

29 Mar 17: Gen. Votel Testifies to HASC on Security Challenges in the Greater Middle East

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House Committee on Armed Services Hearing on Security Challenges In The Greater Middle East

Subject: Greater Middle East Security Challenges

Witnesses: Army Gen. Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command, testifies

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THORNBERRY: Committee will come to order.

Today, we turn our attention to the Central Command area of operations where much of the nation's military power has been engaged since 1991. While we are rightfully focusing attention on other threats, such as a resurgent Russia and a newly assertive China, the threat of terrorism has not gone away.

In fact, as we discussed at our hearing a few weeks ago, it is difficult to see how ISIS is totally eliminated from Syria and Al Qaida with its various branches has not disappeared either. And while terrorists have physically spread out more locations, some of them have become quite adept at operating online as well instigating terrorist incidents in the West. Of course Iran poses a significant threat to regional stability and none of us will forget about the essential fight to prevent Afghanistan from returning to be a base for terrorism.

So there is much to occupy our witness today and I appreciate his being with us to answer our questions. I also want to mention one additional issue that is been in the news lately. There are been a number of press reports about civilian casualties and Mosul all related to U.S. aerial support of the Iraqi efforts to reclaim that city from ISIS. I would just suggest that everyone be cautious.

In a dense urban environment, there may well be civilian casualties and even the finest military in the world can make mistakes, but we also know for certain that ISIS uses innocent civilians as human shields and those they can arrange civilian deaths to further their misguided narratives. ISIS uses such narratives to try to advance their cause and to curtail the effectiveness of our military campaign against them. I think we should always give the benefit of the doubt to the professionals who are working every day to keep us safe.

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

SMITH: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I have a -- at least for the opening statement, which I'll simply submit for the record and echo the chairman's comments about how important this region is to our national security interests, and the challenges there are great.

The only issue that I want to highlight -- and hopefully have the general discuss a little bit -- as we continue in Iraq, the problem to my mind continues to be that the Baghdad government is not inclusive enough of the Sunni population. I met with the Sunni tribal leader yesterday. Certainly Prime Minister Abadi is trying, whereas Prime Minister al-Maliki did not. But there has not been much improvement.

There is still a feeling amongst the Sunni population that Baghdad is more -- is closer to Iran than it is to their own Sunni population. Until we fix that problem, whatever happens in Mosul, whatever happens elsewhere, if you have a disgruntled, dissatisfied, pushed aside Sunni population in Iraq, you are going to have fertile ground for ISIS or Al Qaida or whatever extremist groups want to exploit it.

So I'm curious to hear what -- what we're doing to try and reintegrate the Sunnis into the Baghdad government so that it is not a sectarian Shia government, but a government for Iraq. I think that'll be a great challenge going forward. And with that, I thank the general for his service and his leadership and look forward to the testimony.

I yield back.

THORNBERRY: General, without objection your full written statement will be made part of the record and you are recognized for any oral comments you'd like to make.

VOTEL: Thank you, Chairman Thornberry and Ranking Member Smith.

For the members of the committee, before I do get into my short statement here, I do want to highlight to you, we have put a map at your -- each of your spaces here. There is -- there is coverage on both sides. You'll see the backside really focuses a little bit on Iraq and Syria piece there. That red kind of blotches kind of highlight where we think ISIS is located currently.

Chairman Thornberry, Ranking Member Smith, distinguished members of the committee, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to appear here today to discuss the current posture and state of readiness of the United States Central Command.

I come before you today on behalf of the outstanding men and women of the command; military, civilians, and contractors along with our coalition partners from nearly 60 nations. Our people are the very best in the world at what they do and I could not be more proud of them and their families. Without question, they are the strength of our Central Command team.

I've been in command at CENTCOM for about a year now. It's been an incredibly busy and productive period. Over the past 12 months, we've dealt with a number of significant challenges in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Egypt and the Sinai, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and elsewhere throughout our area of responsibility. We are making progress in many areas but much, much work remains.

We're also dealing with a range of malign activities perpetrated by Iran and its proxies operating in the region. It is my view that Iran poses the greatest long-term threat to stability in this part of the world. Generally speaking, the central region remains a highly complex area, widely characterized by pervasive instability and conflict. The fragile security environments which reflect a variety of contributing factors including heightened ethno-sectarian tensions, economic uncertainty, weak or corrupt governance, civil wars, and humanitarian crisis are exploited by violent extremist organizations and terrorist groups such as Al Qaida and ISIS. These groups have clearly indicated their desire and intent to attack the U.S. homeland, our interests abroad, and the interests of our partners and allies.

