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INHOFE: Our meeting will come to order. The committee today meets to receive testimonies on the posture of the U.S. Central and African Commands. We welcome our witnesses, General Votel and General Waldhauser, and thank each one of you for your great service.

In advance of this hearing, Chairman McCain asked that I submit a statement for the record on his behalf. I will quote that statement. Quote, "As we turn our attention to the central challenge of great power competition, the National Defense Strategy challenged us to think about our efforts in the Middle East in new and in different ways. With all of the recent success in the fight against ISIS, we must work to consolidate our gains and move forward with the -- with a coherent regional strategy to ensure security and stability," unquote.

This committee looks forward to working with this year's National Defense Authorization Act to provide the policies and authorities needed to adjust to this new approach, both in the Middle East and in Africa, where the threat of violent extremism is increasing dramatically.

For CENTCOM, over the past year, we have seen remarkable progress in the fight against ISIS. Your military victories in Mosul and Raqqa and beyond have helped dismantle the caliphate ISIS once claimed in the Middle East.

At the same time, significant challenges remain in the region. The Syrian civil war rages on, Iran continues to grow its influence and fund its proxies. According to the region, we face serious questions about the Kurds, many of whom have fought by our side valiantly.

INHOFE: For Africa, let me make -- AFRICOM -- I'll make one statement that I think is significant for us to keep in mind for the purpose of this hearing.

General Waldhauser, it is my understanding the investigation into the October 2017 ambush in Niger by ISIS-affiliated fighters that killed four U.S. soldiers is completed. I understand it is now pending review by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dunford, and the secretary of defense, Jim Mattis.

After his approval, AFRICOM will immediately offer a brief to the families of the four soldiers, if they desire, prior to any in-depth briefing to Congress. Obviously, we want the families to have an opportunity to know what happened to their loved ones.

Accordingly, I understand that you are not able to comment on the investigation's results during this posture hearing, and, at the conclusion of the briefs to the families, I know you will be providing us with a thorough briefing of the investigation's findings and recommendations.

Now, we do have -- I want to talk about Africa and AFRICOM. Our troops have an important mission there, to train and assist our regional partners so that they will be capable of handling security threats before they become global crises.

Our engagements in Africa are critical not only to regional stability, but to our own national security, but it lacks the dedicated troops, resources, sufficient basing and strategic access.

Senator Reed?

REED: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

And I want to thank our witnesses for appearing today, for, also, your service and the service of the men and women you command. And thank you very much -- and thank them, please.

You're leaving -- leading your commands in very challenging times. We are in the 16th year of military engagement in Afghanistan, for example. Early last year, General Nicholson, commander of U.S. Forces Afghanistan, testified we were facing a stalemate.

Since that time, the administration has announced a new South Asian strategy, articulated a negotiated settlement as the desired end state, moved additional forces into theater to support the military elements of strategy and curtailed security assistance to Pakistan.

Despite these shifts, 2017 continued to be plagued by widespread violence and instability in Afghanistan, as the Taliban expanded their territorial control and conducted a number of large-scale attacks against military and civilian targets.

In addition, ISIS-Khorasan remains resilient despite significant pressure. While the administration has clearly laid out a military strategy, battlefield victories are hollow without political and economic progress, both of which seem stalled in Afghanistan.

However, the Trump administration has yet to articulate the political governance or economic aspects of the strategy, much less the associated staffing and resources that will be required to implement it. And, General Votel, I'm interested in your assessment of the situation in Afghanistan. I'm sure all my colleagues are, also.

In Iraq and Syria the destruction of the so-called physical caliphate previously enjoyed by ISIS is a significant victory, and I commend the administration and your leadership and your colleagues, too, for this U.S.-led international coalition. And our Iraq and Syria partners on the ground have done so much. However, ISIS is not defeated and will remain a threat for the foreseeable future.

Additionally, the underlying issues that gave rise to ISIS in the first place remain unaddressed. We need strong U.S. diplomatic leadership to help bring about the necessary political accommodations that will give Sunni communities a stake in their future and to bring the international community together to assist the communities recovering from ISIS.

As someone -- as some experts, rather, have stated, the seeds of the next insurgency are sown in the rubble of Mosul and Raqqa. Iraq alone -- the cost of reconstruction is expected to be at least \$88 billion, and the international community has pledged about less than one-third of that amount.

REED: I'm deeply concerned that the administration's marginalization of our diplomatic corps undermines our ability to stabilize the areas once held by ISIS, as well, as the broader region.

It is notable that across the CENTCOM and AFRICOM areas of responsibility, a number of ambassadorial posts remain vacant, most notably in Jordan and Somalia where I recently visited, but also in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Libya and Egypt.

And this is not a question of congressional inaction. No nominations have been forthcoming. And I'm sure our colleagues, all of them, would rapidly move to consider nominees for these very important positions.

Military power alone will not be enough to address the national security challenges we face in these complicated regions in any enduring way. We must have the people in place to help ensure our long-term strategic objectives are met.

On Iran, the president risks creating foreign policy crisis by threatening to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA. By all accounts, the JCPOA is working as intended and Iran is verifiably meeting its commitments under the agreement.

Let there be no doubt, Iran continues to be a state sponsor of terror and an abuser of human rights. Iran continues to destabilize the region through its development of ballistic missiles and its support for proxies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and elsewhere.

The JCPOA was not intended to address all of Iran's bad behavior, just the nuclear aspect. If Iran behaves this way without a nuclear weapon, imagine how much worse it would be with a nuclear-armed force.

Withdrawing from the JCPOA would be a devastating blow not only to the Middle East, but also for our efforts diplomatically with North Korea and for any future diplomatic efforts to constrain aggressive behavior by our adversaries.

General Votel, I'm interested in hearing if you, like General -- Secretary Mattis, rather, and General Dunford, believe that remaining in the deal is in the best interest of the nation.

In Africa, the importance of relationships is paramount as we seek to engage by, with and through our partners in a -- for a -- furtherance of our shared security goals.

I recently traveled to East Africa where I saw firsthand the ongoing efforts to disrupt violent extremists and build capacity with critical partners in places like Djibouti and Somalia. I also saw the challenges from competitors, such as China and Russia, who are actively seeking investments and involvement across the continent.

Despite some battlefield success against groups like Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIS affiliates, many governments in the region have struggled to translate security gains into durable outcomes.

As we turn our attention to the great power competition articulated by the National Defense Strategy, we must be mindful not to focus exclusively on these issues at the expense of other threats, such as terrorist organizations, rogue regimes and other non-state actors and criminal organizations, issues that are unfortunately present in both of your commands.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you, Generals, for your service.

INHOFE: Thank you, Senator Reed.

We'll now have opening statements by our two guests. And your entire statement will be made a part of the record.

General Votel?

VOTEL: Senator Inhofe, Ranking Member Reed, distinguished members of the committee, good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to appear today to discuss the current posture and state of readiness of the United States Central Command.

I'm pleased to be here today with my fellow combatant commander and fellow Minnesotan General Tom Waldhauser of the U.S. Africa Command.

I come before you today on behalf of over 80,000 members of the command, U.S. military, civilians and coalition members from 71 nations. In the most complex area of the globe, they serve and sacrifice on a daily basis, in many cases for the benefit of not only American strategic interests, but also the world's.

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

Since I last appeared before the committee, last year, we have made considerable military progress across the region. However, as we consolidate our gains in places like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, we remain clear-eyed about the challenges that the region continues to present.

In the past year, we have achieved incredible success against ISIS in both Iraq and Syria. The Iraqi Security Forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces are operating at their most effective levels and have liberated over 98 percent of the territory previously held by ISIS. The destruction of the ISIS physical caliphate is within our grasp and thousands of displaced persons are returning home and beginning the long task of rebuilding.

Now we must consolidate gains by investing in the security forces, relationships and capabilities that will hold the territory and keep ISIS from returning.

Based upon that progress, CENTCOM is conducting an operational alignment or rebalancing effort to achieve three goals.

The first goal is to complete major combat operations in Iraq and Syria, to bring the defeat-ISIS campaign to a responsible close.

Military success in the campaign presents us an opportunity to reposition forces from Iraq and Syria to Afghanistan in a manner that keeps the pressure on ISIS, but also sets us up to break the stalemate in Afghanistan.

We retain sufficient capability to continue our efforts against ISIS, despite the increasingly complex situation across Syria, and especially in the northwest province of Afrin. Our partners on the ground in Syria have gotten us a long way in Syria and -- toward our objectives and we must stick with them through the completion of this fight.

In Iraq, the Iraqi Security Forces are rapidly consolidating gains and preparing to support elections later this spring.

The second goal is to prioritize the implementation of the South Asia strategy in Afghanistan, reaffirming our enduring commitment to Afghanistan by reinforcing the two complementary military missions: the NATO-led train, advise and assist mission and the U.S. counterterrorism mission.

With our support, the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces are well-postured to begin operations to seize the initiative, to expand population control and secure credible elections.

Part and parcel of this effort is our regionalized approach to engage all countries with a stake in Afghanistan's stability, especially Pakistan, where we seek a more productive and trustful relationship that benefits our mutual objectives in the region.

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

The recently published National Defense Strategy rightly identifies the resurgence of great power competition as our principal national security challenge and we see the effects of that competition throughout the region.

Russia's support of the Assad regime has not only propped them up, but has also added complexity to the defeat-ISIS campaign. Moscow plays both arsonist and firefighter, fueling tensions among the Syrian regime, Iran, Turkey, the Syrian Democratic Forces, the United States and other coalition partners, then serving as a supposed arbiter to resolve disputes.

Today, Russia's manipulative behavior has placed our campaign progress at risk with activities that are not focused on the defeat of ISIS, but rather preserving their influence and control over the outcome of the situation.

China is pursuing long-term, steady economic growth in the region through its One Belt, One Road policy. But it is also improving military posture and force projection by connecting ports such as Gwadar in Pakistan with its first overseas military base in Djibouti, adjacent to the critical Bab-el-Mandeb Strait.

VOTEL: Both China and Russia not only seek to fill in perceived gaps in U.S. influence with increasing defense cooperation and sales of their equipment to regional partners, but they are also cultivating multidimensional ties to Iran.

Against this backdrop of increasing great power interaction are the enduring issues of the region: social, economic and political challenges; high unemployment; falling oil prices; a youth bulge; large numbers of refugees; and longstanding border conflicts.

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

I would like to close by sharing three dynamics that we assess are essential to prevailing in this region. First, in the conduct of our campaigns in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Lebanon and Egypt, we have adopted a "by, with and through" approach that places a heavy reliance on indigenous partner forces.

While this approach does present its own challenges and can be more time-consuming, it, importantly, provides local solutions to local problems. This approach is not without risk, as we are seeing unfold in northern Syria today. But it is proving very effective and will pay significant dividends going forward.

Second, successful pursuit of U.S. objectives in this region comes only from an integrated approach aligned with interorganizational partners. Defense of the nation is a team sport.

This applies not just within the command, but with our fellow combatant commands; the central region's 18 country teams; other departments, agencies and organizations of the U.S. government; and, most importantly, our coalition partners, who have provided unwavering support for nearly two decades of persistent conflict.

As the National Defense Strategy captures clearly, strengthening existing relationships and building new ones will be key to our future success.

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

Your support will remain important as we contend with what potentially are generational struggles to defend our homeland from the threats outlined in our National Defense Strategy.

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

INHOFE: Thank you, General Votel.

General Waldhauser?

WALDHAUSER: Senator Inhofe, Ranking Member Reed, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to update you on the efforts of United States Africa Command.

I am also honored to be here, today with General Votel, and discuss many of the concerns we share between CENTCOM and AFRICOM, including countering violent extremist organizations.

