent counterterrorism pressure is absent.'"

We know from Iran's approach to hybrid warfare how potent and destabilizing this strategy can be in the Middle East.

Please describe: (1) The threat posed by the current ability of ISIS—despite having lost its territory—to conduct hybrid warfare in Syria; (2) How this threat impacts the U.S. and its allies in the region; and (3) How U.S. military operations prior to the October Turkish incursion into Syria kept ISIS from further developing hybrid warfare capabilities.

General MILLEY. While DOD adjusted its posture in response to the October Turkish incursion into Syria, CT pressure against ISIS has not diminished. ISIS today is not the threat it once was, but the group is scrambling to regain some element of its former self to achieve its vision. If CT pressure was significantly reduced, ISIS would likely attempt to intensify its insurgency throughout Syria, expand its influence in Sunni-majority areas, and rebuild its core capabilities, potentially including its ability to conduct attacks in the West. The group currently calculates that it lacks the capacity to seize and hold territory, which is why ISIS is pursuing a deliberate "hybrid" strategy aimed at gradually setting the conditions for its eventual re-emergence as a territory-holding force. However, U.S. forces and the Coalition continue to work with vetted Syrian opposition forces, including the SDF, to apply pressure to ISIS in an effort to curb the group's activities.