At the same time, the central region is increasingly crowded with external nation states such as Russia and China who are pursuing their own interests in attempting to shift alliances within the region. The point that I would emphasize to you is that while there may be other more strategic or consequential threats or regions in our world, today, the central region has come to represent the nexus for many of the security challenges our nation faces.

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

Meanwhile, the team at U.S. Central Command remains appropriately focused on doing what is necessary to protect our national interests and those of our partners. Our strategic approach is very straightforward. Prepare, pursue, and prevail. And I'll explain what I mean by that.

We prepare the environment to ensure an effective posture and strong relationships across the region. We actively pursue opportunities to strengthen relationships and support our interests. And when we do put our forces into action, we prevail in our assigned missions. VOTEL: I would also point out -- point out to you that today, to the credit and professionalism of our armed forces and coalition partners, we are executing campaigns in the central region with significantly fewer US forces on the ground than in previous years.

As your scene clearly demonstrated in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen and elsewhere throughout our area responsibility we have adopted a by, with and through approach that places a heavy reliance on indigenous forces. While this approach -- it does present some challenges and can be a more time-consuming it is proving effective and is likely to pay significant dividends going forward.

Indigenous -- indigenous force partners continue to build needed capability and capacity and they are personally invested in the conduct of operations and thus inclined to do what is necessary to preserve the gains they've achieved going forward. We also have a vested interest in ensuring increased stability and security in the strategically important central region.

To this end I will close by highlighting three areas where I do believe if we apply the appropriate amount of energy and effort we can and will have a lasting positive impact in this part of the world.

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

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

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

Much is at stake today in the central region. We recognize this fact and I assure you that the CENTCOM team stands ready and willing to do what is ever necessary to protect our national interests in the interests of our allies and partners.

Let me close by thanking this committee once again for the strong support that you continue to provide to the world class team in United States Central command, in particularly to our forces located forward in the region. As I said at the outset, the 80,000 plus soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen and civilians that a make up the command are truly the very best in the world at what they do and I could not be more proud of them and their family and I know that you are proud of them as well.

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

THORNBERRY: Thank you General. And you're right we share your pride in them and in what they do.

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

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

First off I wanted to emphasize to everybody here, all the members that -- these are absolutely tragic and heartbreaking situations. And our hearts go out to the people of Mosul and of Iraq and other places where we are operating. We acknowledge our responsibility to operate at a higher standard. It is my responsibility as a combatant commander to ensure that our forces operate in accordance with those goals and standards.

We take every allegation seriously and we are executing at what we -- we have and are executing a well developed process to assess -- and if necessary investigate each of these allegations. How we do things as important as the things we actually do. Things as important as the things we actually do. And we are doing everything humanly possible to prevent these types of events and incidents from occurring as a result of our operations.

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

We have a general officer assigned as the investigating officer to help us address and understand and discover the facts of this case. We were able to visit the actual site yesterday and gather both additional evidence and perspective on this situation. In addition, we are reviewing over 700 weapon systems videos over a 10 day period to ensure -- over a 10 day period that followed this alleged strike -- incident to ensure that we understand the effects of the munitions we dropped in this vicinity.

This should be an indicator of -- to you of how intense of a combat situation this is. The investigation will look at command-and- control. We'll look at the munitions we employed in the fusing for those munitions, and we'll look at intelligence. Importantly, it will look at the behavior of the enemy and -- and it will look at how our actions may have played a role in any civilian casualties. The investigation will confirm or deny our initial impressions and highlight the lessons learned.

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

The nature of this fight has evolved over the course of the operation on this two and a half year campaign, and our approach has evolved as well. One example of how we have evolved has been our effort to enable and entrust our leaders at the tactical edge with the authorities they need to help our partners win. We have not relaxed the rules of engagement.

I have authorized Lieutenant General Townsend to delegate the employment of rules of engagement to the appropriate level due to the tough urban fight that we knew was coming in Mosul. To be clear, there were no changes to the (inaudible) and the rules of engagement that'll -- allows us to engage.

We are aware of all of the reporting, especially by organizations like Amnesty International, Airwars, and The Center for Civilians in Conflict, and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. And we have developed relationships with a number of these organizations and we look forward to working them -- with them as we complete this investigation.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

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

VOTEL: That is correct, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

VOTEL: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

THORNBERRY: Well, I'll just conclude by saying we want to be informed of the results of the investigation. We share your commitment to make sure we do things the right way and so -- but the investigation needs to occur and then you see -- see what it -- what it finds. So I'll trust you and your folks keep us fully informed once you are able to reach conclusions on that.

