

## **27 Feb 18: House Armed Services Committee Hearing on Terrorism and Iran**

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House Armed Services Committee hearing on Terrorism and Iran

Subject: Terrorism and Iran

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**THORNBERRY:** The committee will come to order.

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

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

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

When we withdraw prematurely, the world, including the threats to our homeland, can rapidly grow more dangerous. The challenge, however, is that CENTCOM has received the lion's share of military resources for some time. And, while its importance remains, we have to be more active in other vital areas of the world at the same time.

The recent budget agreement helps, but it will take time to rebuild and field needed capability. In these circumstances, General Votel has his hands full in making sure that U.S. national security is protected.

Let me yield to the acting Ranking Member, the gentlelady from California, Ms. Davis.

**DAVIS:** Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I ask unanimous consent that the ranking member's statement be entered into the record.

**THORNBERRY:** Without objection.

**DAVIS:** Thank you.

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

The Central Command area of responsibility remains critical to our national interest, and we have to maintain a focus on security in the region. Reports of continued military progress in the counter-ISIS campaign are encouraging, but military achievements alone, as I think we all know, will not guarantee long-term success.

We must work with the international community to employ a whole-of-government approach to foster and to sustain political, economic and social conditions to ensure long-term stability. We cannot allow the region to fall into violent extremism again. To truly defeat ISIS, we must be just as determined to secure a durable peace as we have been to achieve a decisive military victory.

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

**DAVIS:** Although our commitments to oppose violent extremism in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan are consuming, we must also remain alert to other regional security challenges. Despite an agreement regarding its nuclear program, Iran remains a designated state sponsor of terrorism, and it exerts destabilizing influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.

We must deter Iran from precipitating conflict and dissuade it from engaging in malign activities. And we must also deter Russia that is increasingly involved in the region, as well.

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

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

I come before you today on behalf of the over 80,000 members of the command. It is a dedicated team of military service members and civilians, along with our coalition partners, representing 70 nations and four international organizations, many of whom are forward deployed across some of the most dangerous areas in the world.

They sacrifice and risk on a daily basis, in many cases, for the benefit of not only American strategic interests, but also the world's. Our people are the very best at what they do, and they, and especially their families, deserve our admiration and gratitude. It is my sincere honor to lead and be a member of such a fine team of dedicated professionals.

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

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

In the past year, we have achieved incredible success against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The Iraqi security forces and Syrian Democratic Forces are operating at their most effective levels since Operation Inherent Resolve began. And now, over 98 percent of the territory previously held by ISIS in Iraq and Syria is no longer under their control.

The destruction of the ISIS physical caliphate is imminent, and millions of displaced persons are returning home and beginning the long process of rebuilding. Now, we must consolidate our gains by investing in the security forces, relationships and capabilities that will hold the territory and keep ISIS from returning.

Based upon that progress, CENTCOM is conducting an operational alignment and rebalancing effort to achieve three specific goals. The first goal is to complete major combat operations in Iraq and Syria and bring the Defeat ISIS campaign to a responsible close.

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

We retain sufficient capability to continue our efforts against ISIS, despite the increasingly complex situation across Syria, and especially in the northwest province of Afrin. We are fully engaged with our mission partners in the Department of State to carefully balance our objectives.

Our partners on the ground in Syria have advanced us a long way towards our objectives, and we will stick with them through the completion of this fight. In Iraq, the Iraqi security forces are rapidly consolidating gains and preparing to support elections later this spring.

**VOTEL:** The second goal is to prioritize the implementation of the South Asia strategy in Afghanistan. This strategy reaffirms the U.S. government's enduring commitment to Afghanistan by reinforcing the two complementary military missions: the NATO-led train, advise and assist mission; and the U.S. counterterrorism mission.

We are making sure that, with our support, the Afghan national defense and security forces are well postured to begin operations to seize the initiative, expand population control and secure credible elections.

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

The third goal is to ensure that we have aligned our military efforts with our broader interagency and international efforts to neutralize, counterbalance and shape the destabilizing impact that Iran has across the region.

Make no mistake, while we continue to confront the scourge of terrorism, Iran's malign activities across the region pose the long-term threat to stability in this part of the world. We view ourselves, the military, as supporting the many other and more effective resources and capabilities of the U.S. government and its partners in this endeavor.

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

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

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

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

While Beijing claims both locations support peacekeeping and humanitarian operations, the new military base and (ph) port bolsters China's force projection into the region.

Both China and Russia seek to fill in perceived gaps in U.S. interest by increasing defense cooperation and sales of their equipment to our regional partners. They both are also cultivating multidimensional ties to Iran. The lifting of U.N. sanctions under the joint comprehensive plan of action opened the path for Iran to resume membership application to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

**VOTEL:** In addition, Russia, supported by Iran, continues to bolster a friendly regime in Syria, limit -- attempt to limit our U.S. military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, and creates (ph) friction among NATO partners.

Against this backdrop of increasing great power interaction are the enduring issues of the region: social, economic and political challenges; high unemployment; falling oil prices; a youth bulge; large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons; and 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 working to prevail wherever we can is working. We are postured for purpose, proactive in pursuing opportunities and resolved to win.

I'd like to close by sharing three dynamics that we assess are essential to prevailing in this region.

First, as I've previously testified, in the conduct of our campaigns in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, as well as our operations in places like Yemen, Lebanon and Egypt, we have adopted a "by, with and through" approach that places a heavy reliance on indigenous partner-nation forces.

Our partners do not always want us to solve their problems for them. So we enable them to stand on their own. And, while this approach does present its own challenges and can be more time-consuming, it provides local solutions to local problems. This approach is not without risk, as we are seeing unfold in Syria today. But, in general, it is proving very effective and will likely pay significant dividends going forward.

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

Our allies in the region, in the wider international community, are equally as critical to supporting our mission. They directly support the CENTCOM headquarters with more than 200 foreign military officers from 49 nations, all of whom are part of the success of CENTCOM, and we are grateful for and largely depend upon their partnership.

As the National Defense Strategy captures clearly, strengthening existing relationships and building new ones will be key to our future success. We are doing this in CENTCOM every day.

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

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

U.S. government commitment to the CENTCOM area of responsibility is more important now than ever. For our part, we will support the third pillar of the National Defense Strategy, business reform, by continuing to be good stewards of the resources and authorities that Congress provides us.

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

We are also keenly aware and grateful for the sacrifices made by our families. They are vital members of the team, and we could not accomplish our mission with them. They, too, make important contributions and tremendous sacrifices every day to support us. I thank them on behalf of the command and a grateful nation.

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

**THORNBERRY:** Thank you, General.

Let me remind members that, immediately upon conclusion of this open hearing, we will re-gather with General Votel upstairs in a classified session. So be in touch to know exactly when this open hearing ends. Since General Votel and I have had a chance to visit recently, I'm going to yield five minutes, initially, to the gentlelady from Wyoming, Ms. Cheney.

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

I wanted to ask you to elaborate, in particular, on the threat from Iran. And, you know, one of the many grave flaws of the JCPOA is the fact that it failed to deal with Iran's ballistic missile threat. And we are now seeing, across the region, increasingly, evidence that Iran is transferring ballistic missiles and other conventional equipment to its allies in the region.

Can you talk about exactly what you're seeing in this regard and what DOD is in a position to be able to do to defend us and our allies against that threat?

**VOTEL:** Thank you, Congresswoman. I think you've highlighted one of the principal concerns that we have, this -- the increasing not just quantity, but quality of their ballistic missiles and the export and movement of those capabilities to other groups and locations around the -- around the -- around the region.

Certainly, as we've seen with Ambassador Haley and her demonstration, most recently, with some of the items recovered from Saudi Arabia, these weapons pose the threat of widening the conflict out of -- out of -- out of Yemen and, frankly, put our forces, our embassy in Riyadh, our forces in the United Arab Emirates at risk, as well as our partners'.

So, I think first and foremost about their threat is the quality and the quantity that they have been pursuing over the last several years, particularly with respect to this. Their direct introduction of asymmetric capabilities concerns me.

As we look at places like the Bab-el-Mandeb, where we see the introduction of coastal defense cruise missiles, some that have been modified, we know these are not capabilities that the Houthis had. So they have been provided to them by someone. That someone is Iran.

The presence of explosive boats, the presence -- increased presence of mines in this area are all very similar to the layered threat that Iran has posed in the Straits of Hormuz, and we hold them accountable for that. So that's the second aspect of this.

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

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

**CHENEY:** Thank you, General.

And, in respect to Syria, could you talk a little bit about -- we -- there have been reports that we've seen facilities, for example, being built in Syria, reports -- an open source -- Iranian missile facilities.

Obviously, the threat there is significant, not just to U.S. interests, but also to allies like Israel. And could you talk more about what we might be able to do, particularly on the ground in Syria, as we see the challenge of -- we've been very effective against ISIS there, but obviously, our interests are still significantly threatened, given that -- the failed state situation we're facing.

