

**Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing U.S. Central Command
And U.S. Africa Command In Review Of The Defense Authorization
Request For Fiscal Year 2022 And The Future Years Defense
Program**

April 22, 2021

WITNESSES:

**GENERAL STEPHEN TOWNSEND, COMMANDER U.S. AFRICA COMMAND
GENERAL KENNETH MCKENZIE, COMMANDER, U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND**

REED: Let me call the hearing to order.

This morning, the committee will receive testimony from General McKenzie, commander of United States Central Command, CENTCOM, and General Townsend, commander, the United States Africa Command, or AFRICOM.

Thank you both for your many decades of military service, and please extend our appreciation to the men and women serving under you, and we appreciate very much their sacrifice and the sacrifice of their families on behalf of the United States.

Last week, in one of the most challenging decisions facing President Biden, he announced the withdrawal of all forces from Afghanistan by September 11th, 2021. It appears the president concluded that more troops might more -- buy more time and casualties, but more time would not create a government that could defeat the Taliban and effectively govern Afghanistan.

REED: The president's decision, however, should be seen as a transition, not closure, and should not mean an end to our counterterrorism efforts. Most importantly, we must ensure that Afghanistan will not be a source of planning, plotting or projection of terrorist attacks around the globe, including against the homeland.

And General McKenzie, I would be interested in hearing your thoughts on how best to transition to a new counterterrorism architecture in the region to continue to degrade Al Qaida, ISIS of the Khorasan Province, and other terrorist groups and prevent their ability to attack the homeland.

Additionally, international support for the Afghan forces will remain vital. The intelligence community's annual threat assessment for 2021 noted, "The Afghan government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the coalition withdrawals support." I'd like to understand plans to continue training and assistance to the Afghan forces in light of the transition, and how we will balance that against the need to conduct robust oversight of funding that we provide the Afghan government and forces.

General McKenzie, you are also facing a complex challenge of deterring the threat from Iran and its proxies while the administration seeks a diplomatic solution to contain the Iranian nuclear threat. I would be interested to hear an update on your progress in meeting these challenges,

particularly against the backdrop of indirect talks in Vienna, the recent attack on the Natanz nuclear facility and Iran's announcement that they had begun enriching uranium up to 60 percent, which would move it closer than ever before to the 90 percent purity threshold required for weapons-grade uranium.

Turning to AFRICOM, General Townsend, you have said that al-Shabaab is the largest and most violent of Al Qaida's branches worldwide. Yet the previous administration chose with little notice to remove the vast majority of U.S. troops from Somalia. The Biden administration is now reviewing that decision as part of a larger assessment of our strategy in Somalia.

I hope you will share your views on the current security situation as well as the status of our engagement with the Somalia partners, particularly in light of news this week that the Somalia federal government has extended the mandate for the president and parliament by two years. This move directly undermines the progress made on democratic processes and institutional reforms and may threaten international support.

As you noted in your testimony, Africa is a vast continent of opportunity and promise, but one that includes many strategic challenges, many of which are overlapping also, Population growth, food insecurity and impact from climate change increase instability, drive conflict, and further threaten vulnerable populations. These challenges do not lend themselves to geographic or bureaucratic boundaries; they require well-resourced and well-integrated whole-of-government solutions.

I look forward to your views on the importance of investing in diplomacy and development to foster (ph) long-term stability, as well as an update on AFRICOM support to the interagency in these efforts.

Our competitors recognize that investing in Africa and the Middle East is in their long-term interest, as evidenced by Chinese and Russian military and economic activity that continues to grow in these critical regions.

General Townsend and General McKenzie, I look forward to hearing your views on how we best leverage U.S. views -- U.S. engagement, rather, and investment to create attractive alternatives and ensure we maintain key partnerships and access.

I want to thank you again for being here this morning. I look forward to your testimony.

And before I turn it over to the ranking member, Senator Inhofe, I'd like to remind my colleagues that there will be an informal classified briefing immediately following this session in SBC217, the Office of Senate Security.

Senator Inhofe?

INHOFE: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Over the past few years this committee's top priority has been ensuring that we implement the -- the -- there it is -- this document. It's been kind of a -- it's surprising that something that was put together back in 2018 by equal number of Democrats and Republicans has been so accurate, and we have been using that as a blueprint.

And if we're serious about the security of our nation, we need resources to make the -- this NDS happen, make it a reality. The president's budget request does not meet this standard. Instead, it represents a decline in defense spending which will have serious implications for our national security. It also means our combatant commanders will have to do more with less.

So, the standard that was put forth was not met by the president.

Our top military commanders have testified in unison in recent weeks the threats to the United States are growing at an alarming rate. Cutting the defense budget sends exactly the wrong signals to our allies and our adversaries alike.

General Townsend, you've highlighted China's growth and -- growing use in Africa as a protection platform for the military. They've secured their first overseas base in Djibouti. We've been there; we've witnessed that. And they're aggressively pursuing a base in Africa's west coast, which would be the first time, giving China an enduring naval presence in the southern Atlantic.

With less than 6,000 troops on the continent and the continued lack of ISR, I hope DOD's Global Posture Review will ensure your resource shortfalls are being addressed.

In CENTCOM we have the opposite problem: It gets significant resources to counter Al Qaida, ISIS and Iranian-backed terrorists. General McKenzie, in the last year I understand you've been able to reduce U.S. troop levels in the region, but I worry this administration's policies in your region are driven more by politics than -- than national security.

First in Afghanistan, the administration is by its own admission executing a calendar-based drawdown rather than a conditions-based one. We know this is true, we -- and we've talked about this for quite a period of time.

General McKenzie, you recently stated that the Taliban still has to take action to meet the conditions for U.S. troop withdrawal of the February 2020 agreement, and the arbitrary September the 11th deadline for troop withdrawal -- drawdown risks a power vacuum that terrorists will dominate and use to threaten our homeland again.

I -- I want to add here that I'm extremely disappointed that General Miller has not yet scheduled to testify publicly before this committee, and I hope that you will work to fix that, General McKenzie.

Secondly, regarding Iran, the administration is moving quickly to negotiate a quick return to the failed 2015 Iran deal granting Tehran a large sanction relief even though the nuclear limitations will begin to expire within the next five years.

As we saw during the Obama administration, Iran will use sanctions relief to fund terrorist groups, including the ones currently targeting the men and women in uniform that you command.

Third, in Yemen, the administration is pulling back from its -- from our Saudi partners, while at the same time the Iran-backed Houthis are escalating their attacks. We should not expect the Saudis to tolerate a perpetual Houthi ballistic missile and -- and armed drone threat on our border. We wouldn't tolerate one on our border. So the United States arms sales restrictions could very well lead to -- the Saudis to seek support from our peer competitors.

And, General McKenzie, I hope you will address these issues and offer your views on how to heighten the risk (ph) and manage a year ahead.

So, I thank both of you for your testimony and your presence here today, and also in the closed session that we'll have, as the chairman mentioned.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

REED: Thank you very much, Senator Inhofe.

And let me concur with the ranking member. We have been pressing the department for General Miller to testify in an open hearing on Afghanistan well before the decision was made by President Biden with respect to forces in Afghanistan. And now with that decision it's even more important that we receive direct in-person communication from General Miller.

The last time we had such an open hearing was, I believe, with General Nicholson in 2017. So we need to carry out our duties, seek direct contact. And I will once again, General McKenzie, ask you assistance and relay that message and hopefully General Miller will be here very shortly.

And with that let me now recognize the witnesses beginning with General McKenzie.

Thank you, sir.

MCKENZIE: Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Inhofe, distinguished members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, I appear before you proudly representing the 70,000 men and women of the United States Central Command. It's a great pleasure to be with you here today.

It's my duty to testify, of course, but I have to say it's also a privilege to address this body, and all the greater honor to do so beside the commander of U.S. Africa Command, General Steve Townsend.

I'd also like to recognize my senior enlisted leader, Fleet Master Chief Jamie Herdel of the Navy, who is here with me today, as well as my chief legislative assistant, Air Force Colonel Jim Livadi (ph).

Since my last testimony, the region has continued to evolve and it remains as dynamic as ever.

With the president's announcement last week, we are focused on working closely with the Afghan government and our NATO allies to responsibly conclude our Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan. This is my main effort at present, but it's not my only responsibility. My prepared statement addresses our other missions in some detail.

The United States and our NATO allies sent forces to Afghanistan nearly 20 years ago, and the president has judged the time is now appropriate to redeploy and reposition these forces so that they are better arrayed to deter adversaries and respond to threats globally, including those in the CENTCOM command region.

Our singular purpose in Afghanistan has been to ensure that Al Qaida and other violent extremist organizations would never again plot, prepare and perpetrate attacks against the United States and our allies from the refuge of that country.

The campaign has evolved considerably over the years, from active combat operations with U.S. and NATO forces in the lead to advisory efforts designed to enhance the Afghan national defense and security forces' ability to conduct their own campaigns against violent extremist organizations. That there has not been another 9/11 is not an accident; it is a cumulative product of these efforts.

MCKENZIE: We will now conclude our Afghanistan-based advice and support mission. We are further planning now for continued counterterrorism operations from within the region. Ensuring that the violent extremist organizations fighting for their existence in the Hinterland of Afghanistan remain under persistent surveillance and pressure.

Every since 12 of September 2001, when our allies invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, we have done everything in Afghanistan within a partnership framework and that will not change in the months ahead. We are planning collaboratively with our interagency and international partners and will take all measures to ensure the safe and orderly withdrawal of all of our forces and those of our partners.

This includes positioning significant combat power to guard against the possibility that if the Taliban decide to interfere in any way with our orderly redeployment. I'd now like to briefly summarize some other challenges in the region.

While Iran has itself avoided state on state attacks on U.S. force since last January strikes on the Al Asad and Erbil Air Bases it continues to menace regional partners and the free flow of commerce through the use of proxies and the proliferation of armed unmanned aerial systems and other munitions. This pursuit of regional fajiminy (ph) remains the greatest source of instability across the Middle East.

In Iraq and Syria the campaign to eliminate the threat posed by ISIS has entered a new phase. In Iraq we are engaged in a strategic dialogue with the Iraqi government to determine the nature

of our security relationship. ISIS' physical caliphate is no more. But its toxic ideology lives on. The problem is especially acute in communities ravaged by conflict and its sprawling camps for displaced persons where ISIS prays upon vulnerable populations.

What has accelerated in the last year is the influence of China and Russia. Each in their own way are attempting to subvert the rules based international order and to gain strategic influence in the Middle East. China's activity in the region takes the form of economic investment, arm sales and other overtures.

Russia has made an 18th Century power play in Syria, profiting (ph) up the murderous Asad regime. The Middle East remains key terrain and I believe China and Russia will continue to expand their efforts to improve their position in the region and diminish U.S. standing wherever possible.