Let me yield to the Ranking Member.

SMITH: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

If you could answer the question I had raised in my opening statement about, you know, where the Sunni population in Iraq is at right now. Because it sounds like it's still a very deep divide. And while I, you know, concur with the Chairman's comments about the civilian casualties in Mosul, I know that the



Sunni population is concerned about the fight that's going on there and the loss of life that is -- that is happening from both sides.

They're also concerned about the presence of Shia militias, Iranian-backed militias, and basically the general feeling that this continues to be a Shia-run country that is not making room for the Sunnis. And that, you know, undermines our entire effort, I think, to defeat these groups. Is that an inaccurate portrait? Is it better than that? And what are we doing to try to -- try to fix what problems remain?

VOTEL: Congressman, the way that I would -- the way that I would characterize it is I think in the near term here as we -- as Iraq and assisted by the coalition confronts -- confronts the ISIS enemy that they're dealing with, there has been some level of local accommodation, some cooperation, some collaboration between different groups, really focused on doing this.

I would cite to you the -- our continued efforts to raise tribal forces to bring hold forces into these areas, particularly Sunni areas as -- as after they have been cleared, we have seen some success with that. But I would agree with you that long-term, there is still much work to be done. I know in my interactions with the prime minister, we frequently talk about this.

I know he is very concerned about it and -- but also I think recognizes the balance that will have to be achieved here in the region with a variety of different -- different interests that are ongoing and so I think he -- he clearly recognizes that. But I would agree with you; more will need to be done to ensure that the Sunni population feels engaged, empowered, and a part of -- part of the government of Iraq and of the Iraqi people.

SMITH: One quick question on that; the issue of arming the Kurds or other Sunni tribesmen. There was frustration expressed that they weren't be able to get -- weren't able to get those arms directly and it is our position -- our country's position that all that has to go to Baghdad basically. Then I'd -- I understand that to a certain degree. Is that accurate? And how is that impacting the ability to arm the Kurds and the Sunni tribesmen that we want to fight with us?

VOTEL: I -- I believe we've made some -- we have made good progress on that over the last year. There certainly were some -- some issues with that in the past in terms of how that was done. But particularly as we got focused on the operation for -- for Mosul I think we saw a high level of collaboration and coordination between the -- the Kurdistan regional government and the and the government of Iraq.

Particularly as they prepared their plans and -- and prepared their forces for that operation. And I would highlight to you that I think one of the -- one of the key successes here and I think this has influenced the government of Iraq is the -- is the -- is a high level of coordination that took place in the military level and the security levels as that operation gets underway and that continues to this day. And I do believe that as a basis for moving forward. That said, it's something that we continue to keep our keep our eye on.

SMITH: And look up to Syria, as we -- you know as people prepare for the -- the attack on Raqqah, There is the great question of, you know, you've got the Turks involved there, you've got the Kurds involved there but they don't get along. When we're trying to figure out what our coalition is in Syria, particularly going after optically going after Raqqah, how are we currently deciding the issue between the Turks and the Kurds?

VOTEL: Well, there's -- there's -- there's engagement at the -- up the high political level that is taking place. As your -- as you're well aware of, the Chairman has been a champion for us in working at the chief of Defense level and back and forth. We have from the CENTCOM standpoint working in conjunction with European Command, we have increased our interaction in Ankara to ensure that there is good visibility on the things that -- that -- that we are doing.

And we certainly recognize Turkey's interests and -- and concerns with this. They're a great partner here, and we couldn't do many of the things we're doing without them. That said, the most effective force that we have right now in Syria is the Syrian Democratic forces that consist of both Kurds and Arabs, Turkmen, and in some cases, some Christian organizations.

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

THORNBERRY: Mr. Wittman.

WITTMAN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Votel, thanks so much for joining us today. I wanted to get your perspective on what might happen in the future. We see today success happening in Mosul with pushing out and defeating ISIS forces both with -- with our forces and with Iraqi forces.

The question then becomes, I believe, is what happens after that. And while ISIS is a concern. I believe that Iranian backed Shia militant groups are of an even greater concern. We don't hear a lot about that today, but I do believe they are a significant issue. The RGC commander Akasam Siliamoni (ph), commander of the Shia militant groups in that region.

I believe with Iranian backing -- has visions about what will be happening in the future as ISIS is moved out. Today as we speak Iran and the US have common interest in defeating ISIS. The question then becomes once ISIS is defeated, Iran has in mind to re-create the Shia crescent through that region.