**VOTEL:** Thank you, Congresswoman.

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

**CHENEY:** General, I'm sorry. Could you just -- I understand it's not potentially -- formally part of the mission, but it seems to me, if we're focused on countering Iran, we need to be doing every place our interests are threatened.

**VOTEL:** Absolutely. And -- and one of the key ways that we -- we -- we are doing that is through our strong relationships that we are building with the government of Iraq military forces that include not only forces that are in the interior, but certainly along their border.

Our -- our strong relationship with the Syrian Democratic Forces in the east and in the northern part of the country put us in a position where we can -- we can impede Iran's objectives of -- of establishing lines of communication through these critical areas and trying to connect Tehran to Beirut, for example. So I think, first and foremost, some of these indirect things we're doing are very, very important to that.

I think, beyond that -- I think also continuing to highlight and illuminate their activities is extraordinarily important so that -- so that they can be addressed not just with military means, but certainly with the other means available to us across government.

**CHENEY:** Thank you very much. I'll yield back the balance of my time and look forward to discussing this further in the closed session.

**THORNBERRY:** Thank you.

Ms. Davis.

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

As you just mentioned, and -- and certainly, in your written statement, the National Defense Strategy stated that great power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of U.S. national security.

Could you elaborate for us on -- on those comments and also talk about the shift in -- in this national strategy? How exactly will it impact CENTCOM? And what, if any, significant changes will actually materialize as a result of the shift? And how will set Central Command's capacity to perform its mission be affected?

**VOTEL:** Well, thanks. I -- Congresswoman, I think that, you know, the shifts that are outlined in the National Defense Strategy are -- are things that will take place over time.

And so, you know, one of the -- one of the principal ways that we are trying to -- trying to manage that, of course, is through the development of -- and continued relationship-building that we have on place with -- in place with partners in the region and continuing to strengthen those -- those relationships.

One of the things we have learned through this "by, with, and through" approach is that we can -- we can do a lot through our partners by providing advice, by providing expertise in areas where we have the experience. And we can do that with that with the smaller footprint and with -- you know, correspondingly smaller investment.

So I think one of the principal ways that we will address this, going forward, is continuing to build on these relationships and continuing to empower our -- our partners in the region.

**DAVIS:** Can you just speak to the key challenges in doing that?



(CROSSTALK)

**VOTEL:** Well, I -- you know, I think that, certainly, one of the key challenges will be making sure that we don't create the -- create the impression that we are abandoning CENTCOM. And this, of course, is a -- is a key talking -- or the region. And so this, of course, is a key talking point not only for me, but for all leaders that come in there.

We recognize that the -- the interests that we have -- the national interests that we have in this region for -- for preventing attacks on the homeland, for preventing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, for ensuring freedom of navigation and commerce to the critical straits, for ensuring other countries can't destabilize -- those are enduring interests that we will always have.

And so this will always require us to continue to be engaged there, to some aspect. But, of course, the secretary will make decisions on shifting resources in accordance with the National Defense Strategy.

**DAVIS:** Thank you.

You also talked about local solutions. And we know how critical that is, and -- as you just -- just mentioned. I wonder if you could also talk about the inclusion of women as a critical strategy that advances countering terrorism, national security, democratization and economic and social development.

Some of those programs have been successful, but there certainly is more to be done. How can we increase the effectiveness of these programs?

**VOTEL:** Well, I -- I think the -- the -- the best way we can do is by sharing our experiences with this. We -- we learned by -- by -- on our inability to include women into many of our counterterrorism operations that we were miss (ph) -- back in the beginning of our -- of -- of these fights that we've been involved in -- that we are missing 50 percent of the population in doing that.

And, when we -- when we began to introduce them into positions where they could have influence, we learned a lot from that. So I think one of the key things that we can do is continue to -- to lead by example in this area and demonstrate how this is valued by us.

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

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

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

**THORNBERRY:** Mr. Wilson.

**WILSON:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

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

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

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

**WILSON:** Specifically, sadly, Turkey has 900 returning and Saudi Arabia has 760 returning. Could you explain what threat the return of the defeated Islamic State fighters to their home country represents to the long-term stability in the region? And can you explain proposed or ongoing efforts to work with ally nations in dealing with this flow of fighters?

**VOTEL:** Thank you, Congressman.

Well, certainly, these fighters that are able to depart these war zones are able to take with them experiences and tactics that could potentially be -- be applied other places. Additionally, they're radicalized, so they have the ability to -- to bring others on board with this. These are -- I think (ph), are the principal concerns.

This has been at the forefront of our efforts from the very beginning. As you've heard the secretary talk about our strategy of annihilation in the conduct of our operations, we have always

attempted to isolate these areas and prevent the escape of these fighters so that they are either killed or captured where we take them on.

And I think we've been successful in that, not -- now, certainly (ph), there are some that -- that have -- that have gotten away. We have, with the support of some of the authorities that have been provided to us by Congress -- we do have an effective program to interdict foreign fighters as they attempt to depart the area.

And we are now working with the Department of State and the Department of Justice to ensure that these hundreds that are in the control of our partners in both Iraq and Syria are moving into a judicial process that holds them accountable and -- and ultimately returns them to the countries from which they came.

**WILSON:** And -- and what a challenge that is, the detainees you're speaking of -- not just fighters, but their families. And this has just got to be addressed, and I appreciate you bringing that issue up.

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

**VOTEL:** Thank you, and -- and I would just echo your comments. Turkey has been absolutely vital in -- in -- throughout the entire campaign plan. They certainly have serious concerns of PKK terrorism, and, of course, this has created some tension with some of the partners we have on the ground.

The principal way that we are addressing this, Congressman, is by being as transparent and clear and candid with -- with Turkey about the things that we are doing on a day-to-day basis with our partners.

Just this morning, I had a conversation with my counterpart in Turkey, again, sharing information back and forth, keeping the communication channels professional and open as we -- as we -- as we discuss this -- this very, very difficult -- difficult challenge that we're working through.

**WILSON:** And -- and, with the multitude of issues you have to face, Yemen -- what's the latest on efforts to provide security and working with Saudi Arabia?

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

**WILSON:** We appreciate your service. Thank you.

**VOTEL:** Thank you.

**THORNBERRY:** Mr. Veasey.

**VEASEY:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I wanted to ask you -- there was a column in the Wall Street Journal, I believe in their opinion section, maybe about four days ago, that talked about -- where they alleged that there was a Russian attack on U.S. Special Operation forces on the evening of February the 7th and 8th.

And I specifically wanted to ask you what you know about that and -- and -- and how can CENTCOM prioritize U.S. counterterrorism objectives while trying to avoid any sort of dangerous escalation with Russia.

**VOTEL:** Thank you, Congressman.

I -- you know, I think we have kind of characterized that as -- as pro-regime forces. We -- you know -- I'm -- we're certainly aware of -- of the amount of media that -- out there talking about this. But, in this particular instance, this was a very clear case of self-defense on our part.

And -- and so I -- I, frankly, am quite proud of the way the force responded to this: quickly identified it; immediately got on -- on the -- on the net with -- with our Russian -- to our Russian -- our channel here to -- to talk with them about this; were talking with them before, during and after this; and very effectively brought together the right capabilities to address this -- this -- this self defense threat.

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

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

**VOTEL:** Well, I -- I think what -- what I would say, Congressman, is -- is what we -- what we can see is -- is Russia has failed to follow through on delivering the regime (ph) in a number of different areas.

As we look at the -- at the U.N. ceasefire -- U.N.-sanctioned ceasefire that was put in this place (ph), one that they helped draft and -- and agreed to -- to implement and -- and -- and to cause the -- the regime to -- to comply by it -- they have failed to do that.

So I -- I think either Russia has to admit that it's not capable, or it doesn't want to play a role in ending the Syrian conflict here. I think their role is incredibly destabilizing, at this point.

**VEASEY:** I'd also like to briefly kind of switch here and ask you just a little bit about Afghanistan, too.

I know that there have been some that have been concerned about our deteriorating relationship with the Pakistanis, and was wondering how important do you think it is for us to continue to have relationships with Pakistan, keeping routes open so we can adequately supply troops in the Afghanistan part of the Middle East.

And -- and just what are some of your -- your thoughts on -- on that whole relationship, and particularly just how it lines up with Afghanistan?

**VOTEL:** Congressman, my -- my view is that success in Afghanistan and in South Asia will require the -- will require a strong relationship and the cooperation of Pakistan.

And -- and, since the announcement of the South Asia strategy, this has been one of my principal focuses here -- is to -- is to -- is to help Pakistan and us together achieve the specific things that we require for them -- we -- we have asked them to do in support of our strategy.

And -- and what I would report to you and to the committee is that I do have very frequent and routine professional communications with -- with my counterpart. We talk almost weekly. We meet frequently face to face. And -- and I think we are now -- and (ph) my goal is to develop this very productive and trustful relationship that will help us move forward together.