I would like to begin this morning by remembering the soldiers and sailor we lost on the continent during operations this past year. I also want to share my respects for the loss of our African partner forces, who, during their efforts in the fight against extremism, gave the ultimate sacrifice this past year, as well.

We honor their commitment, service and dedication to duty. And I offer my sincere condolences to the families of our fallen U.S. comrades and those of our African partners.

Senator Inhofe, I have completed my review of the Niger investigation and forwarded the report to the secretary of defense through the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Once the secretary completes his review and after the families have been briefed, I intend to provide a comprehensive and detailed account of the investigation to you as soon as practicable.

This morning, I would like to talk to you about AFRICOM's strategy for the continent and update you on our priority regional efforts.

The U.S. interests in Africa are reflected in our mission statement. AFRICOM, with partners, strengthens security forces, counters transnational threats and conducts crisis response in order to advance U.S. national interests and promote regional security, stability and prosperity in Africa.

Our mission statement deliberately highlights the importance of "with partners." Following up on this point, very few, if any, of the challenges on the African continent can be resolved through the use of exclusive military force.

Accordingly, AFRICOM's first strategic tenet underscores our military activities. It is designed to support and enable U.S. diplomatic and development efforts. We can create time and space for governments to establish effective and accountable governance while fostering conditions for economies to develop.

Our second theme describes our strategic approach of "by, with and through." This framework emphasizes our main effort to build the capacity of African partner defense forces to credibly provide for their own security.

While African nations have enormous potential, they are often challenged by instability and exploitation stemming from the disruption caused by violent extremist organizations, or VEOs. These VEO groups take advantage of vast ungoverned spaces and recruit from populations lacking economic opportunities.

We approach these security threats through our third strategic principle of keeping pressure on the networks of VEOs such as al-Shabaab, ISIS, Al Qaida, Boko -- and Boko Haram in order to mitigate their destabilizing influence.

At the same time, we remain postured and ready to respond to contingencies and to protect U.S. personnel and facilities on the continent. These strategic themes and AFRICOM's approach are aligned with the national-level guidance.

In accordance with the recently released National Defense Strategy and in the context of changes in the operating environment, we are updating our strategy and theater campaign plan to reflect the guidance provided by the secretary of defense.

Turning now to our regional efforts, I would like to describe for you some of the challenges we face each day on the continent. In East Africa, AFRICOM's contributions are part of an international commitment to help Somalia implement their recently designed national security architecture.

Al-Shabaab remains a threat to Somalia and the region, as demonstrated by their October 2017 bombing in Mogadishu that killed over 500 people. The challenges facing the federal government of Somalia are enormous. Nevertheless, they continue to slowly make progress, with a long way to go before they are prepared to secure their own territory.

With international partners in organizations including the African Union and the European Union, AFRICOM's kinetic and capacity-building efforts to assist the federal government of Somalia with the implementation of their -- of their comprehensive approach to security-sector reform.

In North Africa, Libya remains politically and militarily divided, with leaders and factions vying for power ahead of potential elections later this year.

In close cooperation with the U.S. Embassy's Libyan external office, located in Tunis, and as part of the international effort, AFRICOM supports diplomatic objectives for political reconciliation.

We will continue to work with the U.N.-established Government of National Accord and maintain pressure on the ISIS-Libya and Al Qaida networks in that country.

"The Sahel" refers to the Sahara to savanna transition belt spanning the broadest part of Africa, from the Atlantic Ocean, to the Red Sea. AFRICOM supports multinational efforts in the western Sahel and the nearby Lake Chad basin region of West Africa.

WALDHAUSER: We provide training, advice and assistance to the G5 Sahels countries and the multinational joint task force in order to help them contain violent extremism with the -- and secure their borders.

In conclusion, the continued progress on the continent with our partners reflects dedicated efforts by the men and women of AFRICOM. I am proud to lead these professionals who have built strong and trusting relationships with the U.S. interagency and with our international community in order to foster the security, stability and prosperity on the African continent.

On behalf of the service members, civilian employees and families of the United States Africa Command, thank you for the opportunity to be with you this morning, and I look forward to your questions.

INHOFE: Thank you, General Waldhauser.

Just less than a month ago, Senators Ernst, Rounds and Sullivan and I spent quite a bit of time in the South China Sea, seeing, witnessing firsthand what China is doing there. They talk about reclaiming land, and I suggest it's not reclaiming land, because there's no land to reclaim. It's creating land.

And, while they've been doing this for some time, it's kind of gone unnoticed. They're up, now, to over 3,000 acres that they have created, all staffed with nothing but military staff in there. So, obviously, it concerns a lot of people, and a lot of people in the region. In fact, a lot of them, our allies in the region, look at China as someone more significant than we are, because they don't see that type of thing from us.

Now I know this is not your AOR, General Waldhauser, but recently you stated in your opening statement that they request for a presence in Djibouti. This is very much of a concern. Djibouti is where we've had our Marines for quite some time. it's an area that has control over the interests in the the Red Sea and, ultimately, the Suez Canal.

So I am very much concerned about this, and you are, too. You said at the House Armed Services last week -- this is your quote -- you said, "If the Chinese took over that port, then the consequences could be significant."

Well, if China is successful in taking over the Port of Djibouti, could they use their control to threaten U.S. access and our broader freedom of navigation interests in that region of the Red Sea and Suez Canal?

WALDHAUSER: Senator Inhofe, thank you very much for the question. Although I'm not an expert on port operations, I can tell you a few things about Djibouti that may lend some context to the question.

Within the confines of the Djibouti port, there are five activities, two of which are run by the Chinese. Obviously, their Chinese naval port for the facility there, and then they have control over what's called a multi-purpose port, which essentially is -- offloads containers.

There are three other pieces of the port, one of which is a fuel pier, which the Emirati Company owns. Then there's this -- a container pier, which is what has been discussed about the Djiboutian takeover in the past couple of weeks. And then there is a -- what's called an oil port, where our ships also berth in order to pick up supplies and the like.

The Djiboutians annulled the contract that they had with the Dubai Ports World, here, last week, and they essentially took control of that port. In discussions with our key leadership in the area and with the secretary of state, who was there this past week, the Djiboutians indicated that they will run that port for the next six months and then determine, you know, where they will go in terms of sale, or in terms of whether they will keep control of that port.

The container port, as I described -- basically, all of the containers that comes through there in Djibouti, whether it's spare parts, whether it's provisions -- anything that comes in Djibouti comes through that port. So that port is used quite a bit.

We also use the fuel port quite a bit; between October of '16 and October '17, there were 115 ships that came in there to refuel. The fuel also goes to the port -- to the base in Djibouti to refuel airplanes and the like.

INHOFE: So that is significant area there.

WALDHAUSER: It is.

INHOFE: I -- I'm running out of time here, but I -- that's what I wanted to get into the record. One of the -- area that -- in fact, it was Admiral Harris who called this to our attention -- some of the areas where we've done this IMET program, which I've always been very fond of, and I think both of you have -- they are seeing that China's going after our IMET program.

Actually -- and now, that's -- in that area, are you seeing any of this in Africa -- on the continent of Africa? Because we have worked extensively on the IMET program down there.

WALDHAUSER: So it's unclear. It's difficult to get data in terms of China and the IMET program in Africa. On average, the National Defence University in China graduates about 100 or so foreign students a year, some of whom are, obviously, from Africa. They usually come from about 70 or so countries.

Just -- by the way, we -- we in the United States -- we have about 850 officers from China who go through -- or from -- sorry, from Africa who go through various programs -- National Defense University, seminars and the like -- at a cost of about \$22 million, so.

INHOFE: Well, and that's -- that's good. Let me do this. I -- for the record -- because there's not time to do it now, General Waldhauser -- I want you to kind of outline the resources, because, when we -- when we built AFRICOM, it was done without resources. And we know who we depend on in -- in cases when we need those resources. So I'd like to get in writing some detail on that.

General Votel, I know that you had some -- some, still, concerns about -- about China and the efforts that you're seeing in China to project their influence in your AOR. Any comments you want to make about your AOR?

VOTEL: Well, I -- Senator Inhofe, the thing that I would just highlight is that the activities in Djibouti are not only important to AFRICOM; they're extraordinarily important to CENTCOM.

This is certainly one of the key areas where we have strong cooperation and collaboration across our geographic combatant command areas here. So I -- I certainly share General Waldhauser's concerns about what is -- what is playing out in Djibouti.

INHOFE: Yeah. In your written statement, you also gave some detail on that, and you do make a comment, "While Beijing claims that both locations support peacekeeping and humanitarian operations" -- and you -- you know, I don't know how many people believe that, but it's a great concern to this -- this committee.

Senator Reed.

REED: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

And, General Votel, as I indicated in my opening remarks, consistent with the secretary of defense, Secretary Mattis, and General Dunford, do you believe that it's in our national security interest to stay within the confines of the JCPOA?

VOTEL: I -- I think, from my -- from my perspective, the JCPOA addresses one of the principal threats that we deal with from Iran. So, if the JCPOA goes away, then we will have to have another way to deal with the nuclear weapons program. So, yes, I share their -- I share their position.

REED: Thank you.

With respect to Syria, it's a very complicated situation, and that's an understatement. One issue involves the Kurds. They fought with us very reliably in the Syrian defense forces. Now, they are moving to assist fellow Kurds against the Turks in Afrin.

It appears that we don't have a policy as to our position vis-a-vis the Kurds within Syria, the Syrian Kurds, and also a longer-term policy as to, you know, what do we do. Are we going to have a de facto partition of the country, with the SDF -- Syrian Defense Forces guarding that portion?

REED: Can you give us some clarity on the policy? I just don't think we have one, to be blunt.

VOTEL: Senator, we have not operated in the -- in the province of Afrin. In our -- our interactions with the Syrian Democratic Forces, they -- they understand that this is an area in which we do not operate and have no intention of operating at this particular point.

The concern, certainly, that -- that we have is that the activities up in Afrin are -- are -- are a distraction to our defeat-ISIS activities right now. And there has been an impact to that. We are addressing that. I think we've got very innovative people and partners on the ground that are working to ensure we keep the focus on -- on ISIS.

But I -- I am concerned about the long-term aspects of this.

REED: There is a possibility that the Kurds would gradually leave our efforts in order to protect their -- their fellow Kurdish forces in Afrin. That's a possibility isn't it?

VOTEL: We've seen that already, Senator.

REED: Thank you.

General Waldhauser, I thank you for your hospitality when I was passing through AFRICOM.

One of the impressions that I received there is that, you know, we're keeping some of these forces on their heels by special operations, particularly in working with AMISOM and with local forces, but that the real long-term struggle is building capacity in every way, shape or form. And as I pointed out in my opening statement, the -- the sheer lack of State Department presence -- ambassador to Somalia, ambassador to Libya, ambassador to Egypt -- is that impairing your ability to get the job done?

WALDHAUSER: Thank you, Senator Reed. And thank you and your team for taking the team to come through our AOR. It was very helpful and we appreciate your support and concern.

With regards to Somalia, one of the things -- we -- we do two things there primarily. One is the kinetic piece, which we have authorities to strike al-Shabaab targets and we have done that quite often -- quite robustly here in the last few months. Additionally, we have a niche in building partnership capacity, but I also would say that the international community plays a big part in that as well: UAE, Turkey, the U.K., and so forth also build this capacity.

And the key there is -- is that as we -- as we talk about AMISOM -- AMISOM transit -- transitioning around the '20 to '21 timeframe, the Somali National Security Forces needs to be in a place where they can conduct their own security operations.

With regards to the country team and the ambassador, we will -- our country team there is -- we're very, very tight with them. They, as know you, work out of Nairobi, but now they have a facility in Mogadishu which they just have moved into the last week or so. And we've worked very closely with them. And the charge does a great job working with President Farmajo, because the bottom line is the federal government of Somalia needs a lot of help, a lot of mentoring, and a lot of coaching as President Farmajo moves forward.