So by pushing out ISIS and with the -- the -- the question about how governance takes place after that with the existing government in Iraq, what do you see as the as the future with us, ultimately defeating ISIS and what happens with these Iranian backed Shia militant groups and what happens there too with the Iraqi government in trying to reestablish some kind of governance and control in those regions sans ISIS.

VOTEL: Thank you, Congressman.

I -- I share in your concern about -- about Iran and their long- term intentions here. And certainly with the 100,000 plus Shia militia group members on the ground there, this is extraordinarily -- this is extraordinarily concern -- big concern as we move forward on. We -- we are engaged. I know the -- the -- the embassy is a well engaged with the government of Iraq as they look to implement a paramilitary force law in their country.

The prime minister, I know has appointed a committee that is working through this aspect. We certainly have provided advice into that. We've given examples of how we apply and employ national guards, and other things here and how we would look at that.

Our concern I think with particular aspect is that the -- the PMF -- the paramilitary forces that remain behind don't become duplicative to the counterterrorism service or to the Iraqi army and those types

things, and that there is a -- there is a -- a -- a valid role for them and that they do answer to the government and that they remain like the other security services in a political entity. And so our very strong focus is in that -- in that -- in that particular area, particularly with respect to the -- to the Shia PMF. WITTMAN: Staying on the theme of Iran, looking there in the Arabian Gulf, and more specifically recently in the Strait of Hormuz where we had four Iran fast attack vessels swarm on the USS Mahan, there's a concern about that continued effort and what they are trying to achieve with that and what our actions are or reactions to that might be.

Give me your perspective, first of all about the frequency of those attacks. What is Iran trying to achieve with that? Those -- that -- those probing maneuvers as I see them, I think are very indicative of what Iran, I believe is -- is likely to try to achieve in that area, and that is to harass our ships just enough to -- to stand us off. Give me your perspective on what you think the Iranians are trying to achieve there and what our reaction to that is, or what we're doing took to -- to try to prevent that.

VOTEL: Direct -- direct to your question, I think the Iran's objective here is to be the right regional hegemon. They want to be the predominant power in the region, there's -- there's no doubt about that and I think that's what they -- what they are pursuing. One of the very first things I did after becoming the commander at CENTCOM was get on a ship and go through the Strait of Hormuz.

As an army guy, I wanted understand what this was, and frankly the Iranians did not disappoint. Within 30 minutes of being on there, we had boats surround us in -- in the -- in the area. I had a chance to observe our ship captain and -- and -- and crew and how they respond to that, and then since I've had a chance to see that a number of different occasions. I get normal reports on it.

I -- I would tell you Congressman, I am extraordinarily confident in our leaders and in the processes, procedures, and capabilities they have to properly defend themselves. The presence of these types of boats out there are very seldom if ever, prevent us from accomplishing our missions. I think with their out there to do is -- is to demonstrate their presence, to -- in some cases potentially be provocative.

I think as we -- if you look over a course of a year, I think we see probably 300 plus incidents of this kind and nature, about 10 to 15 percent of those we would classify as being abnormal, meaning outside of their normal pattern of life, unprofessional, meaning they're not following proper maritime procedures or unsafe, meaning that they put themselves or they potentially put our vessel and -- and our crews at -- at -- at risk.

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

WITTMAN: Very good.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back. Thank you.

THORNBERRY: Ms. Davis.

DAVIS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

VOTEL: Congresswoman, I think there's a lot that we don't know about what -- what Russia is doing. I think that it's fair to assume they may be providing some kind of support to them in terms of weapons or other things that may be there. Again, I think that is the possibility. I believe what Russia is attempting to do is they are attempting to be an influential party in this part of the world.

Obviously they do have some concerns because it is -- it is close to former Soviet states that they consider to be within their sphere so there is some concern about that. But in general, I don't consider their outreach and linkage to the Taliban to be helpful to what we have been -- what the coalition has been trying to accomplish for some time now in Afghanistan.

DAVIS: Could you share with us your -- the state of that accomplishment that you could talk about in this setting?

VOTEL: In Afghanistan? Well, I think -- think we've pretty well established we are at a -- we are at a stalemate right now. Right now I would say that it is in generally in favor of the government of Afghanistan but stalemates have a tendency to decline over time so I think we do have to -- we have to continue to support this. We have two missions in -- in Afghanistan.

One is our counterterrorism mission, fully resourced, that is going pretty well. I feel very confident in that. The other one is the NATO mission, the train, advise, and assist. And that is one where I think we -- we ought to consider looking at our objectives here and how we -- how we continue to support that mission going forward and ensure that the -- that the government of Afghanistan has the time and the capabilities to accomplish what they need to.