I -- I can't characterize the -- the relationship as trustful at this particular point. There is a lot of history here that has to be overcome (ph). But what I would also tell you is that we are now beginning to see positive indicators. They -- through their communications, they're reporting to us some of the actions that they are taking on the ground.

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

**VEASEY:** Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

**THORNBERRY:** Thank you.

Mr. Lamborn.

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

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

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

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

And I note your comment here about it doesn't appear in the news, but frankly, Lebanon is a frequent stopping place for me and for all of my commanders, and we pay a lot of attention to this relationship.

We have an outstanding ambassador there who is very, very engaged in the activities, and we're very proud of what the Lebanese armed forces are doing. They're very effectively -- last fall, on their own, orchestrated a -- orchestrated a pretty effective operation against ISIS. They view us as their most important partner, and I do think it is an investment worth continuing.

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

**VOTEL:** Well, I tell you, I frequently interact with the chief of defense there. I consider him to be a very professional military officer. You know, this is a multi-confessional arrangement here in Pakistan that trips -- obviously trips over into the political environment.

But what I observed in Lebanon is a military that is -- that is answerable to the leadership, is doing a good job at staying apolitical and is focused on security of the country.

**LAMBORN:** OK.

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

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

**LAMBORN:** OK. Thank you.

Now, in Yemen, the U.S. military has conducted a much higher number of strikes against terrorist targets last year than in 2016, the previous year. What positive impact, if any, have these strikes had on AQAP and on ISIS in Yemen -- or, excuse me, Islamic State in Yemen?

**VOTEL:** Thank you, Congressman.

It has had a -- I think, a very significant impact on AQAP. Certainly, it has impacted their ability to conduct external operations. It's gone into the areas in which they have had sanctuary, and it has continued to present them with multiple dilemmas that they have to deal with.

So not only are they contending with our strikes, but they're also contending with partner operations that we work with our Arab coalition partners on the ground and with our Yemeni partners on the ground. And this has become very, very effective.

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

**LAMBORN:** OK. Thank you.

And, lastly, I'd like to ask about the 4th Infantry Division at Fort Carson in my district. They're sending an armored -- a brigade combat team to Afghanistan this spring.

And, even though we've had budget shortfalls for the military in recent years, we've made huge steps with this latest budget agreement to beef up military spending, which I totally applaud and support. So I think readiness will be less of an issue in the future. But do you feel good about the current state of readiness with, for instance, the brigade combat team going to Afghanistan this spring?

**VOTEL:** Congressman, I do. I haven't had an opportunity to visit that specific brigade, but I've just had an opportunity to visit one of the brigades that's coming in, the Security Force Assistance Brigade.

I'm extraordinarily appreciative of the efforts that are put forth by the Army, by the Marine Corps, the Air Force -- all the services here that we depend upon in Afghanistan to give us high-quality forces.

**LAMBORN:** Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN:** Ms. Gabbard.

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

I'd like to talk a little bit more about what you began with your opening statements and some of the comments you've made since about U.S. military objectives in Syria.

You talked about how you're working to defeat ISIS and bring that campaign to a responsible close. Later, you mentioned that countering Iran is not a coalition mission in Syria.

Last month, we heard from Secretary Tillerson about how U.S. military presence in Syria will remain for an indefinite period of time, and he went on to list a very expansive list of strategic objectives of the U.S. military, to include ensuring the defeat of ISIS, to include diminishing the influence of Iran, advancing a U.N.-led political resolution, et cetera, et cetera.

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

**VOTEL:** Thank you.

So the principal reason we are in Syria is to -- is to defeat ISIS. And that remains our sole and single task that we are principally oriented on. Part of defeating ISIS, though, is removing their control of the physical caliphate -- the physical terrain as you're -- as you're well aware, and ensuring they can't resurge.

So that means that, after we have removed them from their control of the terrain, we have to consolidate our gains and we have to ensure that the right security and stability is in place so that they cannot resurge. So that is -- that is part of being responsible coalition members in here, and that will take some time, beyond all of this.

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

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

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

**VOTEL:** We are.

**GABBARD:** And how -- does countering Iran -- I'm just seeing some contradiction between what the secretary of state is saying, that that is now going to be a part of the U.S. military objective in Syria, and what you've stated today, saying that countering Iran is not a part of the coalition mission?

**VOTEL:** Yeah, I -- I -- Congresswoman...



**GABBARD:** I'm sorry. Just as a follow-up to that, how -- if it is, then how does that fall under the 2001 AUMF that deals directly with countering al-Qaida and its affiliates?

**VOTEL:** I think what -- my understanding that -- as the secretary of state laid this out, is he made it out not as a U.S. military objective, but he laid it out as a U.S. objective. So there are certainly other ways that we can address Iran's destabilizing activities and others (ph) through -- through military -- military means.

The fact of the matter is, as I mentioned a few moments ago, even though Iran isn't -- isn't our principal focus here in this -- in this -- in this campaign, our -- our relationship with partners, both in Iraq and -- and -- and in Syria, does put us in a position where we can indirectly have an impact on -- on the objectives that -- that Iran is pursuing in this part of the world.

So I think I would characterize them more in that regard than us actively doing something militarily against -- against Iran.

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

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

**VOTEL:** Well, any arms sales, of course, go through our foreign military sales and foreign military funding process that's managed by the Department of State. And so they have -- they have the principal oversight for -- for that.

The provision of fuel to -- to Saudi aircraft is -- is provided for under the acquisition cross-servicing agreement that we have in place with -- with Saudi Arabia. And so that provides us the authority to provide that support to them.

**THORNBERRY:** Mr. Wittman.

**WITTMAN:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General Votel, thanks so much for joining us today.

I wanted to begin by getting your perspective. You speak about the Navy presence in the Gulf and the Red Sea. And we think about CENTCOM as being land-centric, but we also see, as you specifically point out, the first overseas Navy base put in place by the Chinese in Djibouti. We see, in Port of Doraleh, a single berth there reserved for the Chinese Navy.

We see President Xi Jinping, through a modernization of his military, looking to very aggressively expand and sustain operations around the world. From your perspective there, as CENTCOM commander in that AOR (ph), specifically, what you see our U.S. Navy doing to counter this Chinese expansionism?

And what you do you need, as far as U.S. Navy presence there, to make sure that we have what's necessary there, in relation to what we see as Chinese aggressive expansion?

**VOTEL:** Thanks -- thanks, Congressman. I appreciate the question.

And I would share -- I'm an Army guy saying this. I would share that, while we do think about the land territory in -- in CENTCOM, it very much is a maritime theater, with the three critical choke points that are, you know, so important to us in this -- in this area. So I do recognize that.

I -- I would just tell you that I think, certainly, the resources that are being provided to me -- the maritime resources that are provided to me by the Navy and the Marine Corps, I think, are adequate to the tasks that we have right now.

I think the principal way that we develop resilience against these types of, you know, great power influences in this area is through, first of all, our presence -- our constant presence -- and we do maintain a constant presence in both the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden into the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, as -- as well -- and through our very close partnership with -- with -- with our partners.

We -- we -- we have three combined maritime task forces that are led out of our naval headquarters in -- in Bahrain that include a variety of different nations.

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

**WITTMAN:** Very good.

Last year, the U.S. Naval Office of Intelligence pointed out some challenges there with potentially placing the mines that would -- that would put at risk commercial vessels there, near Bab-el-Mandeb Strait.

Give me your perspective not only on what the potential threat is, because we see Houthis operating in the area, obviously, shooting at U.S. ships. Give me your perspective on what we're doing in mine sweeping operations there, looking to counter that potential threat from mines, because we know that that's a choke point area that's strategically very important.

**VOTEL:** Thank you. Well, we certainly maintain minesweeping capabilities in the in the gulf, and have for a number of years, but so do our partners. And I would just point out, you know, some of our partners, like the Emirates and Saudi Arabia, have some very good capability in this regard.

And so one of the things we do is work with them to optimize their capabilities, again, by, with, and through -- getting them to use their capabilities and using our intelligence and some of our experience to help them be more effective at this.

And so this has been -- this, I think, has been very effective in preventing, you know, a major mine catastrophe, if you will, in the -- in the Bab-el-Mandeb, one that we are very concerned about. Sixty to 70 ships a day go through the Bab-el-Mandeb; not just ours, everybody's. So this is a very real -- a very real threat that we have to pay attention to.

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

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

**WITTMAN:** Very good.

Thanks, Chairman. I yield back.

**THORNBERRY:** Excuse me. Mr. Carbajal.

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

America has been engaged in Afghanistan for 16 years, and it is difficult to determine what progress we have made. The administration's new strategy increased its troop levels to 14,000 troops. However, unable to learn from history, we are investing more lives and resources without a -- clearly defined benchmarks.