REED: I concur. And we do have a good and very courageous team of diplomats on the ground in Mogadishu. But in order to have the impact we need in a very short period of time, we're going to have to up the game dramatically, and I don't see that happening on the civilian side, and even your resources are limited as we shift to other priorities. And as the National Defense

Strategy moves near-peer competition with Russia and China to the forefront, leaving you, sort of -- both of you with a -- a maybe not economy-of-force operations, but certainly they're a different priority.

But thank you all for your service. And please again convey our thanks to the men and women you lead.

INHOFE: Thank you, Senator Reed.

Senator Ernst?

ERNST: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And, gentlemen, thank you for being here today.

General Votel, I will start with you. And my best to Michele as well. Please send my greetings.

General, when I was in Afghanistan a few months ago, I visited military and diplomatic leaders in Kabul, Kandahar and Bagram. And it seems as though the Taliban is now transitioning from an ideologically inspired group into a narco-terror group which is using ideology as a veil.

And as such, the Department of Defense is focused on destroying processing facilities and their yields, as opposed to just simply destroying the poppy fields. And the State Department is very focused on enforcement, in conjunction with the FBI and the DEA.

Is this strategy different from those strategies that we've used in the past? And if so, how are they different?

VOTEL: Senator, thank you.

They are -- they are different. We are using the authorities that have been passed to us recently to ensure that we can go after, as you suggested, these -- these funding streams that are fueling the Taliban right now. And they are proving effective.

This is a lesson learned from -- from Iraq and Syria, where we got serious about going after the funding streams that supported ISIS; we made an immediate -- we started to see an immediate impact. And so that is exactly the intention here.

And I -- and I do agree with you. They are large -- they are well-resourced by this narco-trafficking that takes place, and so our efforts are not only targeting -- targeting their production and storage locations, but also working with regional partners to help limit the flow of that -- of that product out of -- out of the region. Again trying to impede their ability to benefit from that.

ERNST: So you think it's fair that we call them a narco-terror group?

VOTEL: I -- I think they are absolutely that way. And they take on many of the characteristics of a -- of a -- of a mob-Mafia type of -- type of group.

This is not a popular insurgency. I think that's an important thing for people to understand. Over 90 percent of the people in Afghanistan do not want the Taliban to -- to be in charge of their country. It's not -- it's not a popular insurgency.

ERNST: And as we fight and try to eradicate their funding streams then, do you believe that we are adequately -- adequately funded to achieve success?

VOTEL: I -- I do. I think we've got the necessary resources right now to pursue the strategy that's been laid out for us.

ERNST: OK.

And then if we are successful in destroying their narcotics industry and their funding sources, what development do we need to see then in Afghanistan to make sure that their people are self-sufficient?

VOTEL: Well, I think -- I think the key -- the key strategy -- the big idea here is to -- is to put -- is to force the Taliban to reconciliation. And the way we do that is by focusing on military pressure, by focusing on political pressure working with the regional partners such as Pakistan, and it's through social pressure.

And this, of course, is ensuring that the government of Afghanistan continues to make the necessary refer -- reforms that -- that the President Ghani has already committed to and that he is moving out on as -- as we speak.

This includes not only addressing endemic problems with corruption, but also ensuring that -- that fair elections are -- are conducted in the country, and that they are addressing some of the leadership challenges they have.

And so they are doing these things right now, and I think this will help build confidence in the government of Afghanistan for the people.

ERNST: And I -- I do appreciate that.

I'm going to focus in a little bit more on the Afghan special operations units.

We've had a lot of U.S. effort in Afghanistan and building the Afghan Air Force and increasing the size of their Afghan special operations units. And how will the creation of the Afghan Air Force and doubling the size of their special ops units change the conditions on the ground, as we see them today?

VOTEL: Well, I think a key part of our -- of our operational approach here is to -- is to build on what is working in Afghanistan. And, certainly, their Afghan special operations forces in the -- and the -- and the air force are -- have been very, very good programs.

And essentially what we are focused on doing by doubling the Afghan special operations forces by building out the air force is to really provide the government of Afghanistan with a very good

offensive capability that can really focus on gaining control of the population in the areas that we need to for the government to exert their writ.

So we look at the special operations forces and the air force as -- really, as their kind of principal offensive capability. And the Army plays the role as the hold force, and then we are working to get the police to become more competent in their policing functions that are -- that are important in the urban and populated areas.

ERNST: I appreciate that. Thank you very much.

When I was in Afghanistan, I was able to visit with some of those pilots, and they're truly excited about being able to support their own country. So thank you, gentlemen, very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

INHOFE: Thank you, Senator Ernst.

Senator Shaheen.

SHAHEEN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you both for your service and for being here today.

General Waldhauser, I and a number of other women senators had the opportunity last week to meet with two young women who had been kidnapped by Boko Haram. They had horrific stories to tell us about seeing family members murdered before their eyes, about being forced into marriage, about being gang-raped on an ongoing basis.

I asked them what they would like Americans to know about what's happening in Nigeria -- they were both Nigerian. And what one of them said to me is that people in the United States should understand that this is not just the Chibok girls -- several hundred who, as most of us remember, were kidnapped several years ago. But this is happening to thousands of girls on a daily basis in Nigeria.

And one of the -- the translator who was with them, who was with the organization that brought them to the United States, said that this is a strategy by Boko Haram to impregnate women, to grow a whole next generation with that extremist ideology.

So I know that, in your statement, you talk about Nigeria's capabilities and capacities growing. But, in fact, they have not really been able to address this mass kidnapping of girls in Nigeria. Is that your understanding? And what are we doing to try and support efforts to address what Boko Haram is doing?

WALDHAUSER: Thank you, Senator Shaheen. Good to see you again.

Obviously, Boko Haram is one of the most deplorable organizations on the planet. Since 2009, they've killed, depending on what you read or what statistics you look at, well over 20,000 people, and they've displaced millions. And they're -- they're notorious for the things that you talked about.

With regards to the Chibok girls, you know, almost four years ago this month -- in April of four years ago, they were -- 276 were taken away; 163 have been returned, about 60 percent. In a closed session, I can discuss with you what we think -- or where we think the other 113 girls are.

On February 19th, this happened again in Dapchi. Dapchi is a location that's about 150 miles north of where Chibok is. And, although no group has claimed responsibility, based on location and based on several open sources, we believe it to be ISIS-West Africa. ISIS-West Africa was at one time part of Boko Haram, but they split for a whole host of reasons.

One of the things I will tell you is that we have been asked to provide assistance to the government of Nigeria to try to help find these girls. We could talk more about that in a closed session. But we are providing assistance in terms of intelligence, support, planning and the like that they have asked us for.

They are trying to find a negotiated solution here. That's their desire. But, as you say, the security situation, especially in Borno State and Yobe State, where this took place, is very, very precarious.

SHAHEEN: And, when we passed the NDAA in 2017, we created a new authority under Section 385 that allows the secretary of defense to transfer up to \$75 million to USAID and to the Department of State to implement foreign assistance programs.

Are these programs that would be helpful as we're looking at the challenges facing women and girls in places like Nigeria, where they're -- they need to be reintegrated into their societies and there are challenges with doing that? And can you tell me -- either of you tell me if the secretary of defense has requested any of those dollars?

WALDHAUSER: So thank you. The 385 program, as you said, is a new one this year. So we've had to work our way through several of the wickets to see how -- you know, how we could apply it and so on.

We currently have two proposals that we have put through OSD. One of them has to do with defections inside Niger, where we would like to work with the State Department to follow through on our activities -- they would complement our activities.

So that one is one we put forward. The second one we put forward is in Nigeria, but it's in the Gulf of Guinea Basin, where we're trying to get some of the people there who -- to court, a legal perspective. And the State Department can help us there, as they run illegal drugs, weapons and the like.

So we've got two nominations in, and we're hopeful that this is something that can complement our overall kinetic effort as part of the development or diplomacy piece of our activities.

SHAHEEN: Well, I think -- if this committee can be helpful with that, I hope you will let us know.

General Votel, I have only a few seconds left, but I wonder if you could tell us what happened in Syria when our forces engaged with Russia pro-regime forces. And it appeared that those were Russian contractors. Is this a new mechanism that Russia's using to engage contractors to serve as mercenaries on the ground for them?

WALDHAUSER: Senator, thank you. I can't speculate on what Russia's intentions might be. But, in this particular situation, this was an, in my view, very clear situation of U.S., coalition forces, with our partners on the ground, defending themselves.

We were attacked in this particular case. My -- my view is that our forces responded properly in this case. They immediately identified what the -- what was happening. They immediately got on the net with the Russians and were talking with them before, during, after the event, and very effectively brought together the right capabilities, whether it was ISR or fire support, to address this.

So I think our people responded extraordinarily well.

SHAHEEN: And I'm not -- I'm not criticizing our response.

WALDHAUSER: I can't -- I don't know if this is some kind of change in their piece -- I would just -- in how they're approaching this. I would just tell you that we remain extraordinarily vigilant in -- to these types of threats, and we retain sufficient capabilities to protect ourselves and our partners on the ground against these types of activities.

SHAHEEN: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

WALDHAUSER: Thank you, Senator.

Senator Graham.

GRAHAM: Thank you, sir.

General Votel, is there any credible opposition to Assad left in Syria?

VOTEL: Senator, as you know, our mission is defeat of ISIS. Certainly...

GRAHAM: That's not my question.

VOTEL: ... right.

VOTEL: ... right.

GRAHAM: My question is, are there any credible opposition left to Assad in Syria?

VOTEL: The -- the only opposition that I am aware of is those that are out in the vicinity of Damascus, in the Ghouta area, and then up in the Idlib area that still control some terrain. So they do pose some kind of threat to the regime.

GRAHAM: Who's winning in Syria? The civil war.

VOTEL: Well, again, from -- from the -- from the -- from a civil war standpoint, it would appear that the regime is ascendant here.

GRAHAM: Do you see any likelihood that the forces you just named can topple Assad in the next year?

VOTEL: That -- that's not my assessment, Senator.

GRAHAM: Is Iran helping Assad?

VOTEL: Iran has been -- has been a key enabler of -- of the regime for a while.

GRAHAM: Is Russia helping Assad?

VOTEL: They also are a key enabler of the -- of the regime.

GRAHAM: Is it too strong a statement to say that, with Russia and Iran's help, Assad has won the Civil War in Syria?

VOTEL: I do not think that is too -- that is too strong of a statement. I think they have provided him the wherewithal to -- to be ascendant at this point.

GRAHAM: Is it still our policy that Assad must go?

VOTEL: I don't -- I don't know that that's our particular policy at this particular point. Our focus remains on the defeat of ISIS.

GRAHAM: Well, if you don't know, I doubt if anybody knows, because this is your job, to take care of this part of the world.

What does it mean if Iran and Russia and Assad have won in Syria? What does it mean to us and to the region?

VOTEL: It means that we will -- we will contend with this -- with this influence of Iran in this particular area, and with the influence of Russia.

GRAHAM: What does it mean to Israel?

VOTEL: Well, certainly, from an Iranian standpoint, it means that Iran could be in a position where they could support Lebanese Hezbollah better, and then pose a greater threat to Israel.

(CROSSTALK)

GRAHAM: They're actually doing that, aren't they? They're actually doing that as we speak -- the Iranians.

VOTEL: We've certainly seen some activities that would certainly support that.

GRAHAM: What does it mean for Jordan?

VOTEL: It means that, again, there is a -- there is other unstable regimes to their north and that the -- that pose -- pose threats to them, as well.