DAVIS: Yeah, clearly I think the governance piece is important. We've obviously been working on that as well for some time but there's a great deal of concern that it hasn't been as robust as is needed in that setting and I'm not sure that I would believe that that's going to increase. I think if anything it's probably going to decrease. Can you comment on that and the importance of that mission?

VOTEL: Well, I think that -- that certainly is a topic under discussion now with the secretary of Defense and General Nicholson and myself and the Chairman right now.

So we -- we are in the process of going through a review of our posture in Afghanistan and how we ought to -- how we ought to look at that going forward and I think it's still kind of pre-decisional at this point so I'm not sure I'd want to get out in front of the secretary in announcing anything in particular.

But it is a -- it is a key topic here and one that Secretary Mattis has been very engaged with us on.

DAVIS: Thank you.

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

VOTEL: Well, Congresswoman, I have the benefit of having -- having a Cabinet secretary who previously held my job and so he understands the region that I'm operating in right now and I -- and we have a very open and communicative relationship here and so I feel I'm getting everything that I need from the department at this particular juncture.

So I can't tell you that I have -- I've been disadvantaged while the transition completes -- completes and gets in place. DAVIS: Thank you. And just following up on my colleague's on my colleagues question earlier about how we're planning for what comes next in Iraq. What's it going to look like? Are -- and what is the extent of that planning? How would you see that right now?

VOTEL: Well, I think as I mentioned in my opening statement. I think this has to be -- it has to involve more than just the military and in -- in my advice to the Secretary and the Chairman as we began to look at the how we move forward in these -- in these areas.

My -- my -- my -- principal piece of advice was, we have to look at the political preparation of these -- of these areas and make sure that we are addressing some of these long term issues like we talked about a few moments ago. To how we accommodate the different parts of the population, how we have a plan for governance. There is a lot that the military can do, but it is extraordinarily important that our diplomats our Department State, our other development agencies, others are involved in -- in this particular process and that we have a very ...

(CROSSTALK)

DAVIS: My question is, are they?

VOTEL: I believe they are. I feel very confident that we are -- we are working with our partners on...

THORNBERRY: Mr. Coffman.

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

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

In the Iraqi constitution there is a provision that was insisted by the Kurds that allows provinces to band together and to create semi autonomous regions. Should in fact the Sunni Arabs look at that issue we encourage that. It just seems like without a path where they have some say -- and they're only 20 percent of the population in the in their future. Essentially, right now all the revenue basically is from oil, most of the revenue.

And so and that's distributed by the central government out of Baghdad and so it's a tough position that they're in. And so do you have a view on that particular issue?

VOTEL: Well, Congressman, as you know our policy is one -- one Iraq right now and so that that's -- that's as we apply our military operations, that's the context in which -- which we do that. I would agree with you though that there has to be a very serious look at this.

And there has to -- we have to ensure that the different parts of Iraq are represented in their government in other things that are their military and other security apparatuses and other aspects. And they have an opportunity to take advantage of the economic opportunity that's available in Iraq.

So I certainly think there has to be a much -- much -- a broader discussion about how we do that.

COFFMAN: I -- I would hope that that would be something that our government would look at from your standpoint. From a diplomatic standpoint, in terms of encouraging the government, because the fact is it's still -- it's still the vertically integrated government that we had left -- that was in place, you know prior to the fall of Saddam Hussein.



Where really all decisions are centralized out of Bagdad. Of -- I mean there is no system of taxation at the provincial level. And so I just think that a decentralization of -- of -- of authority that the Kurds now enjoy would be great for the -- for the Sunni Arabs, and I would just like that to be something that that we look at. And -- and I would express my same concerns.

Having served there in 2005, 2006 for the Marine Corps, that the Ranking Member expressed, in that this is a -- this is a tough situation for the Sunni Arabs in that -- in that -- in that region, and the friction between these Shia militias that are Iranian backed and that local population is -- is -- is not to be discounted. And -- and again, is that alienation from ever feeling that they're part of -- of -- of the Iraqi government.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

THORNBERRY: Mr. Larsen?

LARSEN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thanks, General for coming today. Initially in your answer to your first question about the Mosul incident, you said that you're going to assess, and if necessary investigate.

Can you help me understand that distinction from your perspective? What does that mean for...