I'm extremely concerned about the fact that significant information is being withheld from the Office of Inspector General for Afghanistan's reconstruction and, ultimately, the American people.

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

Because they can get basic facts from the department, how are you measuring progress in Afghanistan? Please describe the end state. What does success look like to you? Currently, what is the amount of territory under the Afghan government control? And help me understand how withholding information has made a difference in our operations in Afghanistan.

**VOTEL:** Thank you, Congressman. Let me take your last one here. We -- we are aware of that issue, and I think measures are being taken to address that right now.

Some of that information is not necessarily U.S. government information. It is -- it is information of the Afghan government, and so, they control the release and classification of that information. So this is something we have to -- we have to continue to work with.

**CARBAJAL:** General, if I -- if I could just interrupt you, it's great to parlay that to the Afghan government, but we're the ones with resources and the lives of our military there. So we got to be able to get some information from them to appease those of us that have to make decisions on what kind of investments we need to make in the area.

**VOTEL:** Thank you, Congressman. And I'm committed to making sure that you do have those details.

You asked, also, about kind of how we're -- how we're -- how we're looking at the -- at the situation right now. What I would tell you is the big idea here, with what we're trying to do in Afghanistan right now, is drive towards reconciliation.

This is different than -- approach we've had in the past. And we're trying to do that through creating not just military pressure with our military activities on the ground, but we're trying to do it through creating social pressure with things that the Afghan government is doing, like credible elections that they're pursuing this year at the parliamentary level, and at the national level next year.

And we're doing it through creating diplomatic and regional pressure, just as we talked about with Pakistan a few moments -- a few moments ago. The idea here is that creating pressure on the -- on all those three axis are going to -- are going to create enough pressure on the -- on the Taliban that they come to the table.

What's different this time, as we approach this, is that we are taking a conditions-based approach that is focused on -- on reconciliation as its end state. It a regional focus here, and we are engaging the partners in the region -- not just Pakistan, but the central Asian states, as well, who are -- who are key to this.

And we have changed the way that we are working with the Afghan forces. So we previously had advised down to a very low level with their Afghan special operations forces. We have now -- we are now, with additional -- with the additional enablers and additional advisers that the department has approved for us -- are taking that capability and extending it out to their conventional forces.

We are building out the Afghan air force. We are building -- they are doubling the size of their -- of their Afghan special operations capability. So there are a variety of different aspects to this approach. This will give us the ability to measure the progress.

You asked about how much of the population is controlled by the -- by the Afghan government. Today, the figure is 64 percent, 12 percent of the population is in areas that are controlled by the -- by the Taliban, and the balance of that are in contested areas.

Our focus -- the focus of our military operations is on increasing and expanding population control by the -- by the government of Afghanistan. And what we are going to do this season is we are going to -- again (ph), our intention is to break the stalemate, grab the initiative, begin to expand population control in this year and next year and then ensure that we create an environment here that allows for credible elections to take place, one of the most important things that the Afghan people need to see from their government.

**CARBAJAL:** Running out of time. What about information -- the sharing of information with the inspector general?

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

**CARBAJAL:** Thank you so much.

I yield back, Mr. Chair.

**THORNBERRY:** Mr. Scott.

**SCOTT:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General, thanks for being here.

I wanted to talk with you a little bit about ISR in the -- in the CENTCOM area. And I know you've got a lot of partners in that area, but what percentage of the ISR does the United States provide?

**VOTEL:** I'm not sure I can tell you what the percentage overall is. I mean, it's very clear that the -- the majority of the ISR in the region is being provided by United States.

**SCOTT:** What about your -- the DOD's capacity to meet the demand for ISR? Do you have enough ISR, currently?

**VOTEL:** Well, I think -- Congressman, I don't think you're going to find any commander that's going to say that he has enough ISR. We've -- we, right now, today, have the largest concentration of MQ-9s down in Kandahar Airfield, designed to support General Nicholson and his forces.

And I know he would -- and that's adequate for what he needs right now. But, given his own druthers, I'm sure he'd want more. And so we would want more in all of these areas.

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

**VOTEL:** That's right. I think, the faster we can continue to buy (ph) those capabilities, the better.

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

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

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

**VOTEL:** Well, they -- they don't necessarily need to be. I mean, the environment is different in parts of -- parts of CENTCOM than it might be in other parts of the world. So, you know, some of the requirements that I have -- the environment that we operate in -- we're (ph)probably different than what Admiral Harris and others are -- and General Scaparrotti, you know, deal with in PACOM and EUCOM, respectively, here.

**SCOTT:** Yes. I would appreciate any advocacy you could have. I agree with you 100 percent. And I'm not opposed to the DOD developing the system that they want for fight against the Russians and the Chinese.

But -- but, even in developing that system, we don't want to use that system unless we have to, because we don't want the Russians and the Chinese to be able to gather the intel that they're going to gather from it, every time we fly it.

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

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

**VOTEL:** Well, specifically, it's to ensure -- principally, it's to ensure an enduring defeat of -- of ISIS -- is what the principal objective is of -- of -- of our military campaign right now, in -- in Syria. You know, certainly, we're concerned about the weapons of mass destruction, in terms of some of their chemical capabilities, as -- as you've seen in the past.

We're obviously very concerned about making sure we can provide the -- the humanitarian aid, the stability that goes along with getting people back into their homes. We're concerned about

making sure that we protect allies that are on the flanks of Syria -- Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey -- that all feel the impacts of that.

And, of course, we're -- we're very keen to ensure that there's a political -- a political resolution to all of this. Of course, that's beyond my military...

**SCOTT:** General, my time's expired, but it's a -- it's a tough situation. I'm glad that we have a leader like you over there. And thank you for your service.

**THORNBERRY:** Mr. Brown.

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

I want to bring your attention back to Iran and its activities in Syria, perhaps covering some ground that's been covered and hopefully clarifying at least one point that you made.

Iran is playing a very large role in Syria, providing senior advisers to the Assad regime; delivering weapons, cash; recruiting and encouraging foreign fighters. Last month, Iran launched a drone that entered Israeli airspace. There's a series of events resulting in the downing of an F-16.

The situation is clearly escalating and at greater risk. You mentioned, in response to Ms. Cheney's question, that we can impede Tehran. Can you just identify what the -- what those strategic and/or operational impediments are that we are putting in Tehran's (ph) -- Tehran's way? And can you evaluate the effectiveness of them?

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

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

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

And certainly, I think, in Syria, although I -- I do acknowledge our -- our partners on the ground are a very indigenous (ph) partner -- they do control very important areas along the border between Iraq and -- and -- and Syria. And so they can, as well, through their own operations,

make -- make it -- make it difficult for -- for Iran to pursue their activities through these particular -- particular areas.

And so that's why I kind of described it much more in an indirect way, as if...

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

(CROSSTALK)

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

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

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

**BROWN:** So let me ask one other question, perhaps the last in the time I have remaining. I understand that Israel's in the EUCOM AOR, but I -- you know, conflict in that region doesn't necessarily respect the area of operations of our different commands.

Can you talk about, in the event, regardless of the likelihood, of a conflict between Iran and Israel, regardless of how it's provoked, can you just comment on what our readiness in -- in this - - in this setting -- perhaps it's best for the classified setting -- our readiness and posture to come to the aid of Israel?

**VOTEL:** I -- again, I think that's -- that's probably a -- a question that's best suited for -- for General Scaparrotti. But what I would tell you...

**BROWN:** The readiness and posture? For -- that -- that wouldn't involve CENTCOM?

**VOTEL:** Right, given that he is -- he is the -- he is -- in his area, and he has a principal responsibility for that relationship. What I would tell you is this -- is that, you know, the -- the CENTCOM area, not just on -- on the -- on the Israeli border, but certainly on the border of Egypt with Libya, on the border of Pakistan with India, to the north of the central Asian states, with Russia, we have -- it's a tough neighborhood.

And so it is imperative for the combatant commanders to be very well nested across all of these areas. And -- and I think, under the leadership of our chairman and with the National Defense Strategy that the secretary has put in place, that we are improving significantly our ability to operate in cooperation with each other and, in many cases, very, very seamlessly.



So it's -- it's not unusual for General Scaparrotti and I to have a -- a lot of coordination in talking across -- across our common -- common areas of concern, just like it's not uncommon for General Waldhauser in AFRICOM and I to talk, or General -- or Admiral Harris and I to talk about the things on -- on his side.

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

**BROWN:** Thank you, General.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

**THORNBERRY:** Ms. McSally.

**MCSALLY:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General Votel, good to see you again.

I have three important questions. I'll be as fast as I can. The first is about this attack on U.S. forces in Syria, media reports alleging it's by Russian mercenaries.

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

**VOTEL:** Congresswoman, I'm -- I'm not sure I can report anything different than you have seen in the -- in the media and in the press on this right now, in terms of numbers and -- and attribution of who this -- who this is.