GRAHAM: Thank you for your clarity and your honesty. And it is not your mission in Syria to - to deal with the Iranian-Assad-Russia problem. That's not in your things to do, right?

VOTEL: That's correct, Senator.

GRAHAM: Do you think it should be?

VOTEL: At -- at this point, I -- I think, if -- if that was the decision that was made by the -- by the coalition leadership here, the U.S.-led coalition leadership, then -- then we would -- we would pursue that.

GRAHAM: Detainees -- we've rolled up about 400 and something detainees in Syria. The Syrian Democratic Forces have -- have about 400-some people in their charge. Is that correct?

VOTEL: Senator, I think you're referring to about 400 or so foreign terrorist fighters that they have within their detention.

GRAHAM: These are the people that did not die for the cause, were captured as we liberate Raqqa and other areas. Is that right?

VOTEL: And as they attempted to escape the areas in which we are operating right now.

GRAHAM: Do you think we have a credible plan to detain these people?

VOTEL: We -- we actually do have a -- a plan to detain them on the ground. And we are working with our partners in the government here to work to get them back to their countries so they can be prosecuted in accordance with their laws.

GRAHAM: If they don't go back to their countries, do you think we have a plan -- credible plan -- to detain them inside of Syria long-term?

VOTEL: We are -- we are working on improving the capacity of the Syrian Democratic Forces to do that right now.

GRAHAM: OK.

Africa -- General Waldhauser, the Sahel is made up of how many countries?

WALDHAUSER: Mali -- well, five. Five or so, yes.

GRAHAM: Of those five countries, how many would you characterize as failed states?

WALDHAUSER: I do not think there's a failed state there yet, but there are certainly fragile states in that area.

GRAHAM: Yeah. If trends continue, will they become failed states?

WALDHAUSER: It's possible.

GRAHAM: Do we have a strategy to prevent that?

WALDHAUSER: Our strategy is to support the G5 Sahel. We do that bilaterally with these countries in order for them to take...

(CROSSTALK)

GRAHAM: Is it working?

WALDHAUSER: It's in the infancy stages. I mean, this G5 program has just begun. It's something that -- you have 5,000 individuals covering a very large territory.

GRAHAM: So 5,000 people are covering five countries?

WALDHAUSER: That's correct -- the border areas.

GRAHAM: I'm not a military guy, but that doesn't sound enough.

Does it matter if the Sahel becomes a region of failed states, to us? And if so, why?

WALDHAUSER: It does matter, because the groups that are in that area -- ISIS, JNIM and the like -- some of these have aspirations to conduct things regionally, as well as into Europe and in our -- into our homeland.

it is very important that we contain or that we degrade and we work with our partners, because, if we had a failed state and if these groups took over that failed state, then you have a situation where it's just vast wastelands where people can plan attacks against the United States.

GRAHAM: One -- one last question. Is Libya a failed state, fragile state, state on the mend?

WALDHAUSER: It's very difficult to characterize Libya, but I'd have to say a -- a fragile state. I mean, Salame, who is the U.N. representative, has got a plan to try to work through a restructuring of the -- of the political committees, a constitution and, potentially, a vote later this year.

But the bottom line is, unless the security is there, unless the fair election can take place and unless those individuals who are part of the process will agree to the outcome of the election, then it wouldn't serve any purpose at this point.

INHOFE: Senator Warren.

WARREN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you, General Votel and General Waldhauser, for your work.

For nearly three years, a Saudi Arabia-led coalition has been bombing Yemen to counter Iranian-backed Houthi militias. The United States military has been providing intelligence, midair refueling and munitions to the Saudis.

As I understand it, refueling operations are governed by something called a bilateral acquisition and cross-servicing agreement. The United States has one with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. And I've read over these documents, and there are a few things they don't seem to cover that I want to ask about.

So, General Votel, does CENTCOM track the purpose of the missions that it is refueling -- in other words, where a U.S.-refueled aircraft is going, what targets it strikes and the results of the mission?

VOTEL: Senator, we do not.

WARREN: OK.

Reuters recently reported on a Saudi coalition airstrike in late February that killed five civilians and wounded 14, including four children. According to witnesses that were interviewed by Reuters, the coalition conducted two additional airstrikes that hit paramedics who were trying to save civilians in the rubble.

General Votel, when you receive reports like this from credible media organizations or outside observers, is CENTCOM able to tell whether U.S. fuel or U.S. munitions were used as part of that strike?

VOTEL: Senator, I don't believe we are.

WARREN: OK.

So the reason I ask about this is the Yemeni people are suffering. And this is a humanitarian crisis. That is why I co-sponsored the Sanders-Lee resolution that directs President Trump to stop our involvement in Saudi military operations in Yemen unless Congress provides specific authorization.

WARREN: The bill would allow our counterterrorism operations against Al Qaida and its affiliates to continue, but it would ensure that the United States is not giving the Saudis a blank check to bomb Yemen and worsen the humanitarian crisis.

I know that Iran's sanctions against Yemen are destabilizing, they're making the conflict worse and that's unacceptable. But we need to be clear about this: Saudi Arabia is the one receiving American weapons and American support, and that means we bear some responsibility here. And that means we need to hold our partners and our allies accountable for how those resources are used.

I have one other question I would like to turn to, if I can.

And that is, earlier this year Secretary of State Tillerson implied that U.S. troops would stay in Syria indefinitely. In addition to our forces, Hezbollah, Russian forces, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and now Turkish troops are also operating on the ground and we've already had several run-ins with these forces.

With my remaining time I have just one question, General: How is CENTCOM deconflicting between these various forces that are operating on the ground? And what is your strategy for de-escalation if a confrontation occurs?

VOTEL: Well, Senator, thank you for the question.

First off, the principal way we are deconflicting is through direct communications. As you're aware, we do have a direct communication line with the Russian Federation forces on the ground. This has -- I could characterize our conversations with them as military -- militarily professional. They take place several times a day. And they have been going on for a couple of years.

And I do think this is has been a very effective way of ensuring that we can deconflict and prevent things from happening -- happening in the ground space and in the air space.

We -- we also have the same thing with -- with our Turkish partners to the north. In areas where we are in close proximity, again, we have very -- very good communications with them. We're able to deconflict. We're able to ensure that people have good situational awareness, they understand what we're doing and with our partners on the ground.

And these -- this direct communication really allows us to ensure that we can -- we can minimize the opportunities for escalation or for miscalculation on the ground. And I think these are working very -- very effectively.

WARREN: OK, so this mostly about communications?

You know, I just worry, General, because the situation in Syria is extraordinarily dangerous and I'm not sure that throwing a small number of U.S. troops in the middle of it is a sustainable, long-term solution. I believe we need a clear strategy here for ending the violence and for holding Assad accountable.

But I appreciate your work in this area. Thank you very much, General.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

INHOFE: Senator Rounds?

ROUNDS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Gentlemen, let me begin by thanking you both for your service to our country as well as to your - your families, as well, for their sacrifice and your time away from home.

I -- I'd like to begin by talking a little about AFRICOM.

And General Waldhauser, I'm curious -- I've had the opportunity to accompany Senator Inhofe on several of his most recent trips to Africa. I think Senator Inhofe has now made over 150 different nation stops in Africa over the last 20-plus years. And what I find interesting in each of our trips has been the amount of interest that those countries and those leaders in those countries have in relationships with -- with our country.

In the case of AFRICOM and our abilities, right now, as I understand it, if you need resources -- and you do in an area of the world in which -- in which things aren't getting quieter, they're getting more intense -- you basically borrow from other operations in and around for the resources that you need.

Would you explain for us how AFRICOM actually receives the resources that it needs right now?

WALDHAUSER: Thank you, Senator Rounds.

There are two ways we -- two or three ways we receive forces.

One of them is if we are assigned forces; and we do not have assigned forces, but we have allocated forces. So, for example, the Marine Corps special purpose MAGTF, which the mission is -- it has to do with protection of U.S. citizens and property on the continent, we are allocated that organization. We have a special operations...

ROUNDS: How large is that force?

WALDHAUSER: That force is, I guess, a company-sized unit, six MV-22s and some C-130s, But it's got a lot of ground to cover on the continent.

ROUNDS: An entire continent?

WALDHAUSER: An entire continent. We've used that or we've moved that around to help on the entire continent.

We also have a force in Djibouti, an East African response force from the Army. That's a company-sized unit and that's also tied to the issue of protection of U.S. citizens and property.

We have Special Operations Command, which has a large part of what we do, in terms of the forces that come to do the train, advise and assist.

We also have episodic forces that come from the Army, for example, to train units. They just trained, for example, for about six weeks, a battalion in Nigeria.

So, although we don't have assigned forces, we are allocated forces and we compete for those through the global force management process which the Joint Staff runs on behalf of the secretary.

ROUNDS: Is it time to take a look at actually standing up AFRICOM the same as the other combatant commands are stood up?

WALDHAUSER: Well, in that regard, I mean, I think we are the same as the other combatant commands. I mean, we have a COCOM staff of a same size, relatively speaking. We're located in -- obviously, in Stuttgart, Germany. But, in terms of -- and we have great interagency partners with us and well as military force. But AFRICOM staff, per se, is one that is like the other COCOMs.

I think, perhaps, what you may be referring to is our components. So, our components, in some cases, are dual-hatted. The Air Force is dual-hatted Europe and Africa.

(AUDIO GAP)

WALDHAUSER: ... and we work with EUCOM and we work with General Votel and his team all the time. If we have kinetic operations, for example, in Somalia that require a little bit more, we'll schedule those and we'll organize those around a period where we can gain assets from CENTCOM, for example.

So, the continent of Africa is extremely large and it -- it's virtually impossible to -- to cover the whole thing all the time with other priorities around the globe for the United States. So we have to be smart, innovative and we have to have good relationships with our fellow combatant commanders in order to make it work.

ROUNDS: Are we placing the appropriate emphasis on Africa?

Look, right now, we know there's hotspots. Long term, this is a developing part of the world which seems to me other superpowers, other nations are paying a great deal of attention to, China in particular. Are we doing the same?

WALDHAUSER: Well, I think back to your original point, first of all, the -- all the countries on the continent, for the most part, really want to be associated with the United States. They want our assistance, they want our leadership. But they don't really expect a lot. I mean, the little things can go a long way. And I think in the countries that you and Senator Inhofe had visited, perhaps, you've seen that in spades.

But we have to remain engaged there for a whole host of reasons of which, I think, you understand. And I think -- I think a little goes a long way on the continent, because our -- at the end of the day, we're trying to develop capacity for their security forces to take care of their security problems. **ROUNDS:** Thank you. My time is expired.

I thank you both, once again, for your service to our country.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

INHOFE: General Waldhauser, I do want to have a personal discussion with you in the next few days, because I don't agree with you in the way this is set up. I was -- I was here when we established AFRICOM, and there was a debate about dedicated assets at that time. And I'd like to go over it to get clarification on that issue.

Senator Peters.

PETERS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you both, gentlemen, for being here today and for your service.

General Waldhauser, I'd like to talk a little bit about Nigeria and add to some of the questions that my colleague asked you about. I had the opportunity to travel to Nigeria as part of my work in this committee last year, and I was very concerned about ISIS-West Africa, which you mentioned as basically a splinter group from Boko Haram.

And, at that time, it looked as if the situation was deteriorating. My question to you is, what is the status? Where are we relating -- in relation to ISIS-West Africa? Is the situation getting better?

WALDHAUSER: ISIS-West Africa is one of the two groups, if you divide them in half, Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa, ISIS-West Africa is the group that is of more concern to us. We see they have ties to ISIS core. They have some funding from ISIS core.

They have indicated, in the past, their desire to go outside the region to conduct activities -- attacks, if you will -- on U.S. interests in the area. They certainly are more of a concern to us at this particular time.