VOTEL: Absolutely so, you know this -- this is unfortunately not the first time we've had allegations of some civilian casualties in -- in CENTCOM. And so what we do have is a -- is a process in -- in place for how we -- how we -- how we'd standardize process for how we'd look at this. And we get -- first thing it starts with the receipt of an allegation.

We get allegations from all over the place. We get it from the news, we get it social media room, we might get it from people on the street, we might get it -- we may -- much of it is self-reported if we see something, so we can allegation. What we do then, is we do what we call a credibility assessment. And

the intention there is to do an initial review of the facts and circumstances to -- to merit -- make a determination about whether we need to move to a more fulsome investigation.

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

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

LARSEN: And you mentioned on this the criteria that you're looking, there's command-and-control, there's a few others. What were those?

VOTEL: Thanks. So you know, we'll look at -- we'll look at command-and-control, we'll look at the intelligence that we had. This was a -- this was a very dynamic situation. So this wasn't a deliberate -- a deliberate target or anything else. This was an evolving combat situation.

So we'll take a look at the intelligence that was provided to us by the Iraqis that we had. We will look at -- at -- at the enemy's reactions here and we'll try to understand exactly their role in this. We will look at the munitions that we employed here, and we'll look at the fusing options. You know we do have the technology largely supported by Congress here to have -- to have munitions that can be very specific.

I think as you heard General Townsend say yesterday, the munitions that was employed here should not have created the effects that -- that -- that we -- that have been observed. so that causes us to -- to look at that to see if there are other -- other things he may have contributed that as -- as well. So what we do is try to -- try to be more very complete in the investigation. It takes a little bit time, but we usually them pretty good answer at the end of it.

LARSEN: All right, thanks.

Kind of switch gears to Yemen. And could you -- could you just briefly describe the U.S. security objectives in Yemen for us?

VOTEL: Well, thanks. I think there's two principle interests that we're concerned about in Yemen right now.

One is that Yemen is not used as a platform or a sanctuary for attacks on the homeland. And that gets to our focus on Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, Al Qaida in Yemen. This is the franchise of Al Qaida that has demonstrated in the past the ability to try to attack our homeland. And some of those people are still -- exist there.

So to -- that's a key aspect of our interest there and so our operations are focused on disrupting and -- Al Qaida there. The other key interest that we have in this particular area is freedom of navigation. On Western Coast of Yemen between it and the horn of Africa is Bab-el-Mandeb. It's an extraordinarily restrictive strait.

It is a chokepoint, it is a major transit area for commerce, not only ours but for international ships. About 60 to 70 ships go through there a day. What we have seen is we have seen, I believe, that the -- at the -- with the support of Iran, we have seen the migration of capabilities that we previously observed in the Straits of Hormuz, a layered defense, consists of coastal defense missiles and radar systems, mines, explosive boats that have been migrated from the Straits of Hormuz to this particular area right here, threatening commerce and ships and our security operations in that particular area.

LARSEN: Just -- can you -- do you assess that we'll be able to stay with those objectives, we won't be dragged into other -- other people's goals?

VOTEL: Well of course, as you know, there is a civil war ongoing right there that it is playing out between a Saudi-led coalition and -- and that Iranian-supported element. And so there, you know, we provide some indirect support to that.

Obviously this is something we're paying very, very close attention to and while that rages, it does have -- it does have some impact on -- on our other -- on our principal interests in this area so I think we do have to pay some attention to that.

THORNBERRY: Mr. Cook.

COOK: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It's -- next month or so, it's going to be very intense here in Washington. Obviously there's been a lot of talk about healthcare but there's also something looming, at least in my mind, is going to have direct implication on you. And that's the Continuing Resolution. That's the budget that we have got to pass to support you. And I'm going to be very candid, you don't have to answer totally.

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

VOTEL: Thank you, Congressman.

And -- so first off, I -- the support that I get from the services is extraordinary. They give me everything that I ask for and I've been well taken care of by that. But I share your concern on the impacts of Continuing Resolution on the services and on SOCOM that really provide the capabilities that a combatant commander like I need to have. And so I am concerned when we are not able to pursue long term programs and fund them and approach them over time.

I am concerned with the impacts that -- that continuing resolutions and other -- other instruments here have had on readiness. For example I just -- I look at the Muarges (ph) that the Marine Corp provides the into my area, as well as in the AFRICOM, and the EUCOM area. They don't come with all of the same number of helicopters that we've had in the past. I believe that's a readiness issue. And it impacts my ability to have flexibility and agility and react to things in -- in the area.

So I am very concerned about this and -- and while, you know, the money won't necessarily come to me, it goes to the people to provide me the capabilities I need to -- to pursue our objectives in this area. So I am -- I am very concerned about this.