And -- and I -- what I can tell you is that, throughout this entire event, we were in communications on our communication channel with the Russians before, during, after. And what they told us is these were not their forces and not -- not their military forces.

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

**MCSALLY:** So do you -- do you believe they were not Russian mercenaries? And do we have any intelligence to corroborate or -- confirm or deny that?

**VOTEL:** None that I would discuss in this particular setting.

**MCSALLY:** OK. But could we maybe discuss in the follow-on setting?

**VOTEL:** I'd be happy to talk with you...

**MCSALLY:** OK. But do you personally believe that they were not Russian mercenaries at this point? Or can you not even say that?

**VOTEL:** I would -- we have characterized them as pro-regime forces, at this point.

**MCSALLY:** OK. I look forward to following up in the classified setting.

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

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

Part of our concept and why we are pushing adviser teams down to a lower level is so that we can bring capabilities like the A-10 to bear very effectively in support of the Afghan national defense forces. And so that's what we expect they're doing.

You are correct -- one of the things that has been successful and we've tried to carry over from our Defeat ISIS campaign is going after the revenue generation, and in this case, the narco-trafficking that is -- fuels the Taliban. So, this is a -- this is a key focus for General Nicholson and our forces at this point.

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

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

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

**VOTEL:** I think we share the -- share the same concerns that you've just highlighted right here. And, you know, what -- this is, you know, very effectively, in this -- in this southwestern corner of Syria, we've been able to diplomatically begin to address that.

And so, working with the special presidential envoy, Mr. McGurk and others, we're continuing to keep focus on that.

Again, Russia is a party to this, and they have responsibilities to ensure that the -- that the, you know, that the tractable (ph) partners that may be in this area are under control.

And so they have to take responsibility for this and be held accountable -- not just the Iranians, but the others that are down there that are much more akin to the violent extremists down there. So I think we have to continue to address that in this -- in this particular...

(CROSSTALK)

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

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

In terms of trends and stuff like this, I can't tell you in the southwest, particularly in this setting, that we've seen anything specific here, in terms of this. But obviously there's some trends.

But what we have seen in places like Idlib and others is where these groups that have come together are -- do potentially pose long-term challenges for security of the region, above and beyond Syria.

**MCSALLY:** Great. Thanks. I'm over my time, but I look forward to discussing further in the closed session. Thanks

**CHAIRMAN:** Mr. Langevin.

**LANGEVIN:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General, great to see you again. Thank you for your great service to the nation. It's a pleasure to have you back before the committee once again.

I'd like to continue on the Iran topic, as well, and deep -- do a little deeper dive as -- on this topic. So Iran supports numerous proxies: Hezbollah in Israel, Lebanon and Syria; the Houthis in Yemen; and militias in Iraq.

Iran is using its militias and insurgents abroad to upset the existing order and sow chaos, obviously. And, in addition to proxies, Iran uses other asymmetric means, like cyber operations and information warfare, to expand its influence in the region.

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

**VOTEL:** Thanks, sir -- thanks (inaudible). Some of this -- some of this discussion, probably, I think, is best set for a -- for a closed session, here.

But, you know, I think, you know, what Iran attempts to do is, by creating proxy organizations that can go out there and do their bidding, they can operate in areas in which they have interests. I think they are attempting to do that.

And I do think we see some instances of that, as we look at some of the undisciplined Shia militia organizations that are here, that are much more beholden to Iran than they are to, say, the government of Iraq. This is -- this is very concerning to us, and I think this gives us indications that they are acting not on behalf of the government they say they are representing, but on behalf of another party.

**LANGEVIN:** OK. Good. I look forward to following up on that question, too, once we're in the closed session.

So the war in Syria has left hundreds of thousands dead, millions either internally displaced, or seeking asylum as refugees. But, as the fight against ISIL transitions to consolidating gains and building stability, it seems as if some of the groups that have formed partnerships of convenience may now turn their attention towards fighting each other, instead.

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

**VOTEL:** Yeah. So, first off, Congressman, I -- what I would say is, with the partners that we operate -- the Syrian Democratic Forces, we have not necessarily seen what you're -- infighting among themselves, here, in terms of that.

I mean, it is -- it is a large organization -- roughly half Kurd, half Arab, and with some others thrown in there -- Yezidis and others, Turkmen -- that are involved in this group. But, frankly, they have -- in my estimation, have continued to be pretty coherent in terms of how they are -- they are doing this.

I guess the way I would describe it is that, as we are competing -- as we are completing the defeat of ISIS, I think what we are now beginning to see is the reemergence of many of the underlying issues that have always been in place in Syria.

**VOTEL:** And, as we have converging forces in the area, we are now seeing diverging interests. And I think we see this down in the Middle Euphrates Valley, between the focus of the coalition and our partners on the ground and what the pro-regime element is focused on.

They are less concerned about rooting out ISIS than they are about going and addressing some of the opposition elements to the -- to the regime. So I think what we -- I think what we have to be mindful of is that, as we -- as we -- as the caliphate goes away and as the threat of ISIS is removed, we will begin to see more of a return to the underlying challenges that -- that really gave birth to many of these -- many of these -- to this problem and other problems in the country.

And those are ultimately going to have to be addressed through a -- some type of Geneva process that brings the parties together to, you know, establish some kind of process and arrangement that -- that allows Syria to be the country that -- that it should be.

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

I see my -- my time's left -- it's about to run out. So I'll hold my questions for the -- the closed session. But, again, thank you for your -- your service, General, and I'll yield back.

**THORNBERRY:** Mr. Russell.

**RUSSELL:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, General Votel, for your testimony today.

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

**VOTEL:** Congressman, I think some of that would probably be reserved for a -- for the...

**RUSSELL:** Of course.

**VOTEL:** ... closed session here. But, you know, I think we have acknowledged that Turkey has some concerns along their -- it has some significant concerns along their border with longstanding PKK interests. Our concern, of course, is that this -- this activity in Afrin is detracting from our efforts against ISIS.

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

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

And I'm being very serious when I say they play the role of both arsonists and firemen, fueling tensions and then trying to resolve them in their favor and manipulating all -- all the parties they

can to try to achieve their -- to achieve their objectives -- their objectives, and not necessarily the broader objectives of the international community here.

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

**RUSSELL:** Do you think that that pressure could come from the other instruments of national power from the United States on (ph) our NATO ally in Turkey?

**VOTEL:** I think they can come from a variety of different -- different sources, Congressman.

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

**VOTEL:** Well, certainly, we're -- we're very cognizant of what AFRICOM is dealing with with their partners on the ground and in the Sahel and the Maghreb, here, and very -- very concerned about that.

I think one of the principal things that we can do is continue to share information back and forth. Frankly, we're -- we're not seeing mass migration of these fighters. They're -- I won't tell you that they're probably not getting out with refugees and others that are -- that are doing that. That probably is occurring.

But, certainly, this is a -- this is a -- this is a concern long-term. And so I think one of the things that we are attempting to do is, particularly now that we have so many foreign fighters that have been captured and are in some level of detention with our partners here -- is try to get the international community engaged in taking responsibility for their people and bringing them to some level of justice.

There's a lot that can be learned from these foreign fighters, and we have to make sure that we've exploited that and learned as much as we can so we can prevent it. But we also need to make sure that they're put back into the judicial process, so they can be dealt with by the countries from which they came.

**RUSSELL:** And then, I guess, the last question I have would be, could you give your assessment of Egyptian and Saudi combined efforts on Yemen and the status of Yemen?

**VOTEL:** On -- with respect to the status of Yemen, I think, obviously, the -- Yemen is very destabilized at this particular point. Not only do they have a civil war going on; they have kind of a proxy war playing out here between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with Iran introducing advanced technology into there.

We see the enabled Houthis trying to challenge navigation in the Bab-el-Mandeb. And, of course, they have a counterterrorism problem that we are very focused on. So, you know, I think

-- from the counterterrorism standpoint, I think we are making very good progress in this particular area.

I don't see significant changes in the civil conflict that's taking place that's largely being orchestrated by the Arab coalition that's on the ground there. They certainly need to put some more effort into that. We're paying attention to the efforts by our diplomats and others here to try to address this politically.

There have been -- there has been some opportunities in the past that have not come to fruition yet. And there -- I think there -- it still has to -- we still have to continue on in this area. But I think Yemen is an area that we should all be concerned about, because we're seeing all kinds of problems in that -- in that particular area and, on top of it, huge humanitarian issues. The people are suffering greatly.

**RUSSELL:** All right, thank you.

And thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**THORNBERRY:** Ms. Rosen.

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

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

**VOTEL:** Well, Congresswoman, you -- we don't really manage those within the Department of Defense, and certainly not within CENTCOM. I do know that the secretary has recently provided some information to the -- to Senator Corker and others on -- with regards to CAATSA and some of the other things regarding sanctions out here. And I think those kind of represent his interests.