The CENTCOM area of responsibility is the most cyber contested theater in the world. It is also the proving ground for the proliferation and employment of unmanned weaponized systems, many emanating from Iran. This difficult and complex operational environment provides units inside CENTCOM opportunities to operate and to conduct realistic training within an environment that exist nowhere else in the world.

I can state, as a matter of fact, that the units and ships assigned to CENTCOM are ready as any in the joint force. The weeks and months ahead will see us execute a very complicated and demanding military operation to withdrawal U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan. This is presently the main effort of my command and we have the tools necessary to accomplish this task.

With that, I look forward to answering your questions.

REED: Thank you very much, General McKenzie. General Townsend, please.

TOWNSEND: Can you hear me?

REED: Yes, sir.

TOWNSEND: Good, thank you. It's hard to tell. Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Inhofe and members of the committee, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to appear today. It's a privilege to represent America's exceptional men and women at U.S. Africa Command who are dedicated in securing U.S. interest and preserving our strategic options on the African Continent.

This morning I'm accompanied by AFRICOM's senior enlisted leader, Marine Corps Sergeant Major Richard Thresher and one of my key staff advisors, Air Force Colonel Jacqueline Breeden. I'm also here this morning with my colleague and friend, General Frank McKenzie, the CENTCOM commander to discuss shared challenges and opportunities in our areas of responsibility and the high return of the American people get for their defense investments around the globe.

Historically, America has not been penalized for underestimating the importance of Africa. Today we can no longer afford to underestimate the economic opportunity and the strategic consequence that Africa embodies. And which competitors like China and Russia fully recognize. Africa is the crossroads of the globe.

The recent blockage of the Suez Canal and -- not only demonstrated the importance of critical sea lines of communication flowing to the Mediterranean and Red Seas but also around the Cape of Good Hope. Violent extremist organizations, competitor activities and fragile states are among some of the threats to U.S. interest.

Beyond geography, global population growth is largely African. By 2050 one in four people on the planet will live in Africa. Rapidly growing markets, 60 percent of the world's arable (ph) land and vast untapped resources including strategic rare earth minerals provide tremendous economic potential. Thirteen of the world's 25 fastest growing economies are in Africa.

Africa's tremendous opportunities are offset by significant challenges including climate change, food shortages, poverty, ungoverned spaces, historic grievances and other factors that make the continent also home to 14 of the world's 20 most fragile countries. Our strategic competitors are very active in Africa. China has invested heavily in their second continent where some think tanks call it China's fifth island chain.

Russia seeks to exploit instability and fragility for their own gain and at U.S. expense. Iran is increasingly active on the continent. At the same time, African based violent extremists like Al Qaida affiliate Al Shabaab and ISIS thrive in the government's -- in the continents ungoverned spaces. They provide the greatest threat to many of our African partners and aspire to kill Americans in Africa as well as here at home.

Across the diverse continent, USAFRICOM operates with .3 percent of DOD's budget and .3 percent of DOD's manpower. This tiny investment pays enormous dividends and it's just under 6,000 service members, civilians and contractors who work with our partners both interagency and foreign to counter malign actors and stop (ph) national threats, respond to crises, and strengthen security forces to advance U.S. interests and promote regional security, stability and prosperity.

AFRICOM works everyday to protect America's security and advance our access and influence. We do this arm-in-arm with the U.S. interagency and through coordinated action with our allies and partners. What AFRICOM accomplishes with a few people and a few dollars on a continent 3.5 times the size of the Continental United States is a bargain for the American taxpayer and low cost insurance policy for America's security.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thanks for your continued support to our armed forces and I look forward to your questions.

REED: Thank you very much, General Townsend. And let me remind my colleagues because this is hybrid hearing of our procedures. Rather than using the early bird rule, we will recognize

individuals by seniority. We will do the same five-minute rounds with questioning and I ask my colleagues to keep track of their clock.

And finally, for everyone to be heard effectively, I'd ask all colleagues to please mute your microphone when not speaking. Thank you very much.

General McKenzie, the intelligence community in a 2021 estimate indicated that Al Qaida and ISIS remain among the greatest threats to the United States overseas and also continue to have the intent to project power into the United States.

In addition, the Afghan Study Group, led by General Dunford and Senator Ayotte, concluded that a U.S. withdrawal -- a complete withdrawal, which is -- I don't think you're contemplating a complete withdrawal, would allow the Al Qaida and other elements to restore themselves within 18 to 36 months.

And do you agree with these assessments, one, that Al Qaida and ISIS are probably among the greatest threats and, two, if unchecked they will revitalize themselves?

MCKENZIE: Chairman, I -- I do agree that Al Qaida and ISIS remain -- have aspirational goals of continuing to attack us. So I completely agree with the intelligence community's estimate.

REED: And Director Burns of the CIA indicated in testimony that the very nature of the withdrawal will diminish to a degree our ability to collect intelligence. Do you concur with that assessment too?

MCKENZIE: Sir, I do concur with that assessment. We will have -- we will lose the abilities that we have now to see completely into Afghanistan.

REED: And so the issue before us very practically is -- is how do we compensate for those facts on the ground. And perhaps you might reserve some more comments for the classified session. How do you intend to compensate so that we can effectively disrupt Al Qaida and ISIS?

MCKENZIE: Chairman, I will have more pointed comments in our closed session. But briefly I would tell you it will be difficult. It is not impossible to accomplish this task.

A couple of things have changed since 2001 when we were last attacked from Afghanistan. First of all, the United States itself is a far harder target than we were in September of 2001. It is more difficult to operate in the United States. It is more difficult to gain access to the United States. So a variety of things have changed inside the United States and we should always keep that in mind.

Additionally, although we are going, in fact, to -- to -- to pull out of Afghanistan -- and I'm operating under the concept that, for U.S. military presence, zero is going to be zero and we can talk a little bit more about that in the closed session -- we will have -- we will have an architecture in the theater that will allow us to look into Afghanistan. It will not give us the same

picture that we've got now. It will us to -- to -- to see in. The ranges will be greater. The resources will be greater. The risks will all be greater, but it will be possible to do those things. It is certainly not impossible, yet we won't have the vision that we have now.

REED: Thank you very much, General McKenzie.

General Townsend, again, thank you for your -- both of you gentlemen -- for your leadership and your advice to the committee. We have withdrawn, effectively, our forces from Somalia. Can you assess what's the operational effect?

And one of the factors that I think you both recognize is that the terrorist threat once was -- seemed to be solely located in the -- the mountains of Afghanistan, but now it is dispersed throughout the entire CENTCOM region. Syria has the capability of generating forces, and Somalia also with Al Shabaab has that capability. So can you give us a sense of -- of the effect of a withdrawal on your operations?

TOWNSEND: Thank you, chairman. So in the last 60 to 90 days of the previous administration, we were directed, as you stated, to reposition our forces out of Somalia. We left a small footprint behind in Mogadishu, tied in to the embassy there, of less than 100.

Since that time we have been commuting to work. We work virtually with our partners from our bases in the region and then we fly in to conduct training and to advise and assist our partners. We've done four such operations in the last roughly 90 days. One of them is ongoing right now. And we're continually revising and improving the way that we do that to make it as effective as we can.

There's no denying that the repositioning of forces out of Somalia has introduced new layers of complexity and risk. And as General McKenzie said, our understanding of what's happening in Somalia is less now than it was when we were there on the ground, physically located with our partners. So we're working to make this new mode of operation work.

At the same time, we're participating in the Global Posture Review with the Department of Defense and we're presenting -- we'll be presenting options to the secretary of Defense on the way ahead. And of course, I don't want to get ahead of my civilian leadership to address that. But we're working to make it work.

I -- I would say that probably, though, the biggest impact to security in Somalia right now is less Al Shabaab and more so the political dysfunction that exists that between the federal government of Somalia; and the federal member states; and, as you mentioned in your opening remarks, the extra-constitutional extension of the president's term in office. That's our biggest challenge, I think, right now.

REED: Thank you. Ironically or coincidentally, what you're anticipating and actually experience at this moment is very -- is very much the same situation that General McKenzie might face. Having withdrawn forces from the -- the most -- from the target country, for want of

a better word, you have to operate on the periphery. You are doing that. And you face political/cultural issues and General McKenzie will face political/cultural issues.

So again, I think this is a -- we look forward to the classified session to get more into detail on these questions. Thank you.

Senator Inhofe, please.

INHOFE: Yes, thank you, Mr. Chairman. You -- you -- you hit it right on there. This -- the term that is being used, over the horizon, which merely means that you're taking troops out of the area and conducting your activity from another country. And that's something that I -- I disagreed with in the previous administration.

The last administration pulled nearly all of the 200 troops that we had in Somalia out -- and -- and that was the previous administration. I disagreed with that at that time and I really think that we were right in -- in disagreeing with that. History has shown that it doesn't work as well from an adjoining country as it does from the country where the activity is.

So I'd say -- I'd ask the -- the -- General Townsend, I know you're going to be able to do this and will continue to do it. But doesn't an over-the-horizon counterterrorism strategy in Somalia make your job harder, General Townsend?

TOWNSEND: Ranking Member, I would agree with General McKenzie's characterization. It makes it more difficult, it doesn't make it impossible.

INHOFE: Yes. Well, I understand that, and I'd say the same thing then, I know that General McKenzie's already expressed. Yeah, it makes it more difficult, but it doesn't make it Impossible. You guys are soldiers, you have a duty to do and you'll do it.

Now, General McKenzie, are you concerned that we won't be able to secure and maintain the -- the U.S. embassy? Tell me what -- if all this happens, as it is designed to happen in Afghanistan, what will be our situation with the embassy?

MCKENZIE: Sir, I believe it is our desire to retain an embassy presence in Afghanistan.

INHOFE: You've got to protect it, am (ph) I (ph) right (ph)?

MCKENZIE: So we do, and of course...

(CROSSTALK)

INHOFE: You've got to secure them (ph).

MCKENZIE: ... sir, we do. Of course, protection of an embassy is the responsibility of the host nation. Most of our embassies around the world have very little military presence there because the host nation lives up to their obligations.

It is a matter of very much great concern to me, and I think everyone, whether or not the future government of Afghanistan is going to be able to do that after we leave. That'll be determined here over the next -- over the next few weeks, as we begin our drawdown, and we evaluate the security platform that is there.

(CROSSTALK)

INHOFE: Will you be able to make that determination as the drawdown is occurring? My concern is if we get to the point where we don't have that help, we would be depending on another country to do what we always do on our own, and that is defend and secure the embassies. That concerns you?

MCKENZIE: Ranking Member, it does concern me. But I would -- I would say, if we have concerns about the physical security of the embassy, the United States will take whatever measures are necessary to ensure the safety of our diplomats, so we will do that based on the security situation as it exists on the ground in Kabul.

INHOFE: And I would hope that you would anticipate that if there were going to be problems, if there's signs of problems as the drawdown continues, that he'd be on top of that and I'm sure you -- you will be.