PETERS: Are we applying adequate resources to deal with the issue?

WALDHAUSER: The strategy for ISIS West Africa is with the Lake Chad Basin region, where we apply our assistance to the countries around there -- Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria.

We have made progress with Nigeria in the last year or so with regards to our ability to share intelligence with them, to assist them in planning and also to assist in training.

PETERS: You mentioned in your written testimony that the multinational task force in that area, in the basin, doesn't seem to be as interested in dealing with the situation. They believe it is a Nigeria-centric problem.

I gather you don't agree. What can we do to convince them otherwise? Based on your testimony here today, it sounds as if they do want to operate across the broader region.

WALDHAUSER: Well, they do want to operate in the countries that support the Multinational Joint Task Force. But, in most cases, these countries have significant other challenges, whether it be in Nigeria itself, in the coastal area or in the central area; whether it's a country like Chad, for example, who has concerns about their border with Libya. Niger has all kind of issues throughout their country.

And so the ability to have large military forces that can do all of these things is difficult for these countries. So, sometimes, if it appears that, let's just say, over a period of months, the trend line has been in a negative way, if you will, on how Boko Haram has been acting, these countries may decide to move their assets other places, because their interests and their security concerns, Boko Haram, for example, may not be in the top of the list, based on some internal issues that are going on within those countries.

PETERS: You mentioned Chad, which is in a very dangerous part of the world and the region that we are focused on. It has always been my understanding in some briefings that I've had related to some of the operations in the Sahel that Chad has been a pretty capable and productive partner for U.S. operations. Is that accurate?

WALDHAUSER: That's accurate, but their main concern, I think, at the moment, would be the issue of foreign fighters coming from Libya into their northern area.

PETERS: So having a relationship with them is important, because that could also have an impact to the United States. And I know that, yesterday Secretary Tillerson -- I guess, former Secretary Tillerson -- indicated that the United States is considering removing Chad from the travel ban.

Now, I have been concerned about some of the rhetoric we've seen from the president in relation to Muslims and African nations, including using some very disparaging language in reference to African nations. I think that can damage, certainly, our standing in working in that part of the world.

I'd kind of like your thoughts as to any impact on the relations we have had with Chad as a result of them being included in the travel ban and how important -- our partnership with countries like Chad and others in dealing with what could be very serious issues arising out of the African continent.

WALDHAUSER: Senator, we continue to work with all the countries, Chad included, and show them our commitment and demonstrate our desire to help them build capacity. One example I would give to Chad -- it's a small example and it's very simple, but it demonstrates, I think, AFRICOM's commitment.

A few months ago, there was a huge storm in Chad, and various aircraft hangars -- and they have a very, very small air force -- but a few aircraft hangars were destroyed and they simply have no way to repair them. We were able to gather some funds and quickly send a team down there and erect several shelters that would replace these hangars that had been destroyed in the storm.

And that's a small way to demonstrate our commitment and AFRICOM's commitment to that country, to let them know that we certainly are behind them and have a desire for their capacity to be built.

PETERS: Thank you.

INHOFE: (OFF-MIKE)

SCOTT: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good morning to you. Thank you for being here this morning.

General Waldhauser, the National Defense Strategy describes the greatest threat to U.S. prosperity and security as the reemergence of long-term strategic competition by revisionist powers. These revisionists include Russia and China. Two countries we see more and more activity in the continent of Africa.

China just opened a new naval base in Djibouti, mere miles from our only enduring military presence in Africa, while Russia's been courting leadership from both sides of the conflict in Libya and announcing major new investments in Zimbabwe.

These Russian and Chinese efforts are self-interested, as these countries are doing very little to counter the myriad of terrorist threats across the region. Groups such as Boko Haram, ISIS-West Africa, and al-Shabaab continue to operate freely.

What is your assessment of the Russian and Chinese activities in Africa -- first question? The second, as we shift our National Defense Strategy to the two revisionists, how are we working to make sure that the terrorist activities in Africa do not find their way to our country?

WALDHAUSER: Thank you, Senator.

First part, I'll talk about Russia rather briefly. So, first of all, Russia's interest in the continent has to do with intelligence exchanges with various countries, with arms sales and also with energy partnerships. You mentioned Zimbabwe. There's a (inaudible) mine there that had they have had some activities in. They've got a \$4 billion investment there.

And they're also interested in arms sales, because there hasn't really been any arms sales from the West since about mid-2000s there. So they're trying to, you know, open those type of markets any way they can to show that the U.S. perhaps is not a good partner, or someone that is not willing to work with them.

My (inaudible) concern with the Russians is what they are trying to do in the northern part of the country, from Egypt to Libya, Tunisia, Algeria. It's that part of northern Africa on the Mediterranean, which is on the southern part of NATO -- they've got interests there and have you -- as you said, in Libya.

They're playing -- on one hand, they talk about supporting the U.N. agreement, but on the other hand, the support that they provide for Haftar and the HOR forces is something that needs to be addressed.

With regards to China, they obviously have a lot of investments. They're interested in the One Belt, One Road. That gives them the ability to diversify economically, imports and exports. And I think that's been very well documented. So they obviously have a big part in there, too.

WALDHAUSER: But there's areas where we can work with China. I mean, we have -- we have a unique situation where their base in Djibouti is just a mile or so from ours. And so, if there's interests that have to do with humanitarian, peacekeeping, safekeeping with regards to airline -- air flight and range usage by their ground forces there, we have to find a way to communicate that with them.

And so, on one hand, we're certainly aware of the great power competition. But we have a unique situation where they're -- they're a neighbor of us in Djibouti.

But, with regards to the future, what the National Defense Strategy says, really, if you look at what Africa -- what -- what Africa is described in there, it -- it is -- we are told to conduct a "by, with and through" strategy. We are told to develop relationships, work with our partner forces to continue the VEO struggle, you know, there.

So, even though a lot of it is China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, the part on Africa basically tells us to continue what we have been doing, to include building partnership capacity to defeat the terrorist organizations.

SCOTT: So, General, do you see the Chinese as -- the proximity to our base as an opportunity for partnership, as well as Chinese being a competitor?

WALDHAUSER: It is, and that's the unique part. It's the only place on the planet where there's a -- China has an overseas base. It's right next to ours.

And so not only do you have China and the U.S. in Djibouti. There's Japan. There's -- there's -- the French and the Italians are all located there, as well. The Chinese have started to work closely with the French in terms of some of the exercises they do there. This is a small-level -- small-level operations.

But, again I think that it's -- the unique situation is what we do with China obviously has to be informed by our overall global strategy. But the unique situation that we have with the -- those individuals being next door and participating in peacekeeping operations and antipiracy operations -- we've got to find a way to work with them as well.

SCOTT: Thank you.

General Votel, I have a few seconds left to naming the conflicts and the extraordinary complexity in your region. I'll just ask a question.

As you consider the strategic environment in the Middle East and competing interests among even our nominal allies, such as Turkey, would you provide your assessment of Russia, Turkish and Iranian goals in the Middle East and if you see their goals as mutually supporting the overall conflict?

VOTEL: First off, Senator, you know, Turkey is a NATO ally.

SCOTT: Yes.

VOTEL: Our relationship is deeply valued. They've been a key partner in the fight against ISIS here for a long period of time. And we do recognize they do have legitimate concerns with security along their border from terrorism.

And, of course, this has led to a little bit of a tension between us at this particular point that we're working through largely diplomatically, but also militarily, at this particular point.

I guess what I would highlight is what I mentioned in my opening remarks, and that is Russia does play a role here. And, again, it's cute to say "arsonists and firemen" is kind of what they try to do. They're trying to instigate tension among partners in the region and then trying to play a role in China -- be an arbiter in that.

And so this is what happens, and this is what plays out on a regular basis. And so we really do have to take a look at our long-term relationships and make sure that we are focused in on that and staying as strong as we can on those.

So I am concerned about this role that Russia plays in northern Syria and how it impacts all of our relationships, and especially the relations between us and Turkey.

SCOTT: Thank you, General. I'll submit a couple questions for the record on...

VOTEL: Thank you.

SCOTT: ... as it relates to Turkey.

VOTEL: Thank you.

SCOTT: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

INHOFE: (OFF-MIKE)

KING: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Votel, I want to follow up on a couple of the questions that Senator Warren asked about Yemen. What would be the implications and the impact if the United States stopped providing the aerial refueling, the intelligence and the advice to the Saudi forces?

VOTEL: Senator, I think right now that the provision of those things that you just covered right now gives us placement, it gives us access and it gives us influence with Saudi Arabia. And what I would highlight to you is that we have been working with them, sharing our own experiences.

KING: But you testified earlier that when we refuel a Saudi plane, we don't have any control over the mission -- where it goes, what it does next. I mean...

VOTEL: But...

KING: ... if the argument is this allows us to maintain control, are we maintaining some level of control?

VOTEL: ... well, the influence that we derive with them is by working with them to demonstrate how we do our targeting process.

KING: Do they listen? Have they ever changed...

VOTEL: They absolutely do.

(CROSSTALK)

KING: ... based upon our input?

VOTEL: They absolutely do. And, in the work that we've been doing with them related to the ballistic missile threat, we have seen some very good progress in this area.

Recently, Saudi Arabia has followed many of the things that we have done in terms of how we stand up architectures to investigate civilian casualties. These are problems that we have, on occasion, even as good as we are.

KING: So the principal argument against this move to limit or cut off that aid is, if we do, the Saudi conduct might be worse. Is that...

VOTEL: Senator, from my perspective, it's better for us to stay engaged with them and continue to influence this. They want this type of support, and they want to improve their capabilities.

KING: You said for us. How about for the people of Yemen.

VOTEL: I think it's absolutely essential that we stay engaged in this for them. And I think this does give us the best opportunity to address these concerns.

KING: Thank you.

Turning to Iran, I understand all the testimony is Iran is abiding by the JCPOA in terms of inspections and what they are doing. What would be implications for the region if the United States abruptly terminated the agreement? And what would Iran do?

VOTEL: Senator, I can't speculate on what Iran would do. You know the implications for the region., I think there would be some concern, I think, about how we intended to address that particular threat, if it was not being addressed through the JCPOA.

Of course, our approach here is one of assuring our partners, maintaining deterrent capabilities in the region, and then, of course, where we can...

KING: But, if the agreement were terminated, wouldn't the Iranians then be free to pursue a nuclear weapon within a matter of months?

VOTEL: Theoretically, they would be able to do that.

KING: And that certainly wouldn't contribute to -- if the Iranians had a nuclear weapon, we'd have two rogue states with nuclear weapons on our hands instead of one, the other one being North Korea.

VOTEL: Right. This could certainly be the case again. We're speculating that that would be the direction...

(CROSSTALK)

KING: Do you think it would be in the national security interests of the country to maintain the Iran agreement, at least for the near term?

VOTEL: I share the secretary of defense's and chairman's comments on this. Right now, I think it is in our interest.

KING: And there may be a different point of view in four or five years, when it's near the end of its term. Is that correct?

VOTEL: That that could be true.

KING: Thank you.

Turning to Pakistan -- by the way, you -- you have one of most complicated jobs in the world, I think. You can go from one area to the other -- I haven't even mentioned Syria.

Is Pakistan still supporting terrorist activity in Afghanistan? And has the recent "get tough with Pakistan" policy influenced their behavior?

VOTEL: It has. The pressure that has been put on Pakistan, I think, through our South Asia strategy and some of our public communication, I think, has helped gain their attention.

And, as I have mentioned previously, we have seen some positive indicators as a result of this.

I cannot tell you that we have seen decisive changes in the areas in which we're -- we're working, but I remain very well-engaged with my partner to ensure that we are moving forward on this...