You know, I think sanctions are a very important part of this. In most of these -- most of these threats -- and I think, as I tried to mention in my opening comments, these are -- this is a team sport. And so we can do things militarily, but we also need the other instruments of our national power -- whether it's diplomatic, whether it's economic, whether it's informational -- to really kick in on these -- on these things.

And, when we are able to bring all of those together, to include things like sanctions, I think we often have the best effects. And so, you know, I think there are certainly -- certainly some very good areas where sanctions will make a -- will make a difference.

**VOTEL:** We do have to -- we do have to look at the impact of those on some of our partners, and we have to be mindful of that. I do think granting waiver authority to the secretary of state with regard to some of these things is a good -- is a good approach and gives us to the flexibility

that we need in these regards. But I -- you know, I look at it as a key part of the whole-of-government approach.

**ROSEN:** So you feel you're getting enough support in this regard?

**VOTEL:** I -- I -- I do. And I -- and I -- and -- I certainly know this is a continuing area of topic in other parts of the government.

**ROSEN:** Thank you.

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

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

**ROSEN:** Thank you. I yield back my time.

**THORNBERRY:** Mr. Gallagher.

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

**VOTEL:** The message that -- that I have conveyed is that our Kurdish -- our Kurdish partners, part of the -- part of the Syrian Democratic Forces, a multiethnic force that consists in equal measures, and actually in greater measures of Arabs than Kurds, has been the most effective force on the ground in Syria against ISIS.

And we need them to finish this -- to finish this fight. So I -- I think that's the -- the first thing, and really one of the principal things. We have to acknowledge them.

I think we also have to acknowledge their concerns about this, and so our -- our attempts to try to be as transparent and clear in terms of what we are doing and our way forward -- I think there are things we have to continue to emphasize them.

**GALLAGHER:** And do they simply make no distinction between the PKK and the elements that we support on the ground in Syria?

**VOTEL:** Well, they don't draw that distinction. And, of course, that's the -- that's the tension.



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

**VOTEL:** Well, I think -- I think our -- our broad U.S. government objective here is to -- is to limit Iran's influence in -- in -- in Syria, because, as -- as we've -- as we've seen, they are they are attempting to -- to arm and motivate fighters that could pose threats to our other -- our other vital partners here.

And so, you know, I think, as a -- I think, as a government, we have -- we have interests in trying to limit -- limit their influence and activities in -- in this part of the region.

**GALLAGHER:** I don't want to spend my remaining time on a semantic debate, but I just would say, if their -- if their influence is gaining in Syria and we need to limit that, I sort of think that necessarily involves us countering their gains in Syria.

So perhaps some clarity -- or let me, rather, say, what is our -- what is our strategy -- how would you characterize our strategy vis-a-vis Iran throughout the rest of the region?

**VOTEL:** I would -- I would characterize our strategy as deter, assure and compete. We have to have capabilities in place to deter Iran's use of ballistic missile capability against our partners. And we have to ensure that we can deter their ability to race to a nuclear weapons capability.

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

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

**GALLAGHER:** But does that rollback, that competition sort of reach a limit in Syria? Is there -- is there some reason we're being less aggressive there? I mean, you sort of mention Iraq as an area where we're competing more effectively with them...

(CROSSTALK)

**VOTEL:** ... I think my point is only that, as we've formed the coalition -- the Defeat ISIS coalition that, you know, has both a military and political component to it -- that one of the objectives that -- that has not been assigned to us is countering Iran. It has specifically been focused on the ISIS mission. So I think that's what I'm trying to emphasize.

**GALLAGHER:** And then, in Iraq, do you think we're actively or effectively competing with them? I'm thinking specifically of -- you know, one of the biggest phenomena in the last year has been the rise of the PMF. And, you know, some of these groups may be able to be incorporated into the ISF, but others are terrorists, you know, taking orders from the IRGC (ph)...

(CROSSTALK)

**VOTEL:** Well, I think, you know, certainly, addressing the -- the PMF is something that the prime minister will -- will have to do. And, in many regards, he has done that. But, again, I think one of the -- one of the -- one of the best things we can do on the ground in Syria is being a really good and valued partner to the to the Iraqi security forces.

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

**GALLAGHER:** I've run out of time. Thank you, sir.

**THORNBERRY:** Mr. Suozzi.

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

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

And I support what the military's doing. I supported the effort to increase the number of troops recently. And I think that you have a very clear strategy as far as the five points of help the Afghan army; helping of the Afghan special forces to increase their size and effectiveness; increase the collaboration between the Afghan air force and the army, as well as replace their platforms with American equipment, as opposed to Russian equipment; help the police; and put more pressure on Pakistan.

It's a clear five-point strategy that makes tremendous sense, and you're doing a very effective job of -- of clearing and holding area. The problem is the backfilling. And, in your prepared testimony you talked about how a Kabul's uncertain political situation remains the greatest risk of stability.

And you went on to say that the -- the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan continues to suffer from a professional governmental capacity deficit, competing interests and corruption. And my concern is that your colleagues on the civilian side do not have a clear plan the way that the military has.

So I want to ask you, who do you see as being your clearest partners with General Nicholson on the civilian side in this effort? And what do you perceive their strategy to be, if you could put it in a succinct way? Because I don't see them putting out a clear, succinct plan on the civilian side.

**SUOZZI:** So you're clearing and holding, but when it comes to rebuilding and transitioning, they're not laying out a clear plan. So I just want ask you to comment on that, please, General.

**VOTEL:** No, thank you.

I -- Congressman, I think that the principal partner that we would look to on the U.S. side, certainly, is the -- is the ambassador and the country (ph) team. And I -- you know, I -- I do think we have a very outstanding ambassador on the ground. I think he is very engaged in this.

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

I -- as I think I mentioned to you beforehand, you know, tomorrow, in Kabul, the president -- President Ghani and, you know, with -- certainly with the support our embassy -- we'll be hosting the Kabul process conference that will address both reconciliation and -- and counterterrorism.

And it will be an opportunity, with (ph) 25 nations brought in, to help do that. There are -- there are efforts underway with -- with our Department of State interlocutors to help devise -- devise ways to move forward with reconciliation.

It is -- it is extraordinarily complex. the -- the Taliban is not a singular, contiguous group to deal with. It is broken. It is fractured. And -- and so not only do we have to look at reconciliation; we have to look at things like reintegration, as well. So, you know, the -- the task in front of our diplomats to solve this, I think, is an extraordinarily complex one as they move forward.

And -- and I do think there certainly is a challenge here. But I do think that they are -- they are -- they are moving forward in -- in ways to begin to address this effectively here, as we apply military, social and -- and diplomatic pressure to -- to bring the Taliban to the table.

**SUOZZI:** So, General, in your testimony, you also -- thank you very much for that, by the way. In your testimony, you talked about how Pakistan is starting to share more information and collaborate more than they had historically.

What -- what do you -- what's your prognosis with -- with Pakistan? What do you see happening in real time, other than the sharing of information? And what can we hope to expect, as far as progress regarding the governing of the ungoverned areas?

**VOTEL:** Well, I -- you know -- I -- I would say that, first off, I think it's important to recognize that Pakistan is actually -- you know, Pakistan, as a country, has suffered greatly from the -- from terrorism, perhaps as much as anybody in the region, or maybe as many -- as much as anybody around the world.

And they have taken a number of measures to -- to address terrorism within their -- within their borders. And that has -- that has contributed, over the years, to -- to -- to the -- you know -- in -- some increased security in the area. But -- and we have to recognize that up front.

So our approach, I think, is to continue to be engaged with them. We want to have a -- we want to have a candid discussion. I think I -- I do. We want to have frequent communication. We want to build trust in this relationship.

The history of the United States and Pakistan is a very long history here. We do share many interests, and -- and -- and they share many things in common with us culturally, militarily, politically, in terms of what we're doing.

But we have to continue to work with them, to move them in directions that cause them to make strategic changes in their approach. And that's -- that's really what we're aimed at. I -- I don't know that we can put a time limit on that.

But I -- as I mentioned to you, we are seeing some positive indicators, and we have to ensure that we don't overlook these as we -- as we move forward and we continue to build on these. And this is what my -- my objective is with my -- with my counterparts.

**SUOZZI:** Thank you, General.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**THORNBERRY:** Gaetz.

**GAETZ:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, General, for your service and for being here.

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

**VOTEL:** I -- not that I would -- I would not characterize it that way, Congressman.

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

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

**GAETZ:** So, since the JCPOA, we've got Iran putting more money behind proxy forces that are destabilizing in literally 100 percent of the circumstances in which they exist.

In August of 2017, the Iranian parliament votes to increase their military spending. Are there particular capabilities that we think may emerge from that, particular tactics that Iran is investing in, as they make a -- as they use more of the cash that they now have access to to be a destabilizing hegemony?

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

They are using the opportunity of things like Yemen to, you know, like we think -- we go out to China Lake to test our weapons systems. They go to Yemen to test their weapons systems. So they're -- they're taking advantage of these opportunities to improve their capabilities around the world.