The -- in AFRICOM, General Townsend, the administration is conducting a global force posture review. Now, that actually started in the previous administration. And I can remember, at that time, cautioning the then-secretary of the defense that we don't have a lot of assets there, and we don't have a lot of protection there.

And that's something that has concerned me before, and that same concern is out there right now. We have less than, what, 6,000, I guess, personnel, and we face the shortfalls in the ISR capability? These things are -- they're -- what would you say, General Townsend, is your biggest resource gap that we would be -- that would impact your ability to do your job?

TOWNSEND: Thanks, Ranking Member. As you pointed out, we underwent the blank-slate review or COCOM review in the previous administration. And by the time we got to the end of that, AFRICOM was still largely intact, I think we removed about 365 troops from the continent. As you pointed out, there's just no fat to cut there. And our (ph) -- we did lose some funding in various programs.

Again, I don't want to get ahead of the -- my civilian leaders on the global posture review, so I'll defer discussing options about forces and posture, but I would say that wherever we have forces in Africa, there are three things that we will need there.

First would be a proper amount of personnel recovery and casualty evacuation and medical treatment to make sure our troops are properly protected. Second, as you mentioned, is ISR. And with the loss of the OCO (ph) and the ISR transfer fund, that puts at risk one of our primary sources of ISR, which is contracted ISR in Africa.

And then the third thing, I would say, would be funding for building partner capacity and exercises with our partners. We do everything in Africa in -- through partners. There's no -- no activity that America conducts unilaterally in the lead for. So building partner capacity is how we help the Africans and our international partners the most.

So I'd say those are the three things we'll need regardless of what our future posture might be.

INHOFE: Well, that's -- and I agree wholeheartedly with that, and I'm glad that you're coming out forcefully and making those statements. And when you point out that we're in a continent there, 3.5 times the size of our country, I hadn't heard that before and I -- we've got to be aware of that. This is a problem, we need to have the resources in there to do the job.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

REED: Thank you, Senator Inhofe.

Senator Shaheen, please?

SHAHEEN: Thank you.

And thank you, General McKenzie and General Townsend, for your service and for being here this morning. And I especially appreciate whoever at DOD heard us when we said, "Please give us a map that shows not just Russian and Chinese activity but also shows U.S. activity."

And it's pretty dramatic. It doesn't take much to take a look at those pictures and see China's influence all in red in Africa, and our influence, and that picture says it all. So I very much appreciate that, and I've used the map that we got from SOUTHCOM to make the argument that we need more investment in Latin America in the Foreign Relations Committee.

Can I just ask, for whoever is listening, if there are acronyms on the maps, that you give us a key to tell us what those acronyms mean? For those of us who are not dealing with them on a daily basis, I would appreciate it.

General McKenzie, I want to begin with you because, in your testimony before this committee last year, you indicated that there had been an increase in Iranian activity in Afghanistan, and that posed a potential risk to U.S. forces.

Obviously the decision to withdraw American troops, which I have expressed concern about, has an impact not just on what happens with Afghan forces and the Afghan people, but it also creates a vacuum that allows regional actors like Iran and Pakistan, Russia and China to fill that vacuum. Can you talk about what you see happening after the U.S. withdraws and what the potential is for those regional actors to come in and influence what happens?

MCKENZIE: Certainly. After we complete our withdrawal, I think the country that's probably going to be the most affected is Pakistan because of their long contiguous border with

Afghanistan, the fact that the Taliban, largely centered in eastern Afghanistan, nonetheless maintains some presence in Pakistan as well.

So I think Pakistan is interested in stability in Afghanistan, and I think it's going to be very difficult for that stability to remain after we leave. So I think Pakistan will be very concerned by that.

I would -- I would say, frankly, that as the situation may have not been terribly helpful (inaudible) over the last 20 years, so that's unfortunate for them, that some of this is now going to come back home in a way that they perhaps did not anticipate.

As for Iran, you know, Iran does not wish us well, has always wanted to have the ability in Afghanistan to attack us or to have others attack us, should they choose to do so. That capability remains as existent now as it was last year. Their interest in Afghanistan is the same as Pakistan's: They want stability in that region. I think everyone is concerned that should -- should we leave, should a civil war ensue, there's the possibility of mass refugee movement that could affect all of the nations around Afghanistan. So I think they are very concerned by that because they don't see a clear -- a clear way forward after we reduce our presence.

SHAHEEN: And you mentioned ISIS camps in your opening remarks. One of the concerns, having visited Syria, that I have, given our withdrawal -- precipitous withdrawal from Syria has been the failure to address those camps from family and former ISIS members that continue to have thousands of people in them. And is there any international effort to address those camps, and to try and resolve how the international community is going to deal with them before they become another threat?

MCKENZIE: I -- I wish I could tell you a better news story there, Senator, but I can't. It is one of my very -- very highest concerns. Al-Hol Camp, which you're very familiar with, is probably the poster child for that: 62,000 people, principally women, principally young children, and they're at immediate risk from disease -- cholera or coronavirus.

But the long-term threat is ISIS radicalization, which goes on in that camp. Unless we find a way to pull these children out of that camp, get them back to the nations that they came from, find a way to reintegrate them in a civil society and deradicalize them, we are giving ourselves a very significant military problem 10 years down the road. And I know that our diplomats and our people in USAID are working this very hard. Nations need to step up, claim their people, repatriate those that they can bring home. Unfortunately, there's not a lot of progress on this front. It is one of my very highest concerns in the region.

SHAHEEN: We actually created a coordinator through the Defense Authorization bill -- not last year; I think the year before -- to try and address that. It's -- I'm not aware that anybody's been appointed to that position yet, so hopefully, the administration will move on that.

Before I'm out of time, General Townsend, I -- I wanted to ask you about what's happening in Ethiopia in the Tigray region, and to what extent the instability there has the potential to create instability in the surrounding countries, and how concerned you are about that.

TOWNSEND: Ma'am, that probably takes longer than the 10 or 15 seconds I have to give a - the -- give the answer to. Ethiopia is in the midst of several challenges, three or four significant challenges on multiple fronts. It definitely will affect security and stability in the region, and I can answer that more in a -- in another venue.

SHAHEEN: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

REED: Thank you, Senator Shaheen.

And now let me recognize via Webex Senator Fischer.

FISCHER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you, gentlemen, for being here today. General McKenzie, what is your understanding of the assistance that we will be providing to the Afghan Security Forces after we withdraw? Secretary Austin, he discussed some of this last week at the joint press conference at NATO. He spoke about training, securing their borders and saying we will continue to support them and -- and those efforts; also about funding capabilities, to continue paying salaries for the Afghan Security Forces. So what -- what -- what types of assistance are you seeing that -- that we are still going to be providing and be responsible for?

MCKENZIE: Ma'am, let me just begin by saying we're -- we're going to go to a zero solution in Afghanistan. So whatever we do, it will largely not be done by people on the ground in Afghanistan.

We can still do some things from -- from remote locations. We can -- we can work the administration of the Afghan Security Force funding, which is sort of the bedrock programmatic weapon or tool that we use to support the Afghan military and other things. We will not be able to do it as efficiently as we do now, where we have people in the country that can really follow the -- follow the money all the way to its destination, but we can still follow it into the country at least, and we will work tools to mentor from remote locations that will allow us to work with -- work with the Afghans themselves.

Some of this will be contingent on how big the embassy is that remains, and that is still something that's going to be worked out over the next few weeks. So we could have a -- we could have a security cooperation office in the embassy. We may not have a security cooperation office in the embassy. That will be ultimately a Department of State decision, informed by our assessment of the security situation that's there. It will be far more difficult than the way we do business now. Again, it's certainly not impossible. We will not have the oversight that we have now just because we won't have the people on the ground to actually perform those functions.

FISCHER: You know, as you look at these force posture options over the horizon, I hope you will certainly keep this committee informed about -- about that as plans are finalized, so I would appreciate that from you.

MCKENZIE: Yes, ma'am.

FISCHER: For both of you, we talk a lot about ISR shortfalls, and I understand that demand always exceeds supply. But can you share with us what percentage of your ISR needs are being met? And also, talk a little bit about the operational impact that this has.

MCKENZIE: Sure. So I'll -- I'll -- I'll begin. The majority of my operational ISR requirements are being met, not all of them. They're being -- and I'll give you a little bit more in the -- in the closed session. You know, we use a variety of manned and unmanned resources to look at -- to look at our problems, and we are most particularly concerned with ISR in areas where we have U.S. and coalition forces in combat, and of course, that is in Afghanistan and in Iraq and Syria, and occasionally, in Yemen. So there, we very -- we -- we work very hard to make sure we've got the ISR needed to do those things.

We take risks sometimes in the ISR that we apply to the Iran problem simply because I place a higher priority on ensuring that Americans -- where we have Americans on the ground, we want to make sure we've got the resources there that we need to take a look at them in order to protect them.

FISCHER: OK, thank you.

General Townsend?

TOWNSEND: Senator, the Joint Staff has a formula how -- by which they validate our ISR requirements. By that formula, we are resourced to about 30 percent, a little less than one third of our requirement. If I take a hard look at that formula, I could probably get by with less than that. If I take that into account, our -- our resourcing levels approach 40 or 50 percent.

Every day in Africa, we have to make decisions about what we will do and what we won't do based on how much ISR we can apply to the day, and I -- we have a -- we don't need a tremendous amount of grey tail or military ISR platforms. We need some of that to protect our troops, but we can do a lot of our work with contracted solutions, which are a good bargain for the taxpayer.

FISCHER: But do you -- I guess you both believe that having that presence of ISR used against hostile nations or their proxy forces, that that does act as a deterrent? General McKenzie, would you say that has happened with Iran?

MCKENZIE: I can say unequivocally that the maneuver of ISR assets in the summer of 2019 deflected imminent Iranian attack planning.

FISCHER: Thank you. General Townsend, do you have any instances of that?

TOWNSEND: Yes Senator. So we know that Al-Shabab looks over their shoulder every day in our -- looking for our ISR. And so, we know that they limit their activity because of the presence of our ISR.

FISCHER: OK, thank you. Thank you Mr. Chairman.

REED: Thank you very much, Senator. Now let me via WebEx Senator Gillibrand.

GILLIBRAND: Thank you Mr. Chairman. General McKenzie, I have several questions for you related to Israel. What is the status of Israel being moved to CENTCOM and what do you see as the benefit for Israeli inclusion in CENTCOM?

Also Israel and EUCOM coordinated very closely on ballistic missile defense including a just (ph) support from the Mediterranean. How will you ensure continuity of ballistic missile defense of Israel and will this continue through EUCOM or move to a different direct with CENTCOM?

MCKENZIE: Senator, we're in a planning phase right now to move Israel into U.S. Central Command. We're on about a six month planning timeline for that. There are, as you've noted, a number things have to happen in order -- in order to make sure that that move goes seamlessly and I'll address those here in just a moment.