(CROSSTALK)

KING: So there appears to be a surge of attacks in Afghanistan. You don't associate those with Pakistan?

VOTEL: Well, again, having sanctuary in Pakistan or having support from other actors in the region certainly is an aspect of the Taliban's success here.

So I think we have to look at all of these to ensure we attribute the causes of these attacks to where that is. We also have ISIS that does have a different approach as well.

KING: Final question: Should we be even tougher with Pakistan? Should we ratchet up the pressure? Because they still are providing sanctuary. It's still unclear whose side they're on in that region.

VOTEL: Senator, I think right now, the strategy that we have is an appropriate one, and I think we have the mechanism to continue to keep them focused on all objectives -- our mutual objectives here.

So I do think we are pursuing this in the right way. And I think some of the positive indicators that we have begun to see, although it hasn't led to decisive changes yet, are things that we have to pay attention to we move forward.

KING: Thank you.

Thank you, gentlemen.

INHOFE: Thank you.

Senator Sullivan.

SULLIVAN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And, gentlemen, good to see you. Thanks for your service.

General Waldhauser, I just want to ask a very basic question. I know there's an answer to it that I'm sure I'm missing. But why is AFRICOM not located in Africa?

WALDHAUSER: Well, as you know, this is the 10th year of the Africa Command as it's (ph) stood up. And there has been several attempts to, perhaps, move it to the continent. But I..

SULLIVAN: What's the roadblock? Is it countries...

WALDHAUSER: ... I think the road...

SULLIVAN: ... that don't want us there? Or is it the Congress not helping you? Or what -- what -- it always seems, to me, a little disjointed that it's in Germany.

WALDHAUSER: Well, I think the roadblocks are, first of all, that there's a financial aspect to this, the cost (inaudible) do that.

But then the second and third-order effects -- if you move to a country in Africa, then what does that mean to surrounding countries or other partners? They may view that as something that's perhaps skeptical.

I think, just to restate it, 10 years ago, when the command was stood up and Senator Inhofe is well aware of this, there was a lot of skepticism on the continent as to what the intent was for a military command for that particular area.

And so it surfaces every once in a while, but, to my knowledge there has been no effort at the moment to move.

INHOFE: If you let me use 10 seconds of your time, I would say that the reason is perceived colonialism. And I was on your side, back when we set this up 10 years ago. And I lost that battle.

SULLIVAN: Well, maybe we should re-look at that. It just seems to be probably a longer conversation.

General Votel, I want to congratulate you and the men and women under your command on the campaign with regard to ISIS. You know, it's really remarkable, what you've achieved over the last year. I don't think the press has done an adequate job of highlighting that, but it's quite commendable. And so I want to pass that on to your men and women who are serving with you.

But the next question is we're going to have troops remaining in Syria. There seems to be a bit of a disconnect to what that mission is.

You know, obviously, we don't want ISIS to return, so that's got to be a key component. But, in your testimony, there's a lot of focus on Iran. Obviously, they're in Syria or their proxies.

And former -- I guess former Secretary Tillerson, now, gave a speech not too long ago at the Hoover Institution at Stanford, and was very focused on Iran and how our mission there, in Syria, should be about countering the Iranian threat.

So I get a little bit nervous when we have troops on the ground in a very kind of complicated, hostile region, where it's not 100 percent clear what the mission of the our troops are.

You know, we don't want to -- I don't think anyone wants us to get back to the situation like we had with the Marines in Lebanon, three or four decades ago, where their mission was, quote-unquote, "presence." And, obviously, that didn't turn out very well for our troops there.

What -- what is the mission of the -- our troops in Syria? And are they focused on countering the Iranian threat, which is probably the biggest threat that we have there? Isn't it?

VOTEL: Senator, thank you. Our mission in -- in Syria is strictly focused on defeating ISIS, and that...

SULLIVAN: OK. So -- but what's the biggest threat in Syria right now?

VOTEL: Well, the biggest -- the biggest threat in Syria right now is all the other instability that is -- that is taking place, that is preventing -- preventing the -- the country from moving forward on...

(CROSSTALK)

SULLIVAN: And isn't Iran...

VOTEL: ... political -- well, certainly, Iran is an aspect of this. But so is Russia and so is the regime itself. Our -- our mission, of course, has been -- has been focused on ISIS. And so we still have a -- we still have ISIS that we are -- that we are addressing. So, you know, that -- that's where our -- our particular focus is.

I would -- I would tell you that, in -- in -- while we don't have a specific task to do something against Iran in this particular area, our -- our strong relationships with the Syrian Democratic Forces, with our -- certainly, our strong relationships with the Iraqi security forces do put us in a position where we can, through our strong relationships -- can have influence, can encourage them to conduct operations and -- and do things that -- that are in the interests of their countries, as opposed to other parties in -- in the -- in the area.

So it may (ph)...

SULLIVAN: Let me -- can I just ask a final question? My time's running out.

VOTEL: Sure.

SULLIVAN: You know, we ought -- we know now that, during the 2004, 2005, 2006 timeframe -- that the Iranians were supplying Iraqi Shia militias, some of the most sophisticated, deadly IEDs on the battlefield that ended up killing and maiming thousands of American troops.

So these are, in my view, the blood of American soldiers and Marines and sailors, airmen -- the Iranians had that on their hands, right? That's a fact. They did -- they, of course, denied it back then. But it's a fact that we all know now.

I just want to make sure, in terms of our (ph) rules of engagement, if there is any, any, any threat posed by any Iranian or Iranian-backed proxies, do we -- do our troops have the full authority to respond, to defend themselves and kill these threats?

Again, give that they have a history of killing our troops, do they have that...

(CROSSTALK)

VOTEL: Senator, they...

SULLIVAN: ... rule of engagement authority?

VOTEL: ... they -- they do. And we have actually demonstrated that, most recently in -- in the Middle Euphrates Valley, but, as you'll recall, last year, down around the al-Tanf area, we did have pro-regime forces, supported by Iranian Shia groups, that attempted to encroach on us.

And we did the full capabilities within our -- within our arsenal to protect ourselves. So I think our people clearly understand this, and they have all the authorities they need to -- to protect themselves.

SULLIVAN: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

INHOFE: (OFF-MIKE)

BLUMENTHAL: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you both for your service, in particular, in very difficult areas of the world and parts of the world that are very important to the United States.

General Votel, talking about America's mission in Syria that was just the subject of Senator Sullivan's questioning, isn't one of our missions or one of our responsibilities in Syria to prevent war crimes?

VOTEL: Certainly. This -- our -- within -- certainly, within the forces that we work with -- certainly.

BLUMENTHAL: And war crimes are occurring in Syria with the support and apparent encouragement of Russia. Correct?

VOTEL: I think, if you look at some of the activities that take place over in the Damascus area and the Ghouta area, I think that we certainly would think that is the case.

BLUMENTHAL: In fact, last week, U.N. investigators linked Russia -- specifically, the Russian air force -- to possible war crimes, citing the November attack near Aleppo, when a Russian fighter killed at least 84 people and injured more than 150 in the last three weeks.

As you observed, more than a thousand people were killed in Eastern Ghouta with Russian military support. My question is, what can and are we doing to deter Russia from engaging?

VOTEL: Well, Senator, as you know, we don't operate in that particular part of -- part of Syria militarily. But certainly, you know, through our diplomatic channels, through our ambassador in the U.N., Russia has been -- frankly, been one of the authors of this recent cease-fire.

So their inability to enforce it -- to enforce standards on this really means either one of two things: one, they lack the ability to do that, or they are choosing not to do that.

And so I think one of the things that we do have to do is hold them accountable for the actions that they are taking here and for the humanitarian disaster that they are perpetuating through their support to the regime and through their own activities.

BLUMENTHAL: What would you recommend to hold them accountable?

VOTEL: Well, I think, certainly, the best way of doing this is through political and diplomatic channels. And, certainly, if there are other things that are considered, you know, we will do what we're told.

I don't recommend that at this particular point, but I think holding them accountable to the things that they have agreed to, particularly through the offices of the United Nations or others here, I think, is a very important way of approaching this.

BLUMENTHAL: So far, they have not been responding to whatever political or diplomatic steps have been taken. Correct?

VOTEL: It does not appear that they are, Senator.

BLUMENTHAL: So, in order to have some effect, the intensity of whatever we're doing diplomatically and politically has to be heightened, or there need to be some kind of military responses to protect people in that area from the war crimes that are being perpetrated. Would you agree?

VOTEL: There certainly need -- this certainly needs to be -- certainly needs to be addressed.

BLUMENTHAL: And, in terms of diplomacy -- I think others may have raised this before me -- isn't the lack of ambassadors in the area, the lack of sufficient diplomatic capacity in the State Department, an obstacle to really effectively using diplomacy?

VOTEL: Senator, I can't comment on the -- on the broader aspects of the Department of State. That's more appropriate for them. But what I can comment is on -- in (ph) the 18 country teams that we work with, of the 20 countries that are in the region, we don't have a country team for Iran or for Syria.

We have extraordinarily good relationships -- 12 of these countries do have ambassadors; six do have charges. The relationships that we have with them, I think, are very good. We give good advice. We have good coordination with them on -- in our day-to-day activities.

So, I think our relationships, certainly, from a military standpoint, remain very, very, strong with our diplomatic partners across the region.

BLUMENTHAL: So 6 out of the 18 ambassadorships are vacant?

VOTEL: Six out of 18 that have country teams in here are being led by charges, at this point.

BLUMENTHAL: Doesn't that reflect an absence of leadership in the Department of State?

VOTEL: I think that's probably a more appropriate question for them than for me, Senator.

BLUMENTHAL: Thank you, General. Thanks for your very helpful and forthright answers.

Thank you.

INHOFE: Thank you.

Senator Cotton.

COTTON: Thank you, gentlemen.

I want to add my voice to Senator Blumenthal and his concerns about what's happening in Syria. I was in the grocery store at home on Friday, and an old, rough and tough retired Marine came up to me -- he was wearing a USMC hat; that's how I knew it, but I'd probably be able to figure it out even if he wasn't wearing the hat.

And he introduced himself and said he just wanted to ask me a question. You know, often, in settings like that, the question might be about the V.A. and what they're doing for our vets.

But the question was, "What are we going to do about Syria? How can anybody stand by and watch what's happening to those little children throughout Syria?"

I thought it was a very touching moment, but also indicative of how much normal Americans pay attention -- not just the humanitarian crisis there, but to the strategic disaster Syria has been for seven years.

But, for now, I want to turn my attention south to another civil war in which Iran is meddling, General Votel, in Yemen. When this war started, three years ago much of the fighting was confined into the mountainous terrain of Yemen. And now, long-range missiles are being fired at King Khalid International Airport outside of Riyadh. It seems like a dangerous escalation in the fighting there, does it not?

VOTEL: I would absolutely agree, Senator.

COTTON: Where are Houthi rebels getting long-range missiles that can range the airport in Riyadh?

VOTEL: Senator, they're getting them from Iran.

COTTON: Well, that's not very neighborly of Iran with its neighbor, Saudi Arabia. How are they getting those missiles into Yemen?

VOTEL: Senator, I think that Iran has, I think, a very sophisticated network of doing this. They can certainly move -- they can move them by components. They can move them by air. They can move them by maritime means. They can move them by land routes to get their stuff in there and then reassemble it and provide it to the Houthis.

COTTON: Can those missiles range the United Arab Emirates?

VOTEL: I think, Senator, some of this might be a discussion that's best handled in a classified setting. But, certainly, we've seen -- as you've pointed out here, we've seen threats that have gone as far as the international airport outside of Riyadh.

COTTON: If you were a Saudi leader or an Emirati leader, you probably wouldn't be very happy about those missiles being in range of your citizens, would you?