COOK: I want to switch gears a little bit. I'm also on foreign affairs and you know we have the issue that continually pops up about the foreign military sales. And the last year looked at the replacement for the Saudis -- the number of M1 battle tanks that they had lost. And sometimes you alluded to it, there was question about Yemen and everything else and toll that -- that has taken there.

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

VOTEL: Congressman we absolutely do. We do that through our security cooperation offices that are located in many of these countries -- almost all the countries that we -- that we have here. And I -- and I would share your -- share your concern about this. FMF and FMS are extraordinarily important programs for us.

From my perspective as a combatant commander, what I want to try do is build capability for our partners to do the thing -- to -- to provide their own security and then to be integrated with us. And I am concerned when we choose not to sell our systems or provide them to them. They will go somewhere else to get them and they will get lesser systems they won't get the sustainment, they won't get the training and we won't be integrated and it doesn't help us.

So I think we have to-- we have to recognize that this is an important part of our security cooperation aspect and we can't completely define our FMF or FMS systems as something to try to change people's behavior that's -- that's certainly an aspect of it, but it's got to be focused on building capability in my mind.

COOK: Thank you, again for your service and for your candor today. I yield back.

THORNBERRY: Mr. Courtney.

COURTNEY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you, General for your testimony this morning.

I was wondering if you could help clarify what's going on right now in terms of increased deployments in Syria? Again this month -- again from a whole variety of news outlets it was reported about 400 or 500 Marines were deployed. New Marines or a new contingent of Marines this month. You know, why was that decision made and what is their mission?

VOTEL: Thank you.

So Congressman, what we are constantly doing is this is an evolving campaign and we -- we are -- you know the enemy changes. We change and the situation changes a lot on ground. What we are constantly trying to do is -- is assess what our requirements are and how we best support our partners through our kind of by, with and approach -- by, with and through approach, here. And make sure we have the capabilities to -- to fully enable them and to help them win.

So there is a constant process of assessing what we need. I -- I demand that our leaders forward, General Townsend in this particular case provides rationale for the additional capabilities that he needs and that we have very, very clear roles and missions Roles and missions for the things that -- that we are bringing forward. And so what -- what we have -- we do have a very deliberate process, and what you have seen here, most recently are not things that just came up relatively quickly.

These have been things that we have anticipated for some time. You cited for example, the Marines and some of the artillery organizations. We have recognized that -- that as we continue to pursue our military objectives in Syria, we are going to need more direct all weather fire support capability for our -- for our Syrian democratic force partners. And so this -- this -- that is what you are seeing.

So they have deployed, they are helping us with that particular aspect, they are also helping us with some of our logistics capability in -- in -- in Syria. Syria is a fairly immature area for us in terms that, so we -- we don't have a big infrastructure like we have in Iraq or some other places here, so we do need some help in those particular areas.

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

COURTNEY: So -- well, thank you for that answer. And again, I don't actually want to second-guess your sort of military judgment, but what I -- I would -- it sounds like they're starting to get much sort of deeper involved in the fight in Raqqa.

And I guess you know we -- we voted a couple years ago on this committee and defense authorization bills have been extending Title X authorization which, in -- in my opinion as someone who supported that, it was not about troops on -- boots on the ground, direct military involvement, but this sounds like it -- we're sort of creeping in that direction.

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

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

COURTNEY: Thank you.

Again, I mean there's a larger question here about the fact that I think the authorization of use of force is long overdue for a revisit, but that's our problem, not on your side. During the time that you been at Central command, the carrier gap phenomenon has been occurring again from, I think '07 to 2015. We had continuous presence of carriers and strike -- airstrikes against ISIS. I mean how you coping with that?

VOTEL: Thank you for -- thank you for bringing it up. I think this is another example of some actual readiness concerns here. So the way that we do that is, what we have done is we work with -- through our -- through our -- really, through our air and maritime commanders in theater.

So we have on occasion brought in additional Air Force organizations to help fill in the gap in those particular cases. We just completed that with -- with a -- with the squadron from the United States that came in and did an exceptional job for us for about 90 days. And we also look to our -- our -- our allies -- our partners to do this.

The U.K., the French have -- have searched for their ships down in this particular area to help make up for this gap as well. So this is a constant management process for us. We expect to do this now. It's the environment which we're operating here.

We're always looking for ways we can kind of balance out the what our requirements are, what the -- what the whole joint force -- whole joint and combined force that's available to us.

LARSEN: Thank you.