But we work closely with European Command and the joint staff based on guidance that we've gotten from the secretary to make sure that move is -- that move is proceed -- that move proceeds very smoothly and nothing falls through the cracks, particularly those things related to the defense of Israel.

The principle benefit of Israel coming into the Central Command AOR is the fact that most of Israel's threats -- all of Israel's threats really emanate from the east, which is in the CENTCOM area of responsibility.

Today I talk a lot to the -- to the Israeli Chief of Defense, I talk a lot all throughout my command at all levels of the Israeli military about the threats that emanate against them, because the threats to Israel have more from being at one time a purely ballistic missile threat now to a UAS and a land attack cruise missile threat. So now the threat is far more -- far more diffuse and actually dangerous. So we need to make sure that we're coordinating fully on all those matters.

We work with European Command to make sure that we transition the defense of Israel to CENTCOM when we're ready to do it. That does involve questions of water space management in the eastern Mediterranean, questions of what ships are going to be available and when.

And I'm in close contact with General Wolters actually as we work through those problems and we'll present a plan to the secretary a little bit later this year for an initial date when combatant command authority will shift for Israel.

The last point I would just like to make is the benefit of bring -- the other benefit of bringing Israel into the Central Command AOR is it allows further normalization of relations between Israel and various Arab states in the -- in the CENTCOM area of responsibility and this just recognizes that by placing them all under one combatant command.

We were not able to that in the past particularly because of strains between Egypt and Israel. We are now well past that. Egypt and Israel function very well together on a -- at a variety of levels, including joint -- including operations against threats in Sinai.

GILLIBRAND: Thank you. General Townsend, in the last decade China has made significant investments in Africa. It has been in the form of infrastructure and military installations as well as significant investment from private firms. I'm concerned with perceptions of the U.S. presence when we are conducting major air operations with significant collateral damage while China build roads and bridges.

What is AFRICOM's strategy for breaking this dynamic? Is this a problem that has a military solution?

TOWNSEND: Senator, you're right, China has been aggressively investing in the continent with infrastructure, bases, our armed sales, training, et cetera. Their -- we don't have to compete with China head-to-head, dollar-for-dollar. We can target where our investments are best made.

I would not characterize it the way you did about our strikes with significant collateral damage. We don't do very many strikes in Africa. They're limited to Al-Shabaab areas in Somalia and we have very low collateral damage when we do those strikes.

I agree with your point though, there's not a military solution to any of these challenges on the African continent --

GILLIBRAND: Right.

TOWNSEND: -- it's a whole of government approach that will be necessary to solve these challenges.

GILLIBRAND: I was encouraged by your commitment to working with African Union Security Forces and other nation's militaries. And I do appreciate the fact that we can fight terrorism, but we have to actually stop the social problems at the source.

In your opinion how can we increase cooperation with the African stand-by force and the African Union Peace and Security Council? And just to note, in your written statement you listed extreme poverty, more frequent and intense weather events and vulnerable and marginalized populations as issues that are contributing to instability in the region, and as a result terrorism.

These obviously sound like political problems and potentially a vacuum that China will be happy to fill at their own investments. So, what is your thoughts on this issue and how do we confront China and make the territory less fertile for BEOs (ph)?

TOWNSEND: Regarding the confronting China here, I think we can do that in a targeted way in certain selected countries and that way we can make our investments count for more. You mentioned several partners, African partners, we work with all of those partners to advance what we're doing.

The United States doesn't lead any activity. We work through African partners first and international partners second, and I think that's -- and then you mentioned several political problems. I think our administration strategies the right one, lead with diplomacy, follow with development, secure with defense.

GILLIBRAND: Thank you. Thank you Mr. Chairman.

REED: Thank you Senator Gillibrand. Let me now recognize via WebEx Senator Rounds.

ROUNDS: Thank you Mr. Chairman. Gentlemen, thank you both for your service to our country. Let me begin with a question for General Townsend. And General, the last time that I had an opportunity to visit Djibouti I noted that at that time we had a chance to observe the operations that the Chinese were doing with regard to the creation of a naval base or at least a port there at Djibouti. Can you share with us the current status of the Chinese operations in Djibouti right now with regard to their port and what their capable of doing with it?

TOWNSEND: Thank you Senator. The base in Djibouti, the Chinese base in Djibouti is named Doraleh Port or Doraleh Base. What they have done in the last two years is completed a very large and capable naval pier that is adjoined their -- adjoins their base. This pier has the capability to dock their largest ships, to include the Chinese aircraft carrier as well as nuclear submarines.

Now they are finishing that pier now. They're applying the final coats of paint to this thing. I expect that we will see increased Chinese naval presence there. Their presence at Doraleh Base in the past has been largely to secure and sustain their small naval task force that operates in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (ph). I anticipate now with this pier being recently completed they will increase their naval activity into Djibouti, soon.

ROUNDS: Thank you, General. General McKenzie, I'd like to visit with you with regard to the difference between a conditions-based withdrawal and a withdrawal with a date certain. And I recognize that your role here is to follow the directions of the Commander in Chief, I respect that, and I know that the President has made the decision to move from a conditions-based withdrawal to a date certain withdrawal.

There is a reason why I think many of us had talked about and I believe a number of the military officials in the past have discussed the validity of a conditions-based withdrawal while at the same time recognizing that there is no real good answer to the Afghanistan questions. Respecting the President's ability to make and having to make this decision can you share with us a little about some of the concerns that you have expressed with regard to the ability of the existing Afghan national forces to be able to respond to aggression by the Taliban?

And what the impacts could be in those areas that are not currently under Taliban control with regard to the stability in those villages, those communities and the impact that could occur for women and children in those regions?

MCKENZIE: Senator, thank you. First of all, the decision making process was very inclusive. I had multiple opportunities to make my views known and I appreciate the opportunity to have had those views known. I can't share those views with you in this forum but I would just say that the inclusion and the deliberate and methodical way that this decision was approached was heartening for me at least.

I would tell you that my concern about leaving with a date certain is that after we withdrawal and we talk -- we're going to go zero -- mean (ph) zero, there'll be no real U.S. enablers in Afghanistan. My concern is the ability of the Afghan military to hold the ground that they're on (ph) now. Without the support that they have been used to for many years which we weaned them off direct support -- U.S. and coalition soldiers being present with them on the ground to a point where now it's intelligence, it's fire support, it's the enabling things that actually give them an edge over the Taliban.

Now all that will be gone. So I am concerned about the ability of the Afghan military to hold on after we leave; the ability of the Afghan Air Force to fly in particular after we removed the support for those aircraft. All of those things are factors that will be worked out here in the next few months and we'll get an opportunity to see how the Afghans do.

Your last point on conditions for women and children, and women in particular, and the strides -- the great strides that have been made in education and human rights in Afghanistan. The levers that we have now will be reduced but I believe there will still be levers that we can apply and those levers will be principally diplomatic and economic. Because if the Taliban or whatever future hybrid (ph) government (ph) exist in Afghanistan wants to gain global recognition and receive some form of international support.

They're going to have take some actions that would tend to protect those groups. Again, those are things we just can't know right now.

ROUNDS: (Inaudible), General, I most certainly appreciate your responsibly comments and I understand that you did have the ability to give input and I just simply think that's important for the American people to understand that repercussions of this are not going to be pretty. And that we will see reports of atrocities in those areas as committed by the Taliban if these Afghan National Forces are not able to hold their own without those U.S. supports that they have become very dependent on.

ROUNDS: Thank you.

REED: Thank you very much, senator. Now, let me recognize Senator Blumenthal.

BLUMENTHAL: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. Thank you both for your service and to the men and women under your command. I don't need to tell either of you that the definition of success in Afghanistan has changed over the 20 years that we've been fighting wars in that part of the world.

In October 2001, President Bush set the terms of victory in Afghanistan as bringing Al Qaida to justice and ensuring that they could no longer use Afghanistan as a base to launch terrorist attacks on the United States.

Coming right to the point, General Townsend, Public Press reporting states that after a withdraw from Afghanistan it would be a four hour flight for an MQ9 to be on station in Afghanistan to do a counter terrorism mission.

And my question is, how does that compare to the flight to be on station in Somalia, or Libya, or other places under your command where countering terrorism is a similar mission?

TOWNSEND: Senator, we also have some pretty long legs to get our ISR on station. Although, I don't believe four hours. Our transit times are more in the realm of one to two hours, one way. We spend four hours probably on average back and forth, but not as long as you just described.

BLUMENTHAL: General McKenzie, would that length of time enable effective counter terrorism in Afghanistan using the kind of air resources that we have in General Townsend's command?

MCKENZIE: Senator, right now in Afghanistan we principally use MQ9s and MQ1s. And I - - I -- the newspapers -- the newspaper story might have said four hours if we get out of Afghanistan. Most likely the transit time will be considerably longer than four hours to get in. And I can talk about this in our closed session in a little bit more detail.

So I can, in fact, give the persistent overhead coverage that's required. It will simply require far more platforms operating at greater range in order to accomplish that same mission that you can do with fewer platforms.

Because as you know, the airplane has so long to fly. It can either -- you can either use that flight time to get to the objective, or what you do on the objective. We want to maximize what you can do on the objective. It will be difficult.

BLUMENTHAL: I would like to hear, and probably it should be in a closed setting with Chairman consent or support, what specifically by way of counter terrorism can be done, what the plans are to do it. Because I think that is an essential feature of our withdrawal. And you said if but as of right now it is planned for September 11th, and I would like to know what our preparations are.

MCKENZIE: I'd be happy to discuss that in the closed session.

BLUMENTHAL: Thank you. I think Senator Inhofe alluded to this topic, but as you know there have been various reports about attacks on American personnel, diplomats, members of the intelligence community, even military. Some of it referred to as the "Havana Syndrome," referring only to those public reports. If there is any truth to those reports about attacks on American personnel, don't you think the American people deserve to know about it?

MCKENZIE: Sir, I do. And I track that very -- and I can only speak, of course, to the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility. And I can give you a little bit more information in a closed closed session, but I have found no evidence of those attacks in U.S. Central Command. But I can talk a little bit more about it and I would like to do so in closed session.

BLUMENTHAL: I'd like to hear about it in closed session, but I'd also like for the American people to know about it because I think they need and deserve to know about it.

General Townsend, do you have any comment?

TOWNSEND: Senator, we have not seen that phenomenon in AFRICOM in any significant number, and in fact, any number that I am aware of.

BLUMENTHAL: Thank you.

General McKenzie, what have you seen by way of the Iranian support for proxies and their attacks on United States personnel under your command, malign influence of Iran and their support for those kinds of attacks on our personnel or our allies and partners?

MCKENZIE: Sir, which I think, first of all, Iran is not seeking state-on-state conflict with the United States right now. I think they would like to see how the Biden administration's approach to JCPOA works out for them.