So I definitely am concerned about this.

**GAETZ:** You also test some great weapon systems in -- off my district, in Northwest Florida, and we're very proud of. My district's also home to the 7th Special Forces Group.

They do a great deal of work in the CENTCOM AOR, and frequently, they return home and then deploy to SOUTHCOM AOR to find themselves fighting a very similarly flavored enemy in radical Islamic extremists funded, in many circumstances, by Iran through their terror proxies.

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

**VOTEL:** I'm -- I'm not -- I'm not sure I can answer that in this particular setting here. I'm -- I'm sure that there -- there probably are.

**GAETZ:** OK. We may chat about that a little later today, then.

Are there particular capabilities in the development of Iran's terror proxies that we find them particularly investing in, whether that's drone technology, whether that's guerrilla capability, the development of explosives?

**VOTEL:** I -- you know, I think all of the above. I -- I think these are all tactics that we've seen in the past. You know, certainly, we're concerned about the -- the increasing use of missiles, of all short-range, medium-range missiles. And that type of stuff is very concerning.

Their -- their use of -- of UASs is a particularly concerning emerging threat for us here that we're -- that we're concerned about. But I think one (ph) -- you know, the other things is that, you know, I think, if we look at what Iran did and what it took Iran to do -- it took 20 years for Iran to

do in Lebanon, with the Lebanese Hezbollah, they're attempting to do in about five years with the Houthis in Yemen.

This -- this is very concerning to us. So I think they're accelerating their pace and their ability to do this, and this is something we have to -- have to be very concerned about.

**GAETZ:** I completely agree. And I would add to the list of activities in the Western Hemisphere, where that very same game plan that we've seen Iran run in Syria, then on the Arabian Peninsula, and now in our own backyard -- we continue that troubling trend line with an increase both in volume and in quality.

As we look at the particular missile systems that you mentioned and the areas where they may be used, I -- I look particularly to our ally, Israel, as a -- as a point of vulnerability.

Do we see the Iranian -- or in what capacity do we see the Iranians hardening their positions in southern Syria? And what feedback have we gotten at the mil-to-mil level from our ally, Israel, about their discomfort with that?

**VOTEL:** In this setting, I would just say I think we've seen -- and we've seen in public -- public media releases here, you know -- Israel has -- has struck at some of these locations here that -- that they have posed -- posed a threat to them. So, you know, I think in this setting, I would leave it at that, that there certainly is -- certainly are some concerns there.

**GAETZ:** Great.

Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to our next setting. I yield back.

**THORNBERRY:** Mr. Gallego.

**GALLEGO:** Thank you, General.

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

**VOTEL:** Congressman, we -- we are. And -- and -- and I -- I'd be happy to take it for record and give you some more detail on this. But what we did in CENTCOM here over the last -- with the support of the department was put in controlled supply rates for our key munitions here. And we've been managing that for some time.

Certainly, the success that we've had in Iraq and Syria has resulted in the -- in a lower use of that, which has allowed us to cross-level within the theater, to Afghanistan, to address our issues. I -- I -- I won't comment on the broader, department-wide challenge with this, but I think we are being well supported right now in CENTCOM.

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

(CROSSTALK)

**VOTEL:** Congressman, I think that's probably a better question for -- my -- I can't comment on their stockages.

**GALLEGO:** OK.

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

**VOTEL:** I think Qatar has been a dependable partner to us. Certainly, we have our -- you know, my forward headquarters is located in Qatar. Our air -- we have our air operations center there. I think they've been good partners to us in the past.

**GALLEGO:** Is the discord between our GCC -- other partners outside of Qatar, and especially between Saudi and Qatar, especially (ph) in regards to the block (ph) -- has that affected any of our operations in CENTCOM?

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

**GALLEGO:** Thank you, sir (ph).

I yield back.

**THORNBERRY:** Mr. Banks.

**BANKS:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And, General, thank you for being here today.

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

**VOTEL:** I -- I think our coalition remains very, very strong in Afghanistan. You know, the -- one of the things that underpins the -- you know, the Afghan -- the president's roadmap for the Afghan national defense security forces was the commitment made by the NATO nations, the partner nations at the Brussels conference and Warsaw to make sure that the -- that we -- that the support would be continued.

And so we have seen the partner nations continue to sustain and, in many cases, increase the -- their contributions to the -- to the effort.

**BANKS:** So, just to repeat, so we're seeing -- we're seeing, in some places, an increase. Can you mention which -- which nations are increasing their commitment?

**VOTEL:** I think the U.K. is an example of -- they've increased some of their recent -- recent contributions.

**BANKS:** OK. Thank you.

A moment ago, you said, in addressing Mr. Suozzi's comments, that Pakistan's paid a significant price -- "has suffered greatly" was your quote. In your testimony, though, you, quote, say, "The Taliban and Haqqani leadership and fighters continue to find sanctuary in Pakistan," end quote.

And then, on the next page, you -- you talk about our discontinuing of IMET FMF support to Pakistan. Can you -- could you dig a little bit deeper into that? I mean, what -- what -- what is working to bring Pakistan back to the table to -- to thwart the Taliban and other like-minded groups and -- providing them sanctuary in Pakistan?

**VOTEL:** Well, I think, certainly, the -- the pressure that our government put on Pakistan as we -- as we brought out the strategy, I think, contributed to that.

I think what is also working right now is the approach that we have in place with them. I think we have tried to be very clear in terms of the things that we need of them -- we need Pakistan to do for us. And what I have endeavored to do -- not always in a public way, but in a private way -- is develop a relationship that allows us to -- to provide feedback both ways.

There are things, frankly, that Pakistan has asked of us, as well. So we are -- this is a two-way -- two-way street here. And so it is my responsibility, I think, to make sure that we have feedback loops in place that go back and forth between the things that we're doing to try to -- try to support each other and -- and -- and moving forward in that regard.

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

**BANKS:** Has -- has there been a plan to re-continue (ph) FMF and IMET support to Pakistan?

**VOTEL:** I don't think we have -- we have addressed that at this particular point.

**BANKS:** So we remain in a posture of discontinuing that support? Pakistan has obviously been...

**VOTEL:** That's the current posture. And I would imagine, hopefully, in the future, we'll have an opportunity to -- to...

(CROSSTALK)

**BANKS:** Has -- has that been beneficial?



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

**BANKS:** Pakistan continues to provide a very important and strategic logistical root for our efforts into Afghanistan. Have you seen those logistical roots continue to operate fully, as they've had...

**VOTEL:** I have.

**BANKS:** ... for the past decade-plus?

**VOTEL:** I have. the ground lines of communication, air lines of communication (ph) -- absolutely vital to us, and they have continued to sustain that.

**BANKS:** OK. Thank you very much.

I yield back.

**VOTEL:** Thank you.

**THORNBERRY:** Mr. O'Rourke.

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

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

**VOTEL:** The force management (ph) -- we generally don't talk numbers in -- in -- in public here, Congressman. I'd be happy to...

(CROSSTALK)

**O'ROURKE:** What can you say that that we can say in a public setting?

**VOTEL:** That...

**O'ROURKE:** There's lots of reporting on this. What's -- what's a ballpark you could talk about?

**VOTEL:** ... the -- we are -- we are at the level that the -- that the Department of Defense has approved for us in this -- in this area. And we'll maintain that, going forward.

**O'ROURKE:** Is that public information, the level the Department of Defense has (ph)...

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

**O'ROURKE:** OK.

And so I'd like to ask you how many U.S. service members are in Syria, or are operating in Syria. I'm expecting to get a similar answer. Are you -- are you able to tell me?

**VOTEL:** Right. I think, you know -- the Department of Defense, I think, is -- has basically said about (ph) around 1,700 have been there. But, again, I would offer the same response to you on these.

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

**VOTEL:** That is the reason for our military presence.

**O'ROURKE:** And -- and, with the defeat of ISIS, will we no longer have a military presence in Syria?

**VOTEL:** Well, when -- when we have completed our -- when we have completed our mission here in -- in Syria -- it involves not only kicking ISIS out of the areas in -- which they occupy, but it also includes the consolidation and -- the consolidation of gains and the stability that allows -- allows us to move forward with a -- with a political resolution to this.

So that -- that's been defined for us by our leadership here. And so that's how we are -- we are gauging our military support. That's part of the mission.

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

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

**VOTEL:** Right.

So what we'll -- what we'll -- what we will continue to do is support our partners on the ground to ensure that the areas -- we consolidate our gains, we can stabilize the area, we can ensure that the international organizations, humanitarian aid organizations can come back and people can get into their -- into their homes.

And this is about creating the security environment that allows that and provides the time for our diplomats to pursue the solution that we are seeking through the United Nations in Syria.