VOTEL: I agree. This is a dangerous threat...

(CROSSTALK)

VOTEL: ... it's a dangerous threat to them; it's a dangerous threat to us. We have 100,000 U.S. citizens that live and work in Saudi Arabia.

COTTON: We also have more than a few naval and merchant ships going through the Bab-el-Mandeb, don't we?

VOTEL: We absolutely do.

COTTON: OK.

Could you tell us a little bit more about the nature of the intelligence and military support we are providing to the coalition fighting in Yemen?

VOTEL: Certainly. We -- you know, we are not parties to the civil war, as you know, Senator. Our principal focus in Yemen has been on the counterterrorism front, against Al Qaida and now against ISIS there.

But we are authorized to help the Saudis defend their border. And so, we -- we have -- we have done that. We are doing that through intelligence sharing, through logistics support and through military advice that we provide to them.

We are principally focused on the ballistic missile threat and the maritime threat that is -- that plays out in the Bab-el-Mandeb and the Red Sea to the -- to the west of Yemen.

COTTON: Is it fair to characterize that as primarily defensive operation in nature that we're...

VOTEL: It is principally defensive in -- it is designed to, again, protect -- protect Saudi Arabia.

COTTON: OK, thank you.

General Waldhauser, there's been some open-source reporting about China's construction of the African Union headquarters in 2012. That open-source reporting states that China installed microphones in the walls and under desks and is also copying data from servers each night. A.U. has since installed new servers and swept its headquarters to remove these listening devices.

This kind of public disclosure of blatant Chinese espionage, you would think, would cause many nations, but especially those victimized at the A.U. headquarters, to think twice about accepting such Chinese generosity, if you will.

Have you seen any kind of growing reluctance by the A.U. or by African nations to cooperate with China or support -- or accept that kind of aid, given this espionage against that A.U. headquarters?

WALDHAUSER: We haven't seen any reluctance on the part of the African countries individually to refuse any type of aid.

I mean, I think that the Chinese assistance with infrastructure building and the like is something that is welcome there. But then the agreements that they make, the arrangements that they make, need to be scrutinized.

I would say however, to that point, with our base in Djibouti and the Chinese base right next door, what you describe is a big concern to us. I mean, we've got to make sure that our operational security is such that we can operate freely there.

Because it's not just AFRICOM that uses Djibouti. Special Operations Command, European Command, CENTCOM all use that area, and we need the ability to operate freely there.

COTTON: I agree.

Thank you, gentlemen, both for your service and for your appearance today.

INHOFE: Thank you.

Senator Kaine?

KAINE: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And thank you to our witnesses for your testimony.

General Votel, I want to start. We had a good session with General Scaparrotti about EUCOM last week and he mentioned that you and he spent a lot of time together, especially talking about Syria and Turkey. There have been some questions about Syria. I want to really focus on the Kurds in northern Syria.

The Kurds have been superb fighting partners of the United States, or maybe I'd put it the reverse: We've been superb fighting partners of theirs in trying to drive ISIS back. They've helped us and we've helped them significantly.

But the U.S.-Kurdish relationship in northern Syria has been a real tough spot with our NATO ally Turkey.

Now that we've, through the -- the great work of your team and our coalition partners, have made some real battlefield success against ISIS in northern Syria, what do you see as, sort of, next

steps forward in the relationship of U.S. to the Kurds that can hopefully allay some of Turkey's concerns and maintain their ability, as a NATO ally, to provide us the support we need?

VOTEL: Thank you, Senator.

As -- as you know, there are -- there are ongoing diplomatic discussions with Turkey led by the Department of State. I won't comment on those. They certainly have our support with that to work through that.

Our intention with Turkey -- and we do, again, recognize their concerns here and have -- have certainly kept that in the forefront of our mind -- has been to try to be as transparent and clear with them on the things that we are doing with our partners on the ground, the Syrian Democratic Forces, which is, you know, about half and half, Arab and Kurd.

And -- and so, they have proven to be, as you pointed out, very effective against ISIS. And so, as we move into, especially in the liberated areas and the areas where we are now consolidating our gains and we're trying to move into -- more into the stability phase here so we can root out the remainder of ISIS and allow people to come into -- into -- back into their villages and back into their homes, I think we've, again, got to continue to work closely with Turkey and with the coalition and certainly with our State Department partners here to work through this.

It is, as you point out, an extraordinarily complex situation. The demographics of the area are all over the place, frankly, in this. And so, we've got -- this is going to take a lot of very close work on the ground.

But I think the important piece to get in place right now is to make sure that we have good communication back and forth, we have a mechanism to reduce tensions, and certainly to pass information and prevent these situations from escalating into conflict. That will make it extraordinarily difficult to resolve, if we -- if we are instigating conflict among ourselves.

KAINE: Let me follow up, focusing on Syria for a minute.

And if you'll forgive me, I'm going to read a statement out of the Marine Corps' doctrinal strategy publication to a -- to an Army general.

"What matters ultimately in war is strategic success, attainment of our political aims and the protection of our national interests. History shows that national leaders, both political and military, who fail to understand this relationship sow the seeds for ultimate failure, even when their armed forces achieve initial battlefield success. Battlefield brilliance seldom rescues a bad strategy."

I'm very, very puzzled about the strategy right now in Syria. We have asked the administration to come up, even in a classified session, and talk to us about strategy.

Because the battlefield success of the U.S. plus partners against ISIS has been very notable. Very, very notable. But we read -- just in open-source newspaper articles, we need to stay in Syria to not let ISIS come back. We need to stay in Syria to check Iran.

We did a missile strike against Syrian forces. After Syrian forces pushed against Syrian opposition, we came in a couple of days later with a missile strike against them.

I -- we're seeing activity, but we're not really yet, in Congress, kind of read into a strategy. And I -- I don't know that this is really the place for a discussion of that, it might be better to do it in a closed session, but some of us have been asking the administration to read us into the full strategy.

Is it just about keeping ISIS from reoccurring? Is it to check Iran's presence in Syria? Is it to actively push against the Syrian military as we did with the missile strikes last April and then the recent missile strike that occurred last month?

We're real puzzled about it. Anything you want to say about that in open?

VOTEL: Senator, I think -- you know, our mission, as you know, has been strictly focused on ISIS. And so the coalition's been focused on addressing this common threat that virtually everybody agrees has to be dealt with. And that's what we've been doing with this.

And by pursuing consolidation operations, by stabilizing the areas in which we're operating, what we're hoping to do is create a platform, a platform upon which the international community can move forward under a Geneva process and begin to also address the broader underlying issues that are very apparent across Syria and that really cannot be resolved through fighting, but have to be resolved through talking and through diplomatic -- diplomatic means under the United Nations.

So, our focus on addressing this common threat that everybody -- everybody agrees is bad, is really, I think, one of the preliminary steps that has to take place.

VOTEL: It's certainly -- I think continuing to keep them from risings, continuing to allow these areas to become stabilized, get people back in their home, reduce the refugee problem, I think contributes to hopefully create an environment that the international community can step forward into, with the leadership of United States and others here, to actually pursue a diplomatic solution to these problems through the United Nations.

KAINE: All right, thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

INHOFE: Senator Perdue.

PERDUE: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you both for your decades of service. And -- and I'd like echo earlier comments, General Votel, to -- for a message sent to your troops for the outstanding success we've had over the last year. And it goes without notice here many days, but I want you to know, on record, those of us who pay attention are paying -- we are very, very grateful for that.

I have a question, General Waldhauser, before get into the other question. Recently, four U.S. servicemen were killed in Niger, and one of those, Staff Sergeant Dustin Wright, was -- is a -- was a constituent of mine. So your investigation is obviously very important to us.

When do you expect that investigation of the completed, sir?

WALDHAUSER: So, Senator, thank you very much.

As you well know, the investing officer did an exhaustive assessment, visited all these countries, 150 witnesses and the like, and he gave the investigation to me at the end of January. I reviewed it for about three weeks, and I've turned it over to the chairman, Chairman Dunford, for him to pass to Secretary Mattis.

Secretary Mattis, I believe, now has it and will review it. As soon as he is done with his review, the families will be briefed. That's been our commitment all along, and we want to continue to do that.

And then, as soon as practicable (ph) as the family's been briefed, we will come here to the committee and we will brief you -- myself, the invested (ph) two-star who investigated it, and a civilian representative from OSD -- and we will answer all of your questions at that time.

PERDUE: Thank you, sir. And thank you for that investigation.

I'd like for both of you to address the NDS briefly in your AORs. The most recent NDS obviously prioritized, and I quote, "great power competition with China and Russia as a primary effort of DOD," and directs a more (ph), and I quote, "resourced, sustainable approach," end quote, to counterterrorism.

General Votel, what does that mean in your AOR? And -- and, parallel to that, we are in a competition for influence there. With China's "One Belt, One Road" issue and all the money they are putting behind it in Pakistan and other areas in your AOR, what does the NDAS (ph) change mean to your mission and AOR? And are you resourced to accomplish it?

VOTEL: Thanks, senator.

So, you know, I think, as we look at great power competition, you know, we -- for example, we look at a -- at a -- you know, a resurgent power like Russia, Russia is not just -- as we know, not just a European problem. It's a -- it's a global problem. I mean, they have influence globally.

So they're certainly acting out in -- in the area of responsibility that I have. So I think the first thing that the -- that the National Defense Strategy and the -- and the National Military Strategy that will -- that is being modified to write (ph) that, will -- will recognize that aspect, that, you know, we have to be prepared to address these threats, not just in the areas in which they reside, but the areas in which they have influence.

And so, under General Dunford's leadership, we have developed between all of the combatant commanders, I think, very good plans and -- and processes for how we will -- will do that.

I think, more specifically, what it means for -- for us in the region here, particularly as we look to potentially shift to other areas of the -- of the globe in accordance with the -- with the national defense strategy's priorities -- what it means for us is we'll put a premium on -- on the "by, with and through" approach and by -- and having strong relationships with the people we've always had relationships with, but also fostering new relationships.

PERDUE: But this -- excuse me, General -- but this does not send a message to the Taliban that we're not open for business in Afghanistan, does it?

VOTEL: Absolutely not.

PERDUE: Thank you.

VOTEL: Absolutely not. We remain very dedicated on this.

So, you know, we are focused on sustaining these relationships, on working with our partners, on becoming more interdependent with them, on becoming more mutually supporting with them, among ourselves. And so that's what it -- that's what it means for me.

I'm looking forward here, in a couple of weeks, to meeting with a number of the chiefs of defense across the region to talk specifically about what the National Defense Strategy means and how we are going to approach it in -- in the CENTCOM region.

PERDUE: General Waldhauser, I know you've talked in the committee hearing already about China's effort in Africa. But I would like you to address the NDS shift and what that means in your AOR, specifically.

WALDHAUSER: Senator, I think one of the things that the NDS shift has done is shine a -- it's put a spotlight on China's activities on the continent, which have been ongoing for quite some time. But now, with this strategy, with this notoriety, I think it's -- it gives an opportunity for us to actually have a discussion and bring to awareness what, actually, the Chinese are doing and how that impacts us.

But, interestingly, on our future there, we're specifically told in the NDS to continue the "by, with, and through" approach. We're specifically told to work with partners and build capacity and continue the fight against -- counterterrorism forces.

So -- so, in essence, the strategy frames the overall global posture. It -- it frames, for us, prioritization. But it also tells us to essentially continue to build capacity on the continent so the Africans can take care of problems themselves and continue to degrade and disrupt this -- the VEO fight so that those problems either stay localized and don't -- don't get out of the region, or certainly to Europe or to our continent.

PERDUE: Thank you, sir. Thank you both.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

INHOFE: Thank you.