At the same time, and this just reflects the contradiction inherent in the way the Iranians think about many of these problems, they want us out of places like Iraq and they are prepared to take kinetic activity, which they believe they can disavow, by their actors, their proxies acting on the ground to conduct low-level attacks against us.

Over the last year, in 2020, the Iranians believed they had a political solution to eject us from Iraq. That no longer appears to be a viable way ahead for them. So we're seeing a return to a more kinetic approach. And that has been manifested here over the last few weeks as low-level attacks that have begun to crop up in Iraq, attacks that the Iranians would disavow themselves from.

We carefully look for attribution in these attacks. And national leadership will eventually make a decision on how to respond.

BLUMENTHAL: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you both.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman.

REED: Thank you, Senator Blumenthal.

Now let me recognize Senator Ernst, please.

ERNST: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And, gentlemen, thank you very much for your testimony today. And I do want to take time to think you, your senior enlisted members, and all of the men and women within your commands for their continued service to our nation.

And I'll move into my questions, but what we are doing today, we are obviously discussing the significant challenges that both of you have within your commands. Our National Defense Strategy is still targeted towards five very real threats: China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and then, of course, violent extremist groups. And four of those five challenges operate in both your AORs. And, of course, the way that we operate and resource your AORs is very different.

But, General Townsend, I'd like to start with you. Within AFRICOM we do have various pockets of activity and we do engage our Special Operations Forces in those areas. The Lake Chad Basin is a very volatile region and there are a number of as violent extremist organizations there such as ISIS, Boko Haram. They're operating within the region and they're exploiting, of course, the economy, the terrain, and the vulnerable population there. And what is the assessment of the risk these various organizations pose to the U.S., and have we allocated the proper resources necessary to defeat their threats?

TOWNSEND: Thanks, Senator. You specifically addressed the Lake Chad Basin, and there we see operations by Boko Haram and ISIS West Africa. A couple of years ago, those two organizations had joined in league with one another, they have split in the last year or two -- again, apart.

My assessment is that neither -- although they cause tremendous problems there for the countries that all adjoin in Lake Chad Basin which is Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon all come together right there -- they cause tremendous problems for them, it's my assessment that neither Boko Haram nor ISIS West Africa today pose a significant threat to U.S. interest. That is not true of other violent extremist organizations in Africa.

ERNST: Thank you very much, General. How can we help those countries in that area be it military or other resources available through our federal government? There are a few of those countries that do have significant resources that could be exploited by a China or a Russia. What ways can we further support that region, not just military but other types of supports?

TOWNSEND: Well, just exactly what you said along the lines of not just military. So the whole of government approach in that region would help, we have that now to some degree, I think we can make that more robust. There is a partnership between our Department of State and Department of Defense to provide security assistance to those countries there -- we do that on a bilateral basis directly with those countries.

The -- there's a multinational joint taskforce that operates in the Lake Chad Basin region, it would not be hard to increase some of our efforts there, I think what we see, and particularly with Nigeria is they're struggling with that particular threat in the Lake Chad Basin in the northeast part of their country.

ERNST: Right. Thank you, General.

General McKenzie, it was my great honor, just several days ago to spend some time in the company of some truly extraordinary women -- and these women were gold star wives. And many of them came from our special operations forces. We had an Air Guard member, as well as an Army Guard member.

And part of the conversation obviously flowed towards the close down of Afghanistan, the withdraw of troops, and of course what we would hope to see is the end to the global war on terror. I have concerns about it, I have concerns that we are conceding territory at a great loss of lives.

And so, if you could indulge me, sir, and address these extraordinary women and their families all across the United States, and just let them know your thoughts and how we can recognize the ultimate sacrifice that their husbands made, and to please let them know that those sacrifices were not in vain.

MCKENZIE: Senator, thank you. And certainly the sacrifices have not been in vain. Particularly the family members of those people who've gone forward to defend this nation and who died in so doing, going to carry those memories with them for the rest of their lives and there's nothing I can do to really make that better.

But what I can tell them is, I believe we went to Afghanistan in a good cause, and I believe we have in fact prevented attacks on the United States from being generated from Afghanistan for over the last 20 years, and that was ultimately our base mission for being there.

A long-term view for the War on Terror is this, it's not going to be bloodless, the War on Terror is probably not going to end. What we actually seek is the creation of local security where the threats as they arise can be dealt with indigenously by those countries themselves without significant U.S. presence there.

We'll see a test of the hypothesis in Afghanistan in the months ahead. We also tested in Iraq where it is moving toward success. We also tested it in Syria and in other places. Nothing will ever compensate for the loss of a loved one, and I would not attempt with any words I can say here to try to do that.

ERNST: God bless you. Thank you so much.

REED: Thank you, Senator.

Senator Kaine, please.

KAINE: Thank you Mr. Chair and Ranking Member Inhofe, and thank you Senator Ernst for asking that question to the witnesses who are before us today. We appreciate your service. Just a comment, I think we've had a good discussion about the big issue that is dominating our attention right now, Afghanistan and every concern that anyone I know that's expressed about it is a very legitimate one. There's a lot of concerns.

I do support the president's decision, but believe it was a decision made with no particularly wonderful options out there on the table, and I honor the 20 years of service -- 10 years to find and kill bin Laden and then 10 years to train hundreds of thousands of Afghan security forces.

And General McKenzie, as you mentioned, there will be a test of that security apparatus to determine its efficiency to counter the threat that the Taliban poses, and we'll all be paying attention in a significant way. One thing I'd like to just caution against is sometimes, particularly at a military hearing, we will talk about the state beginning on September 11 as a zero solution.

And it is true that the president's announced intention is a zero solution with respect to military presence in Afghanistan, except for that necessary to protect our embassy, and if needed for counterterrorism operations as they arise.

But I think it's important for the American public to know that it's not a zero solution if you look at it from the whole of government standpoint, because I think it is very likely that the United States is going to continue to provide significant security assistance to Afghanistan. It's highly likely that we're going to provide significant assistance in the humanitarian, economic, trade, development, diplomacy space.

And so it's not a zero solution in terms of America's partnership with Afghanistan, I would imagine that when we get to a new status quo in terms of the relationship, the support that we provide for our partner, Afghanistan would be significant and maybe significantly greater than sort of the support that we provide to other nations -- that remains to be seen, and obviously the affect of that support is being tested as General McKenzie mentioned.

General McKenzie, you mentioned something about Afghan's neighbors, and I wanted to just dig in to that a little bit. You indicated that while they haven't all been helpful to the United States, not by a long shot, and they haven't necessarily even done what we would hope they might do to assist in Afghanistan, they do desire stability in Afghanistan, they don't see instability there as furthering their interests.

And just quickly, I was looking at who the Afghan neighbors are -- Afghanistan is bordered by six countries -- Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China and Iran, very different nations those six. But can I just dig in a little bit with you, General McKenzie, on that. As different as these nations are from each other and as different as they are in their relationships with the United States would you say that they all, for their own reasons, would desire stability in Afghanistan and feel threatened by instability in Afghanistan?

MCKENZIE: Senator, I would agree with you completely. I think all, for their own reasons, and as you noted those reasons are very different. They all want stability in Afghanistan. And the other thing some of them want too is they recognize the vast natural resources that are inherent in Afghanistan and they seek access to that.

KAINE: In terms of wanting stability I would imagine that they want stability, again for their own reasons, but some of the common reasons would be instability could lead to unacceptable refugee flows into neighboring nations if that's not managed. And instability could also lead to the possibility of terrorists or other attacks in their own nations if that's not managed correctly.

Are those two of the reasons that they want stability and are there others -- why they want (inaudible) -

MCKENZIE: Senator, I think those are the two principle reasons; the movement of -- the movement of refugees across national borders and also the threat of exportation (ph) of ISIS to Al Qaida's ideology from inside Afghanistan. I think those are the two principle reasons.

KAINE: And in terms of those threats, the threat of refugee flows and the threat of terrorists attacks in many way they have more of an existential connection to stability in Afghanistan than the United States does just because of their proximity to Afghanistan. Isn't that correct?

MCKENZIE: Senator, I would agree.

KAINE: All right. Thank you, Mr. Chair, I don't have other questions.

REED: Thank you, Senator Kaine. Let me now recognize, via Webex, Senator Tillis.

TILLIS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for holding the hearing. And gentlemen, thank you for being here and for your years of service. General Townsend, I want to talk a little bit about China. In your opening comments you talked about China's move, I think in Djibouti as a power projection platform. We know that there is even talk about an Atlantic coast naval base.

How does this play out over the next several years if they continue at the current pace? And what are the real threats to our own national security as a result?

TOWNSEND: Thanks, Senator Tillis. So we know that the Chinese desire a network of bases around the globe. How that plays out in Africa is first with their base Doral (ph) in Djibouti. They have been working a number of options to get a base elsewhere in Africa; Tanzania primarily on the east coast, the Indian Ocean. And then they've placed a number of bets down along the Atlantic coast. My concern is the greatest along the Atlantic coast of Africa.

This is probably -- this is the most significant threat, I think, from China would be to gain a militarily useful naval facility on the Atlantic coast of Africa. And by militarily useful I mean something more than a place that they can make port calls and get gas and groceries. I'm talking about a port where they can rearm with munitions and repair naval vessels.

They're working aggressively to get that but we haven't seen any of that come to fruition yet and it's my number one global power competition concern.

TILLIS: Thank you, General Townsend.

General McKenzie, with the withdrawal of troops in Afghanistan, we've -- we've received, you know, various estimates of how that's going to play out over the next year or so.

I, for one, think that we're going to run into -- that Afghanistan's going to run into serious problems after we completely withdraw our troops. But I'm -- I'm primarily concerned with force protection as we withdraw from the forward operating bases and ultimately Kabul.

What are we doing? Are we just going to exploit the resources we have on the ground for force protection or are we going to surge a bit as we withdraw? Can you give me some sense and some confidence that we're going to be able to do this with the full expectation the Taliban may take some shots at us on our way out the door?

MCKENZIE: Senator, first of all, we're -- we're prepared if the Taliban want to take shots at us today, or after 1 May, or at any point during the withdrawal. The plan that we have designed, and General Miller will begin execution of, is designed to come out with or without pressure from the Taliban.

And yes, we will bring additional resources in in order to protect the force as it comes out. That's normal in any kind of disengagement operation. And I don't want to go into the detail of those operations right now, but we will bring -- we will have additional capabilities.

And I'm confident that -- that we'll be able -- that we will -- and our coalition partners, will be able to extract ourselves. And we -- we look every day, every hour at force protection in Afghanistan. It has the complete undivided attention of General Miller and myself.

TILLIS: Well, I hope that any malign activities on the part of the Taliban are -- are met and that you have the authority to -- to exact a cost (ph) for any of those. Hopefully there won't be any, but I'm afraid that we'll probably see some.

General McKenzie, I also wanted to talk about the Abraham Accords. Do you think the -- the countries that have come to the accords already that that's been a positive thing? And what other additional cooperation or participants in the accords do you think would be helpful as a check against Iran?