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

**VOTEL:** Well, the fact is, ISIS is still there, and that's what we're dealing with right now.

**O'ROURKE:** But the question I asked you is, after ISIS is defeated and you've accomplished that task...

**VOTEL:** Well, part of our -- part of our...

**O'ROURKE:** ... what is the legal justification for U.S. service members to be deployed in Syria?

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

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

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

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

And I think that is a recipe for disaster. We will not have successful oversight or accountability or prosecution of that war because we cannot define its goals or the strategy.

I yield back.

**THORNBERRY:** General, what happened when we left Iraq completely in 2009, after we had supposedly defeated al-Qaida in Iraq?

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

**THORNBERRY:** OK.

Mr. Hice.

**HICE:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

**HICE:** How is CENTCOM working with the Iraqi government and other regional partners to try to address this?

**VOTEL:** Well, the -- you know, certainly, the -- the Iraqi government has a -- has a law in place that addresses paramilitary forces. And what we are doing as part of our broader security-sector reform support that we provide to the government of Afghan -- of Iraq is encouraging them to take the steps to bring those forces to the right size and to ensure they have the right leadership and they are beholden to the government -- government of Iraq.

So the principal way that we will do this is through our advice and, where necessary, our assistance to the -- to the government of Iraq.

**HICE:** OK.

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

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

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

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

**HICE:** OK. Thank you. And that, actually, raises some questions that I think would probably be more appropriate in our next session.

**VOTEL:** Thank you.

**HICE:** But, with that, Mr. Chairman, I'll yield back. Thank you.

**THORNBERRY:** Mr. Bacon.

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

I'd like to drill a little more into the Iranian influence in Syria itself and that specific problem set. Iran has propped up Assad, I think, maybe more so than Russia. But the two together have totally been working together.

They've got advisers. They have sent fighters to Syria, have encouraged Hezbollah to be supportive. Shia militants from other countries have been sent there. They've sent weapons, cash, petroleum. They've recently launched a drone, it appears. I think it was an Iranian drone versus a Syrian drone.

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

**VOTEL:** I'm not sure I would necessarily characterize it that way. You -- we -- there are -- there are -- there are things that are appropriate for the military to do, and that's the -- that's the angle that I talk about.

But there are certainly other parts of our government and other capabilities that we have as a -- within our national resources that can address Iran's malign activities, whether they're in Syria or in other places.

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

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

**BACON:** Would you say it's acceptable or unacceptable for Iran to build a land bridge from Iran, through Iraq, Syria, to the borders of Israel?

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

**BACON:** What would you say with the (ph) -- was the purpose of Iran launching that drone into Israel? Was that, indeed, Iran? Or could it have been Syrian?

**VOTEL:** I'm -- you know, I'm not sure. I think that's probably a better question for the Iranians here, in terms of that.

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

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

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

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

**BACON:** Thank you.

Are we actively interdicting shipments to the Hezbollah in Lebanon from Iran?

**VOTEL:** I think that's probably beyond the discussion in this room.

**BACON:** OK.

Going back to a previous question on Joint STARS, we're being asked by the Air Force to determine, should we recapitalize the Joint STARS or (ph) the new airframe, or let that go away and go to some new capabilities, and we're getting conflicting advice and counsel on that. I'd love to have your perspective. Do you need more Joint STAR (sic) capabilities, or less? Or do you...

(CROSSTALK)

**BACON:** ... for us at the HASC?

**VOTEL:** You know, from -- as a combatant commander, you know, we -- I'm very dependent upon the services to provide us the right capabilities, and they -- they almost -- they always do. And we're very, very satisfied with that.

So I'm less concerned about which platform it is on -- it is on and more concerned with the -- with the capability that's coming our way. Certainly, the Joint STARS provides not only ground movement targeting indicator capability -- that's very important in my theater and other theaters - - but it also provides, you know, battle space management, command and control that comes along with -- these are -- these are key capabilities.

What I'm trying to achieve, and with our use of ISR, is layered ISR. I want to be able to draw all these capabilities into a -- into a -- into an ISR scheme that meets my requirements and meets our requirements in this particular theater.

**BACON:** Well, again, thank you for being here today and answering our questions. We're grateful to you.

I yield back.

**VOTEL:** Thank you.

**THORNBERRY:** Mr. Hunter.

**HUNTER:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General, thank you for being here. This just proves, if you stick around long enough, you get to ask a question, whether you're good or not -- if you're there.

I guess the first question is we've been working on getting some kinds of UAVs, whether they're Predators or they're whatever, to our allies in the Middle East, whether it's Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, UAE -- and we've been stopped.

We've even offered them the ability to use U.S. contractors to do it, so that they can prosecute their own targets and we can use them instead of using our own. So the question is can we tolerate a reality where, because of self-imposed constraints, we can't sell our allies our UAV technology, but the Chinese can?

And you've already spoken to that point. But, when it comes to technology, I think we're missing a big advantage there. Could you comment on that?

**VOTEL:** I think it's -- I think it's -- you know, as you're alluding to here, I think the opportunity for us to improve our interoperability through common systems -- whether it's ISR or other systems we have out here -- I think these are always opportunities that we have to pursue, wherever we can.

**HUNTER:** Do you support our -- us sharing our UAV technology with our allies?

**VOTEL:** I certainly think it deserves serious consideration.

**HUNTER:** Thank you.

The second question is, in terms of Iran and Iraq (ph) -- line that goes from Iran through Syria, down to Israel, I've got big poster boards with Soleimani with his arm around every single Iraqi corps commander and militia guy. They're all -- they're all -- they're all buddies. Soleimani is now hand-picking the guys that we're equipping and training. But that's the fight that we're in right now.

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

**VOTEL:** I think there certainly is an opportunity in Iraq, through our strong relationships that we're developing here. And I think that, you know, one of the things that I've observed about Iraq over the last year has been their outreach to other partners across the region, whether it's Jordan, whether it's Saudi Arabia, whether it's Kuwait, whether it's Turkey -- the other key Sunni nations in the area.

And so they are very much emerging as a -- as a -- you know, trying to be much more involved in the region, which I think is a very positive thing, and I think it -- I think it connotes the fact that Iraq is for Iraqis.

And, while they live in a difficult neighborhood with difficult neighbors and they have to deal with that, they are principally concerned with Iraq.

**HUNTER:** But let's -- but let's bring it back right now, because right now, we're playing the "enemy of our enemy is our friend." That's what we're playing right now.

If the Iranians are the major power players, with weapons and our training and our gear right now, with their hand-picked militia guys, the Iraqis can reach out all they want to, but the power is with the Iranians in Iraq and Syria right now.

Is that not where the power lies in your opinion -- the actual power, and I'm talking power via (ph) force?

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

**HUNTER:** And so let me just lay it out, then, one last time. You're -- you're confident that, in the next 10 -- 10 years, we're not going to see an Iranian-controlled ratline where the Iranians can



go from Tehran, through Syria, down to Israel on a high-speed road with M1 Abrams tanks that we've trained them on? You do not see that happening?

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

**HUNTER:** I wouldn't disagree with you on that.

**VOTEL:** ... and to -- and to continue to be the valuable partner that we have been for them and to continue to professionalize their -- their forces and their capabilities so that they are -- they are beholden to themselves, not beholden to others, to do things for them and they don't allow their terrain to be exploited in the manner that you highlighted.

**HUNTER:** As you've seen, General, as we train and equip and try to pick sides, we're not always right on who we end up helping. And that's turned around to, you know, bite us a few times.

And I really hope that, right now with the Iranians, we're not doing that in a much bigger way than we've messed up in the past. So thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**THORNBERRY:** General, I want to follow on two questions that I don't think you've been asked directly.

You started the hearing talking about the considerable success in the fight to eliminate ISIS from controlling any territory. Is there or will there be a reduction in U.S. people and U.S. capabilities from Iraq, especially, due to that success?

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

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

**THORNBERRY:** Yeah, because we also don't want to repeat the mistakes of the past and leave completely.

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

**VOTEL:** There is, Chairman. And I think our -- first of all, I think our off -- our efforts over the last year have been very effective in addressing many of the concerns that we had with -- with al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula.

And I think we have -- we have -- we have addressed their leadership, their media capabilities, their external operations capabilities, certainly some of their explosive capability that has been inherent (ph) in this organization.

But I think, with al-Qaida, I think it's important to always understand what their long-term objectives are. And they are a very patient and savvy organization. And I think we always have to be concerned about al-Qaida.

And so it is -- it is absolutely vital to not take the pressure off now, but to keep the pressure on them and -- and -- and make sure that we complete this -- this effort against them.

**THORNBERRY:** Yeah. I -- I just -- while it's a complex situation -- you talked about the humanitarian, the Houthis and all that's going on -- I just think it's important not lose sight of the fact that there continues to be a terrorist threat that -- that emanates from there.

I think that we're good for now. Thank you for being here. We will adjourn this open session and, within about five minutes, reconvene upstairs. Thank you.

END