Senator Hirono.

HIRONO: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

For both of you, I believe some of my colleagues have already asked you about the -- basically what I see as a hollowing out the State Department in a time when we need to maintain that capacity.

But I just wanted to ask you -- you know, the -- would you acknowledge that a proposed 24 -- 25 percent cut in State Department and a 12.5 percent cut to USAID funding from fiscal year 2017 to -- from fiscal year 2017 would not be helpful to your mission -- either one of your missions?

VOTEL: Senator, I -- as I mentioned in my opening comments, we -- we look at this as a team sport. So we are very dependent upon our intragovernmental (ph) partners. And so continuing the support for their activities is, I think, essential to the things that we do.

HIRONO: Well, I would think that a 25 percent cut to the State Department would make it a lot -- a lot harder for you to in -- to work with your partners. I -- I think that that goes without saying. And I realize you have to be very tactful in your responses.

Let me get to some other questions. General Votel, the president's South Asia strategy was announced nearly seven months ago, and General Nicholson stated in November that new permissions granted within the strategy for Afghanistan means that the campaign is on the, I quote, "path to win."

Yet the Department of Defense inspector general estimates that the Afghan government is in control of only 18 percent of the districts in the country. And we are now in the 17th year of conflict in Afghanistan. And the director of national intelligence stated that conditions this year are likely to deteriorate.

So, in your view, what exactly does winning mean in Afghanistan at this point? And can the addition of troops, even the much-heralded Security Force Assistance Brigade, really make enough of a difference to reach the level of winning?

VOTEL: Senator, I think we are on the right approach. And -- and I'm aware of -- of what you're citing there. But I'd also highlight that the government of Afghanistan also controls 64 percent of the population -- has control and is able to protect 64 percent of the population.

So our strategy is really, this year, using the additional authorities, the additional resources that we have moved within CENTCOM and those that are coming from the department to ensure that we are in a position to break the stalemate, to seize the initiative, to expand that population control and to ensure that we have, in this year, provided the right security environment to support the upcoming parliamentary election.

So I do think we are on the right -- right track with this.

HIRONO: That remains to be seen, because, a number of years ago, when I went to Afghanistan, we were training the Afghan troops to be able to support their own military efforts and defense. That was many years ago, and at that time, we were told that we were on the right track. And here we are, 17 years later. So it remains to be seen.

I want to get to what's going on in Yemen. So the United Nations has called Yemen the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, and the United States continues to support the Saudi-led coalition, but the situation on the ground continues to be a stalemate.

Your testimony mentions, both, the challenge of this crisis and the threat of Iran's proxy war in Yemen growing into a regional crisis. Do you see a realistic path to hostilities in Yemen concluding? How long do you expect the hostilities to go on? And are there ways to deal with the humanitarian crisis immediately before a full cessation of hostilities?

VOTEL: Well, Senator, to answer your question directly, I think, you know, there are our diplomats and there are other international parties under the U.N. that are trying to pursue a diplomatic solution to this and get to some kind of a peace process. That's been difficult to do at this particular -- at this particular point.

I guess what I would highlight, first off, is that -- is that what is happening in Yemen is -- there certainly is a humanitarian disaster taking place, but there is also a security disaster taking place and there is a political disaster taking place.

And the people that are responsible for this are the Houthis. And they are -- they are the ones -- they are the central nexus to all of this, enabled by Iran. They are refusing to cooperate in the political process. They are impeding humanitarian efforts that are being undertaken by Saudi Arabia and others here. And they are perpetuating the military situation with their support from Iran, which threatens to widen the conflict.

So I think it's important to recognize that -- that at the heart of the problems, humanitarian, security and political, are the Houthis, enabled by -- by the -- Iran. I would also say...

HIRONO: I agree with you. I acknowledge that. What is the opportunity for any kind of U.S. leadership, because we are enabling the Saudis to continue their battle there?

VOTEL: Well, you know, we're not -- we're not parties to this...

(CROSSTALK)

VOTEL: ... to this conflict. But what we can do is we can -- we can help them, we can advise them, we can share our lessons learned on how to more effectively apply their capabilities, on how more effectively to apply their -- apply their partnerships that they have in conjunction with this.

I would also add, Senator, that, when -- during my last visit to Saudi Arabia, one of the things I had an opportunity to do was to talk with them about how they're -- how they are helping with the humanitarian aid or the humanitarian disaster situation.

And I -- what I would share with you is -- what I learned is that they have a much more aggressive program in this area than even I realized. They are -- they are not only going into the port of Hodeidah. They are exploiting other ports. They are -- they are bringing aid into airports in the central part of the country, and they are using their own -- their own ground routes across the border to do this.

In many ways, they are -- they are pushing a lot of effort in this. It's not perfect. The situation is extraordinarily challenging here, but as -- but they -- they recognize this, and I -- and I do believe they are trying to take efforts to support this wherever they can, with their coalition partners.

HIRONO: Yeah. I still don't know what the U.S. role there should be and is, because we are very much a part of what the Saudis are doing.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

INHOFE: Thank you.

Senator Gillibrand.

GILLIBRAND: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Votel, I am deeply troubled by an incident that happened in Afghanistan on June 9th, 2014, in which five American troops and an Afghan soldier were killed by our own aircraft.

This friendly fire incident was explored in a 60 Minutes segment last November that highlighted deeply concerning elements about the event, including the assignment of a JTAC who had been demoted and kicked out of the Air -- out of an Air Force Special Operations unit for poor performance and then assigned to these Green Berets, and the lack of understanding by the B-1 crew and the unit on the ground about what the crew could see.

Are you familiar with this incident? And, if so, what can you tell me about how something like this can actually happen?

VOTEL: Senator, I am familiar with the incident, although I will tell you I don't recall all the specific details of it right here today.

What I can -- what I can tell you is that, in all of these instances -- and I know this from my own experience -- that we do exhaustive reviews and exhaustive investigations to determine the cause of what happens. If people are to be held accountable, they are held accountable, and then we make efforts to try to apply the lessons learned out of this to limit this.

The unfortunate aspect of -- of this business is that our people are operating, oftentimes, in confusing situations, making decisions in very dynamic environments. And, unfortunately, things like this do occur.

And so our goal has been to minimize that by ensuring that we have the right people, they have the right training and we have the right capabilities.

GILLIBRAND: Do you think that -- do you think that B-1s are appropriate airframes for close air support?

VOTEL: I think the B-1s have been very effective in that role, as they played -- as they played it in Afghanistan and other places.

GILLIBRAND: Do they have the technology available to be able to see the strobe lights that are placed on the helmets of our troops?

VOTEL: I believe they -- I believe they do.

GILLIBRAND: Were any changes made as a result of this incident?

VOTEL: Senator, I -- I -- again, I would -- I would take that question for the record, and we'll go back and look, and I'll provide you a more thorough response to all the actions that we did take as a result of this.

GILLIBRAND: Specifically to infrared strobes -- I've asked the Pentagon for the investigation of this incident, and have not yet received it. Can I please have your commitment that you will help me get this information?

VOTEL: You have my commitment, Senator.

GILLIBRAND: Thank you.

In early February, Israel intercepted an Iranian drone in its airspace, resulting in an Israeli military response striking what it described as the command center from which Iran had launched the drone.

An Israeli F-16 fighter jet involved in the offensive was downed by Syrian anti-aircraft fire, which prompted the Israeli military to respond against eight Syrian targets, including three aerial defense batteries and (ph) four Iranian positions that it described as part of Iran's military entrenchment in Syria.

What's your assessment of Iran's actions in Syria? And is it entrenching itself in the country?

VOTEL: Well, Senator, I'm extraordinarily concerned about Iran's role. I think they are trying to perpetuate their influence and, certainly, they are trying to create a -- access (ph) so that they can continue to support Lebanese Hezbollah and use that relationship to threaten Iran -- or threaten Israel. So I am extraordinarily concerned about that.

GILLIBRAND: And do you feel that this incident reflected a change in the Iranian rules of engagement in Syria?

VOTEL: I can't speak for the -- for what the Iranian rules of engagement are. Certainly, it was brazen and foolhardy for them to do this, given the capabilities that Israel has.

GILLIBRAND: General Waldhauser -- Waldhauser, I took a CODEL with a number of senators to Africa, a few years ago, to assess where we were with regard to the growth of terrorism, because, as you know, the precursors to 9/11 came out of Africa, whether it was the bombing of the embassy in Kenya, or other terrorist attacks.

I'm very concerned about what's happening in Africa, not only your previous answers today, but even -- the front page of the New York Times, yesterday, a story that more than 65 -- 650,000 children under the age of 5 are severely malnourished in northern Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia, and that famine throughout Africa is causing 12 million people to rely on food aid.

You combine that with the effects of global climate change specifically on the ability of the many countries within Africa to grow their own food and -- and provide for food, it's creating crime, it's creating more terrorism. And you add to that what's happen with the Boko Haram efforts to steal children to have trafficking of females and to destroy whole communities.

I'm really concerned about the direction of -- of terrorism and its growth throughout Africa. Can you give me guidance on how these changes are impacting our mission and our posture in the areas of your operation?

WALDHAUSER: Senator, some of the numbers that you stated are -- are certainly overwhelming. And when you come -- it comes to the African continent, unfortunately, those numbers are sometimes the order of the day.

Last year, for example, in -- inside Somalia there were over 6 million people who were food insecure. This year it's going to be around 5 million people and that's just in that region.

I would say from the -- from the climate perspective that we have seen the Sahel -- the grasslands of the Sahel recede and become desert almost a mile per year in the last decade or so. This has a significant impact on the herders who -- who -- who have to fight, if you will, for grassland, waterholes and the like.

So these environmental challenges put -- put pressure on these different organizations -- some are VEO, some are criminal, but it puts pressure on these organizations just for their own livelihood. So consequently, in areas like northern Mali, ISIS West Africa and the northern part of Niger, these are areas that are a very concern to us. And this is why were trying to work so closely with those countries there, so that they can maintain security, that they can keep it -- at a minimum, keep these challenges with -- inside those particular boundaries.

But there are some significant challenges and the numbers sometimes in Africa can overwhelm you.

GILLIBRAND: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

INHOFE: Thank you.

We don't have any more members and hopefully we won't have any more members. But let me, just for clarification.

First of all, I -- I didn't want to be discourteous in that one interruption that I had during the course of it. I think it's important, because this is something that can be changed.

I think what Senator Rounds is getting to is that we're all aware that prior to 10 years ago, the continent of Africa was divided into three different commands: PACOM, EUCOM and CENTCOM. It completely surrounds Africa.

Now, when we had it the old -- decided to have AFRICOM, still under its construction, we had both allocated and assigned troops in PACOM, allocated and assigned troops in EUCOM, allocated and assigned troops in -- in CENTCOM. But only allocated troops in -- in -- in AFRICOM. Now that's the difference.

And I would -- I would still think that that should be open to discussion, because we've seen a lot of things; LRA, for example, when we had problems we had to bring in troops from other places.

And so, it's my intention to try to draw -- and I'm sure it is Senator Rounds' intention to put that in the focus, to see if we have the right blend there or if in fact we should have assigned troops in AFRICOM.

Do you have any comment to make on that?

WALDHAUSER: Senator, I -- I think, to a large degree were saying the same thing. I mean, the technicality of signed and allocated to those who are the -- who don't do this on a daily basis may not seem like a big deal, but allocated is something that you might be able to count on all the time but you may not be; assigned forces, obviously, you can...

INHOFE: Exactly.

WALDHAUSER: ... count on.

INHOFE: And I'm sure that's what he was getting to...

WALDHAUSER: Right.

INHOFE: ... so I think we're in total agreement on that.

Any other thoughts?

OK, we are adjourned.

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