MCKENZIE: Sir, I think normalization of relationships between Israel and -- and for Arab neighbors is a profound step forward. It represents really a new era in -- in the Middle East. And I think that's one of the things that Israel coming into U.S. Central Command as part of a unified command plan shift will also help.

So I think, you know, we've got to be patient. It will take time for this to happen. But I would look for -- over time for further nations to join in normalization of relations with Israel. And I think that is a net-positive thing for the region.

TILLIS: Last question is, with the -- the missile attack -- or rocket attack out of Syria against Israel just this week, do you -- does -- is that potentially a part of a trend or do you think that maybe it was just one-off activity?

MCKENZIE: I think it reflects, actually, incompetence in Syrian Air Defense, where they were responding to Israeli strikes on targets in Syria. They fired their missiles, the missiles went ballistic, literally, and followed a parabolic trajectory into Israel where they were intercepted. I do not believe it was an intentional attack but just rather a lack of capability on the part of the Syrian air defenders.

TILLIS: OK. Thank you both. Thank you both, gentlemen. Thank you for your service and your leadership.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

REED: Thank you, Senator Tillis.

Now let me recognize Senator King via WebEx.

KING: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. There's been a lot of discussion today about the September 11th date and the calendar-based withdrawal. I think it's important to recall that the prior administration initiated a calendar-based leaving/withdrawal from Afghanistan. And in fact, that calendar date is one week from -- from tomorrow.

So we -- the -- the -- the current administration was, in a sense, boxed in by those negotiations with the Taliban that took place last year -- and which, by the way, excluded the Afghan government.

General McKenzie, you used a term earlier in your testimony, if a civil war ensues. Isn't there a civil war going on right at this very moment? There's no doubt that a civil war is going on now and will continue, is there?

MCKENZIE: Sir, I -- I'm probably not the best person to give you an answer to this. I would defer to the diplomats. But we have a constituted, elected government in place in Afghanistan and -- and I would -- and so that -- we have a legal authority in place. So I'm not sure that I would refer to what's going on right now as a civil war. Others might take a different view of that, but I'm not certain that I would refer to it in that way.

KING: You wouldn't -- you don't think the Taliban is a viable insurgency that's fighting against the government and the -- the government's reach into the provinces?

MCKENZIE: I think the Taliban certainly have a -- are militarily very capable. I -- I do not know how much of the actual Afghan population they represent. Polling data would tell you it's a very low percent, if you subjected it to an honest -- to an honest election, which I know would be very difficult to accomplish in Afghanistan. But I wouldn't confuse an insurgency, however capable and lethal, with a civil war.

KING: Well, I'll turn the question around. We've been there 20 years, we've spent over \$1 trillion, lost lives, tens of thousands of injuries, incredible support to the Afghan government -- why hasn't the Afghan government been able to take hold of it?

My understanding is, general, that the -- the Taliban controls more land today than they did last year, and more last year than they did the year before. They are, in fact, winning (ph). What - - why -- why can't the Afghan government defend itself successfully?

MCKENZIE: Sir, so our principal objective in Afghanistan has been and -- and will remain to prevent Al Qaida and ISIS from developing attacks against our homeland. And those are...

(CROSSTALK)

KING: No, I understand that, general. That's not my question. My question is, in your military judgment, why hasn't the Afghan government with all the support that it's had from us been more successful in beating back the Taliban and -- when, in fact, over the last dozen years or so the Taliban has been making steady gains?

MCKENZIE: I believe that right now a rough stasis exists between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan forces. Taliban have access to offshore havens where they're able to reconstitute, where the government of Afghanistan can't reach. And it's always very difficult in a counterinsurgency fight when your opponent has the ability to do those things.

KING: Well, I -- I -- I understand that. But it just seems like with all the advantages of the Afghan government, I'm just puzzled as to why they haven't -- and you -- you've testified that you thought they had the support of the majority of the people -- why they haven't been able to be more successful.

General Townsend, you -- we've talked a lot about the Chinese activity in -- in Africa. You talked about the purpose appears to be both economic and military. My question is do you discern any backlash in these African countries where the Chinese have made these big loans and big investments and now the bills are coming due? Are the Africans having any second thoughts about their engagement with the Chinese?

TOWNSEND: Thank you, senator. Actually we do see some backlash, as you know -- you have famous -- heard of the famous debt-trap diplomacy that they -- the Chinese have used. That has actually worked against their efforts in a lot of African countries.

Our embassies have a very successful program where we now will review any contracts -- we have an -- a standing offer to review any contracts that these countries are going to undertake

with China to point out the inconsistencies, the potential pitfalls. And the difference is often, we find, between the host nation language translation and the Chinese translation.

I think this is a great effort by our Department of State to help these countries make informed decisions on their own.

We see backlash and we see it in the military sphere. Their equipment frequently breaks within a year or two. It sits and rusting at -- on the side of the airfield or the port and their training has been described to me by one African leader as not much more useful than a Hollywood demonstration. So, we are starting to see some pushback by African leaders on the Chinese.

KING: Well, I think one way to look at it and I've talked to leaders throughout Asia, is that we have allies, China has customers. And I think to the extent we can maintain those relationships with those African countries in the long run I think they're going to prefer our model and our support. Thank you very much gentlemen for your service. Thank you Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

REED: Thank you Senator King. Senator Scott, please.

SCOTT: Thank you Chairman. Thank both of you for your service and all the men and women under your command. Just to follow up with -- General Townsend, with what Senator King was saying, what do you -- how are they -- what are you hearing from these leaders in these Afghan -- African countries about how they're going to deal with the debts (ph) that the Chinese have done or their relationship? Or is there much opposition to what China's doing right now?

TOWNSEND: I had an African leader tell me a drowning man will reach for any hand. And so, I think that they're faced with very difficult choices, many of these countries. They've got extreme poverty, they have climate challenges, food shortages, they want to advance their country for their people. Many of them have challenges with violent extremist organizations and they need to secure their country. So, they will reach to any offer.

Frequently those offers are fastest from China and Russia. We are slower to deliver in their estimation, and it's true. And we're more deliberate in that way. And we have strings attached and the Chinese and the Russians, you know, our strings are related to good behavior and things like that, democratic values. And the Chinese and the Russians attach no such strings other than loans -- loan shark type of lending. So, they reach for whatever assistance they can get.

They constantly tell us, we would prefer you to be our partner. And many of them do that when we have the ability to that. But they also will take any help from any source and they'll take help from us and help from the Chinese and the Russians all at the same time. And they'll reassure they can manage those relationships and we try to help them with that.

SCOTT: So, take the Chinese, are they going to be able to enforce the deals they've entered into in these countries?

TOWNSEND: That's a great question Senator. And I don't know the answer to that and probably best for the Department of State.

SCOTT: OK. What -- General Townsend, Israel's -- it seems like Israel's reputation and presence in Africa's growing. And with the Abraham Accord you'd think it would be positive. So are you seeing Israel involvement in Africa growing at all?

TOWNSEND: We do see Israel. Israel has always been involved in parts of Africa, mostly the northeast and long the Red Sea. We are seeing Israel reach out across Africa in -- in a fairly positive way in most cases. They are doing some arms sales there and quite frankly, I would rather see our African partners buy Israeli drones than Chinese drones.

SCOTT: Thank you. General McKenzie, how -- what -- how concerned are you about the relationship that Iran is building with China?

MCKENZIE: I'm very concerned about it, it's too soon to tell though if this latest agreement is going to amount to something or nothing at all. I think Iran is always seeking out opportunities to buy weapons. And I -- so I think it's interesting but I do not think I am prepared to pass a judgment on it.

SCOTT: Are you -- are you seeing China's involvement grow -- continuing to grow military all across the area you're responsible for?

MCKENZIE: In Central Command, China's engagement is principally economic with the debt trap diplomacy that -- that General Townsend discussed in Africa. We see the same thing across our region. You know, we shouldn't forget that -- China actually enforced a significant fraction of their hydrocarbons from -- from -- from the region and from the Strait of Hormuz and from the Arabian Gulf. So they are going to -- they are very interested in the region. So I think right now what we're seeing is the leading edge of a long-term Chinese plan to firmly establish themselves in the region.

SCOTT: Thank you. Thank you, Chairman.

REED: Thank you, Senator Scott. Now let me recognize via WebEx, Senator Warren.

WARREN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you, General McKenzie and General Townsend, for being here. So, General McKenzie, President Biden recently announced his plans to withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan no later than September, 11th 2021. That's going to mark our longest war ever. So I just want to review what's happened, just over the last decade and where we stand now. General McKenzie, is it true that the Taliban has more members today than it did 10 years ago?

MCKENZIE: Taliban has 50 thousand or so members today. It -- I would have to come back to you on where that stands compared to 10 years ago, senator.

WARREN: Well -- I -- as I -- I think the number could be as high as 85 thousand according to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan reconstruction. And that is almost triple what it was in 2011, you might want to go back and look at those numbers. And does the Taliban control more of Afghanistan than it does 10 years ago?

MCKENZIE: Yes it does, senator.

WARREN: Yes. And does Pakistan or elements of the Pakistani Government still provide support and sanctuary to the Taliban?

MCKENZIE: We believe that elements of the Taliban are in Pakistan, yes, senator. We do.

WARREN: And is corruption in the Afghan Government still endemic?

MCKENZIE: The Afghan Government has corruption, significant corruption.

WARREN: Yes. And after all this time and all this work to prop up and support the Afghan Government, is it fair to say that Afghans still have little trust in their government and elections, just as they 10 years ago?

MCKENZIE: Senator, I defer to the Department of the State for a better commentary on that.

WARREN: All right, I think if you check their commentary on that they will say yes. The situation in Afghanistan has not improved in the last 10 years even with our troops present. And it's clear there is little for us to be gained by continued U.S. presence there. I strongly support President Biden's decision to withdraw U.S. troops. We should have learned by now that a conditions based withdraw is just a recipe for staying in Afghanistan forever.

Defense officials have come before this Committee year after year to proclaim that the U.S. has turned a corner in Afghanistan, but all I see is a vicious cycle that damages our nation's reputation abroad and keeps our troops in harm's way while producing little tangible benefit for our security. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield the remainder of my time.

REED: Thank you very much, Senator Warren. Now let me recognize, Senator Sullivan.

SULLIVAN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Gentlemen, thank you for your service. General McKenzie, I appreciated our -- our discussion yesterday. Let me start with a big picture issue. You're in the Middle East, a lot of energy there. Does it help or hurt the United States of America from a national security and foreign policy perspective that we are now the world's energy superpower, producing more natural gas than Russia and more oil than Saudi Arabia. Does that help our national security posture in the Middle East and other places in the world?

MCKENZIE: I would say -- I would think that it helps globally, it certainly helps in the CENTCOM region.

SULLIVAN: So you think it makes sense from a perspective to unilaterally start reducing the production of American energy, it kills jobs, but I'm talking for a national security perspective to enable Saudi Arabia and Russia to be bigger energy producers? Be honest, does that make sense from your perspective, national security, in your personal opinion?

MCKENZIE: Sir, I -- I defer it to commerce and -- for a more informed opinion...

SULLIVAN: I'm asking as a..

MCKENZIE: I would say that it is -- that it does -- it is not helpful to the United States.

SULLIVAN: Thank you. You know, General, this is a very difficult decision, a controversial decision, certainly I wish the President would not pick September 11th as some kind of date to celebrate. Not a good date in American history, I think that the Taliban is going to have a great propaganda victory by saying 20 years ago there was a victory and now there was a victory.

I don't believe it was a victory but I -- I hope in the future the President, Secretary of Defense and even you don't use September 11th as some kind of date where -- celebrating here on the withdraw of troops. You don't need to comment on that, I just think it's baffling that somehow, somebody in the white house thought that was a good date to choose.

One thing that we're hearing, many of our bravest men and women fought, many died, sacrificed -- I mean you start to hear this mantra that they -- if we're pulling out, the Taliban takeover, which is a distinct possibility, these sacrifices, particularly those who died, died in vain. You know, I had the honor of serving as a Staff Officer of General Abizaid for a year and a half and he was CENTCOM Commander many years -- he said something once that I -- really struck me. He said no American that's ever fought for freedom or the defense of the national security of the United States has ever died in vain.

What would you say to the men and women who fought in Afghanistan, wounded, families who lost loved ones about their sacrifice even though we're leaving?

MCKENZIE: Senator, first of all there's really nothing that I can say to replace the empty chair at the table, the loss of a loved one. And I'm very humbled by -- by recognizing that. I can't improve on what General Abizaid said in any way. You know, if -- to fight for freedom is not to give something up in vain. I think it's -- but I think it's very hard on those people. As you know, I've been to Afghanistan multiple times as have General Townsend sitting here beside me. My son's been to Afghanistan twice, so I'm well aware of the burden that's been placed on the families of this nation to support our fight there.

SULLIVAN: I just want to make sure that our message to these families, to the men and women who served, sacrificed, some gave their lives, that it's not going to be your sacrifice didn't mean anything. I would agree with General Abizaid, that I hope that can be the statement from our military leaders. No American who has ever fought for freedom and the security of our nation has died in vain, regardless of what happens in Afghanistan the next two to three years. Would you agree with that?

MCKENZIE: Certainly, senator, I would.

SULLIVAN: Would you agree with that General?

TOWNSEND: Senator, I would. Absolutely.

SULLIVAN: Let me ask one final question. General, you are a marine. You know that honor, courage, commitment is a cornerstone of our ethos. Semper Fidelis. Do you believe nations have honor?

MCKENZIE: I do believe nations have honor.

SULLIVAN: So, one thing I worry about given this decision is that a lot of people who worked with our military, their lives are going to be at risk. The women who are now parliamentarian, their lives are going to be at risk if the Taliban takes over, which I think is a distinct possibility.

I think we should be doing much more in planning, much more to try to protect those lives, maybe get them out of Afghanistan if needed. Would you agree with that? And if there is a plan to do that -- well, what is the plan to do that right now and if there isn't a plan, would you be able to execute a plan if we were able to keep our word to people who sacrificed and worked with us who's now -- their lives are clearly going to be at risk, to help them.

Wouldn't that help the honor of America despite leaving?

MCKENZIE: Senator, I know the Department of State is looking at a variety of venues, the Special Immigrant Visa Program among others to potentially bring people out. We have the capability to do that as so directed.

SULLIVAN: I certainly hope we look at doing that in a big way. I think the idea of a year from now or a year and a half from now if the Taliban takes over, which I think is a distinct possibility, and you have people who worked with our troops who are lined up and shot or killed because they worked with Americans, I think that would be a stain on our honor as a nation. I hope that we're making plans to avoid that. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

REED: Thank you, senator. Now, let me recognize, Senator Rosen, via WebEx.

ROSEN: Thank you, Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Inhofe, and -- for holding this hearing, of course. And I'd like to thank Generals Townsend and McKenzie for testifying today and of course for their service to our country.

I'd like to speak a little bit about maintaining Israel's QME, because for decades maintaining Israel's Qualitative Military Edge has been a bipartisan American foreign policy priority. It's been codified in law since 2008. In recent years, the combination of Iran acquiring advanced Russian and Chinese systems, transfers of arms to terrorist groups, and an escalating weapons

race in the region undermine Israel's QME and they pose a significant conventional threat to the United States personnel.

Just last night, a Syrian surface to air missile exploded in Israel, demonstrating the danger of advanced missiles proliferating throughout the region. So, General McKenzie, what is your assessment of Israel's current QME? And what must be done to maintain it and do you view the escalating arms race in the region as having a negative impact on Israel's QME?

MCKENZIE: Senator, I'm newly energized to study the Israeli question because in the movement of Israel into it -- into the Central Command is under the recent ECP decision, all though I have looked at it for several years at U.S. Central Command. I am confident we will be able to preserve Israel's QME going forward, even considering arms sales to various countries across the region.

And we should also reflect that those arms sales to countries across the region at least partially reflects the increasing normalization of ties between Israel and those nations.

Nonetheless, I am absolutely confident that we will be able to retain Israel's military advantage.

ROSEN: Thank you. I look forward to revisiting that with you as you move forward. I'd like to move next to the MQ9 production because the MQ9s and remotely piloted aircraft plays a critical role in supporting our current intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance requirements.

A key part of the MQ9s architecture is the mission at Nevada's Creech Air Force Base. As force drawdowns and CENTCOM area responsibility reduce human intelligent availability signals intelligence capabilities become even more important despite this the prior administration tried to cut MQ9 production.

So again, General McKenzie, last year you included additional MQ9 funding at the top of CENTCOM's -- CENTCOM's unfunded priorities. So how would additional MQ9 aircrafts support your ISR mission and what would the impacts or the gaps in your ISR capabilities if that production would be suspended without a follow up plan?

MCKENZIE: Sure. The MQ9, the MQ1, and various other platforms are critical platforms for us in Central Command, particularly for use in VEO fight. They give us the persistent overhead coverage that we need to go through the fine fix and finish part of the -- of the equation.

So we continue to use them particularly in the Afghanistan but also in Iraq and Syria and we have also found the MQ9 to be invaluable in use against Iran. Where in the summer of 2019, the manipulation of ISR assets in and around the Strait of Hormuz directly deflected Iranian attack planning.

So it's useful in a variety of venues for us. Senator, I also recognize there's a global demand for these resources. Other combatant commands need them. My partner here, General Townsend, needs them in Africa as well. It remains an invaluable platform for us.

I -- I also recognize the platform is not viable in a -- in a high end fight and there are parts of CENTCOM that could become a high end fight, there are parts of CENTCOM that are not a high end fight.

The platform is going to remain vital to us as we go forward, particularly as we pull out of Afghanistan and our ability to maintain persistent -- persistent overhead coverage will maybe -- will possibly require additional MQ9s in order -- because of the range of -- range from the base to the place where we actually be looking. We may even need more of them in Central Command dedicated to that particular task.

ROSEN: Well, thank you. I appreciate that. Nevada is glad to do their part in signals and reconnaissance intelligence in the MQ9 certainly helps us meet those goals. Thank you. I notice my time is just about expired. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

REED: Well, thank you very much, Senator Rosen. And there are several members that are endeavoring to get here. And in order to allow them a fair opportunity, let me ask an additional question or two and Senator Inhofe, he joins us.

In fact, this is perfect timing because I can now introduce and recognize Senator Kelly. Are you prepared, Senator?

KELLY: I'm always ready.

REED: Always ready. That's...

KELLY: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. And General McKenzie, General Townsend; thank you for your testimony today. So we've seen a range of gray zone engagement activities by near peer competitors throughout Africa and the Middle East. From China's pursuit of strategic partnerships with the Iranians in attempts to use infrastructure loans and medical supplies to gain favor on the African continent.

To Russia's efforts to establish a foothold in critical mineral extraction in a presence on NATO's southern edge. The national defense strategy speaks of the need to expand the competitive space. With that in mind I'd like to get both of your thoughts on how the U.S. should be engaging in this environment to build relationships in each of these areas of responsibility with an eye towards countering the opportunistic influence seeking behaviors by our competitors and discouraging any further escalation. General Townsend?

TOWNSEND: Thanks, Senator. So you've correctly pointed out that Russia and China are competing deliberately and -- and hard in Africa with the United States. I believe that they are determined to win -- China is determined to win that competition.

I'm less concerned about Russia's competition, although it's not helpful. I think they are exploitative, they're self interested. I think in many ways they can -- the Russians can be their own worst enemies. I think they are less of a longer term concern to me than China is. China is a concern today and longer term. They are a learning organization; they're spending a lot of money in Africa.

We don't have to outspend them. What we have to do is figure out where we need to out compete them and how to do that. And how to do that is a whole of government solution. In -- in my view the first thing I'm concerned about with China, number one is Atlantic Coast naval base. Number two, it's their activities in North Africa and I can discuss that in more in a closed session.

My third concern would be the influence of Russia in Libya. As the Libyan national government there is sort of forming up now, maybe there's a path forward there that's better. And my fourth concern would be Libyan naval bay -- or Russian naval base in Sudan on the Red Sea.

So those are my top four global power competition concerns with those competitors and it's a whole of government approach, I think, that will get us there. They've -- most African partners want to partner with us.

KELLY: And when you're thinking about China's desire to have an Atlantic Coast Naval base, what do you -- what do you think the most likely place that they're exploring right now?

TOWNSEND: Senator, let me say this, they have placed bets from Mauritania in the north to Namibia in the south and in many countries in-between. I'd really rather dig into those details in a closed session.

KELLY: OK. Thank you. General McKenzie?

MCKENZIE: Senator, when we talk about competition against Russia and China in the gray space, clearly we need to think globally, not just in the western pacific and not just in -- not just in Europe. The principle tools that we use in Central Command range from exercises with our partners.

Everybody wants to exercise with the United States. So we -- we work those very hard with all these partners. The other is INET, bringing their officers and NCOs to the United States for educational opportunities, extremely low cost, extremely high pay out. Everybody wants to go to a U.S. school if they can -- a military school if they can have the opportunity to do that.

Additional, security cooperation, as Steve noted, everybody wants our weapons. They would prefer to buy from us. They accept the restrictions that we will place on their weapons but we have a variety of tools that we can employ and that's just in the military domain.

In the whole of government side, I just call out to the economic aid that we can offer and the work of USAID. All of those working in concert with us give us significant advantages that we can apply against Russia and China, particularly in the Central Command AOR.

KELLY: If we were able to expand those educational opportunities for foreign often (ph) officers, but just military personnel, is the demand -- I mean, how significant is the demand right now?

MCKENZIE: The demand is -- the demand far outpaces supply, far outpaces supply.

KELLY: So we could double the...

MCKENZIE: You could double, triple, you could quadruple, you could a lot of things. The problem really is on our end. I mean, our institutions are good because they're scoped in size and we recognize that, but nonetheless there's enormous demand for these.

KELLY: Thank you. I yield back.

REED: Thank you Senator Kelly. Senator Tuberville, please.

TUBERVILLE: Oh thank you very much. Very quickly, thanks for being here today. General McKenzie, what's the most important thing we can do to prevent a resurgence of ISIS in Syria and Iraq? And are we doing enough?

MCKENZIE: I think we were on -- we're on -- we're on track to do that. I think the Iraqis are a lot better at fighting and fighting ISIS. We've pulled back from accompanying them in the fight to high level advising. They can generally master the battlefield and protect their own country. So, I think we're in a good place -- I think we're in a good place in Iraq.

In Syria we work with our SDF partners to continue the fight against ISIS remnants, they don't hold any ground. There's small isolated groups of them that operate up and down the Euphrates River and we go after them pretty hard and because of that they are unable to generate effective attack plans against the United States or our allies.

TUBERVILLE: General Townsend, how will China's growing influence in the region disrupt the U.S. abilities to impact long-term strategic goals?

TOWNSEND: Senator, I think our number one strategic goal for Africa is to ensure that the United States has the access and the strategic influence that we need in the future. That's, I think, the number one concern I have for China's activity in Africa is that they will try to maneuver us or box us out of access and influence.

I'd say that we have an edge still. As much money as they have invested, as many activities as they're doing, we still have edge and access and influence. And example I use is our rescue of an American citizen that was held hostage in Nigeria just last October.

An hour's notice we asked seven countries for access to their country for armed -- our armed forces to enter their country and do some military activity. In many of these countries this was done over the phone with literally hours to give us an answer. All seven said yes.

And I -- that's an example of the access and influence the United States has today and we need to work to ensure we have that access and influence in the future. And not all seven of those countries are what we would consider strong and close partners, but they all said yes to that request.

TUBERVILLE: Excellent. Thank you. General McKenzie, are there effective measures being taken today by CENTCOM to address the individual displaced person's crisis along the Syrian and Iraqi border? If so, how?

MCKENZIE: Senator, I remain very concerned about displaced persons in northeast Syria. And the -- it's not a military problem. It's really a whole of government. And it's more than that; it's actually an international problem. We've trained the people that run those camps. That's our responsibility and we prevent external actors from getting in there and causing harm.

Nonetheless those camps are incubators are radical ideology. We need to find a way to return particularly the children, but also the other family members back to the countries that they came from and that requires an international effort.

And I know the Department of State is working very hard to make that -- to make that happen. It's a tough -- it's an uphill sled though, trying to make -- trying to achieve that. This is one of my most significant concerns, sir.

TUBERVILLE: Thank you. General Townsend, as we build relationships with African nations such as Morocco and Algeria, how does this -- how does this strengthen our national security?

TOWNSEND: Both of those countries sit in this geostrategically important part of Africa. They both have -- Morocco directly over-watches the Strait of Gibraltar. And Algeria is close enough to influence the Strait of Gibraltar in the western Med. So, from a geostrategic standpoint we absolutely need working -- good working relations with those two countries.

Morocco is a very strong partner of the United States, probably our number one African partner, as far as relationships go. They take great pride in their military being equipped primarily with U.S. equipment and operating at a standard that is equivalent to a NATO standard. So, they're a very strong partner.

Algeria has been -- has had close ties with Russia for decades. However, they have recently been expressing a desire to increase their ties with the United States and we do have good working relationship with Algeria on issues of mutual concern.

TUBERVILLE: Did we sell Morocco a lot of arms and equipment?

TOWNSEND: I'm sorry?

TUBERVILLE: Do we sell Morocco a lot of arms and equipment?

TOWNSEND: We do. And unlike a lot of African partners they purchase it all with their own money.

TUBERVILLE: Excellent. Thank you Mr. Chairman.

REED: Thank you Senator Tuberville. Now I'd like to recognize via WebEx Senator Hawley, please. Hi -- I know Senator Hawley is trying very quickly to get either to...

HAWLEY: There we go. Can you hear me now Mr. Chairman?

REED: I can Senator. Please proceed.

HAWLEY: OK, thank you. Thank you so much. Sorry, I couldn't hear you there. Thank you gentlemen for being here and thank you Mr. Chairman for being patient with me.

General McKenzie let me start with you if I could, Secretary Austin said recently that the United States will be able to maintain counterterrorism capabilities in the region sufficient to ensure Afghanistan cannot become a safe haven for terrorists who threaten our security. And that was Secretary Austin.

Can you just give me a sense, do you agree with the secretary's assessment that we can achieve our counterterrorism objectives in Afghanistan even once we complete the drawdown that President Biden has directed?

MCKENZIE: Senator, I do agree with that assessment. We -- you know, we will rely on a defense in depth, the changes that have made to security here in the United States make our homeland a much harder target than it was in 2001.

Additionally, the rebasing that we will do across the theater as we pull out of Afghanistan will give us the capability to go back in as necessary to strike targets when they need to be struck. I don't want to make it sound too easy. It's going to be extremely difficult to do that. It is certainly possible to do that and we will have the forces that will allow us to accomplish those tasks.

HAWLEY: Thank you for that answer. I'm glad to hear that. What are some of the options, can you give us a sense that CENTCOM is evaluating for finding and neutralizing targets in Afghanistan once we withdraw our forces?

MCKENZIE: Sure, I'd prefer to cover it in detain perhaps in the closed session. But...

HAWLEY: Sure.

MCKENZIE: ... I would say that you always need a combination of and you want to -- the formula is you've got to find them, you've got to fix the target, then you have to finish the target.

So, we tend to think in those terms when we talk about the resources that we need -- that we will need. What you will need is the ability to bring persistent overhead coverage in, probably from extended ranges, to still loiter (ph) and take a look at areas that you want to -- you want to further examine.

And the reason you're going to need persistent coverage is if you plan to strike something, we're going to strike it in -- in full compliance with the law of armed conflict, low collateral damage and the -- and the American way of war. So we're going to make sure, if we go after something, it's really what we want to hit and we're not going to kill innocent people, should that be necessary.

And so we will do all that from extreme long range, and it will be a challenge. But we do have the capability to do it. We have a number of ways to get to a fix (ph) solution, ranging from precision strike at very long range to on-the-ground options, should those prove necessary. And I'd really prefer to talk a little bit more about those in a closed session, sir.

HAWLEY: Absolutely.

Give me a sense, General, if CENTCOM has done a similar analysis to identify ways that we can achieve our counterterrorism objectives in Iraq? Should we withdraw our forces there?

MCKENZIE: The -- the logic -- the logic is the same. We would certainly be able to do that, and the logic would be the same.

HAWLEY: Would you be willing, in the appropriate setting, to -- to share your findings with the committee in terms of the analysis you've done about how we might achieve that in Iraq?

MCKENZIE: Certainly. Of course, right now, we do not anticipate withdrawing from Iraq. In fact, we believe, as a result of the strategic dialogue that was just completed in the last two weeks, we'll maintain a footprint in Iraq, going forward. But certainly, pending approval of the secretary and further -- you know, and further approval by the department, we'd be willing to do that.

HAWLEY: Yeah, let me -- let me perhaps rephrase my question. Has CENTCOM done a similar -- you're doing this analysis now for Afghanistan because of the president's order, in terms of how we can reposition there to achieve our counterterrorism objectives. Have -- has CENTCOM done a similar analysis for Iraq in the event that -- that our force posture there might change significantly?

MCKENZIE: Senator, not vis-a-vis Iraq particularly, although the logic of the argument, the logic of the capability would be the same, whether it's targeted against Afghanistan or Iraq. So the work that we're doing right now would be useful, should that prove necessary at some contingent time in the future, as yet unplanned.

HAWLEY: Do you anticipate doing an analysis for the Iraq situation? The reason I'm asking, General, it seems that if we're going to have a meaningful discussion about our continued

military presence there, we're going to need to know the options. I mean, what we can realistically hope to achieve, should we draw down or leave entirely.

MCKENZIE: Sure. So right now, we are not planning for that in Iraq, is probably the best way to answer your question. We could plan for it very rapidly, if so directed. But again, I note that right now, we do plan on maintaining a presence in Iraq into the future, subject to agreements and further discussions with the government of Iraq.

HAWLEY: Let me just ask you, in the few seconds I have remaining, General, DOD budgeted about \$4 billion last year for the Afghan Security Forces fund, that's just short of the amount that PACOM needs for this year's installment of the Pacific Deterrence Initiative. And at the same time, there's strong reason to believe that the Afghan Security Forces will be significantly, significantly reduced, harmed (ph) or just collapse (ph) when U.S. troops depart.

Here's my question. From a military standpoint, under what conditions would you say that it's no longer advisable for DOD to be investing this amount, these billions of dollars each year, in the Afghan Security Forces?

MCKENZIE: Senator, that's a sort of future -- future hypothetical question, which I try to avoid answering. But I can tell you this, if we don't -- if we don't provide them some support, they certainly will collapse and I think that's not in our best interest.

HAWLEY: Yeah, the reason -- as you can probably anticipate, the reason I'm asking is I am concerned that -- that we will continue to pour resources into Security Forces without much return on investment, when we need them, we need those resources very badly in other theaters, particularly in our pacing (ph) theater.

I've just about used up my time here, I think -- in fact, I'm over my time. Thank you, General, for being here.

Thank you, General Townsend, as well. I'll have some additional questions for you in the written setting.

And thank you, Mr. Chairman.

REED: Thank you, Senator Hawley.

This concludes the open session. Let me yield to Senator Inhofe, any comments he might have?

INHOFE: Yeah, I do, I want to make sure the staff, anyone who's here understands we have a lot of things, a lot of questions we want to ask in a closed session. That's going to take place in 217. We have four votes coming up, so it's going to be very convenient, to be down there, run up to get our votes and come back. So I would advise all of our members that -- to come to that closed session...

REED: Let me echo...

INHOFE: ... immediately (ph).

REED: Let me echo what Senator Inhofe said. In fact, I was going to say that, but he...

INHOFE: Oh.

(LAUGHTER)

REED: ... this is sort of ESP, I think, I don't know what's going on. But yes, we are going to adjourn immediately to SBC (ph) 217, we'll have a closed session. It'll be people coming in and out to vote, but there's many issues we want to cover there.

Gentlemen, thank you for your testimony, thank you for your service, and for those who serve in your commands.

The open hearing is adjourned.

END

SPEAKERS:

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SEN. JEANNE SHAHEEN, D-N.H.

SEN. KIRSTEN GILLIBRAND, D-N.Y.

SEN. RICHARD BLUMENTHAL, D-CONN.

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