THORNBERRY: Dr. Wenstrup? WENSTRUP: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, General, for being with us today. Appreciate that very much. You know, we perceive that we are in the process of increasing our -- and/or our allies capacity and capabilities in the fight against ISIS right now.

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

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



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

VOTEL: I -- it hasn't significantly altered our approach here at this particular point but I think what they are attempting to do is they are attempting to be an influential third party here in Afghanistan. I think they are reaching out to the Taliban and they have made the decision under their own determination that the government of Afghanistan and the coalition that supports them is unable to solve the concern about ISIS and they -- I think they are much more concerned about ISIS and the potential that has to move into the Central Asian states and potentially have an impact on them.

And so they have created a -- created a narrative that -- that you really have to partner more with the Taliban to address this particular threat and they are trying to leverage that into a bigger role in terms of, I think, trying to pursue peace agreements and other things with the Taliban.

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

WENSTRUP: So does that change your -- your behavior in any way with their presence?

VOTEL: I don't think it has -- it has changed our behavior. We have been working with our Afghan partners, we have been extraordinarily focused on the Islamic State as its emerged in Afghanistan. We have -- actually I believe had a significant amount of success against them. We've reduced them from about 15 districts that they were operating into to about two.

We're targeting a lot of their leaders right now. We have persistent pressure on them all the time. So it has not -- it has not impacted our approach.

WENSTRUP: OK. Thank you, General. Appreciate it.

I yield back.

THORNBERRY: Ms. Tsongas.

TSONGAS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and it's good to have you with us today, General. Appreciate very much your taking the time here and want to thank you for your service to our nation as well as the remarkable women and men who are serving in some of the most contested parts of the world.

We're forever grateful. And I appreciated listening to your opening statement as well as reading your written remarks which I think illustrates so clearly the threat posed by ISIL, Al Qaida , and other affiliated groups in the region. And certainly make clear that there are no easy answers given the seriousness and complexity of the challenge to reverse ISIL' gains. TSONGAS: But I'm also concerned about the steady buildup of U.S. forces in the region, most especially in Syria. Absent a robust debate in Congress on an authorization for the use of military force. Something Secretary Mattis called for last week before the Senate Armed Services Committee. And I was glad to see that. I'm concerned that additive deployments may lead to an expansive, open-ended commitment.

I think you referenced an evolving campaign that could have long term consequences raising substantial and unpredictable risks that haven't been fully considered or endorsed by congress as a whole.

I'm also mindful of the human toll and the countries where we are waging the fight against ISIL and how mounting civilian casualties, tragic in and of themselves as you yourself said, can ultimately work against our long term interests in setting the conditions for stability. And I appreciate your redressing in -- addressing it in your opening remarks, but I also appreciate the important work that international groups are playing in monitoring civilian casualties.

As reported in the Washington Post yesterday, quote, "According to Airwars -- a group that you are familiar with, which is a British monitoring group -- that the frequency of civilian deaths alleged to be linked to U.S. strikes in Iraq and Syria has now outpaced those linked to Russia.

The scrutiny has been compounded by a string of high profile reported US attacks in both countries, including assaults on a Mosque, a school and most recently a building apparently used as a shelter in the Rocky sitter -- Iraqi city of Mosul that is currently being investigated appropriately so."

These reports come alongside indications that the administration is considering relaxing the rules of engagement put in place by the Obama administration, which made a concerted effort at avoiding civilian deaths and you have said today that there has not been such a change. And I have read that you have said that the call coalition will quote, "Take extraordinary measures to avoid harming civilians," unquote.

So can you tell us how you balance the pursuit of very important military objectives with those extraordinary measures? And in particular when fighting an enemy that intentionally places civilians in harms way, we all we all know that, how much risk should the U.S. and its civilian coalition partners except in limiting air or artillery strikes where it may be difficult to confirm civilian presence, especially in Mosul, where civilians have been directed to shelter in place.

So there are so many still there. It seems to be an extraordinary challenge and I'm curious as to how you are thinking this through in order to minimize civilian casualties?

VOTEL: I thank you Congresswoman for your question there.

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

Their judgment, their experience is the best thing to ensure with this. We -- as we go through this, you know, and with our with our unseen commanders that are very, very close to this -- I think the key thing that we do emphasize to them is we -- we go to war with our with our values. We hold ourselves to a higher accountability -- a higher standard with respect this.

And of course we always operated in accordance with the law of armed conflict. And we do everything that we can to prevent this. And what we try to do is we try to work that through our leadership and -- and ensure they understand the obligation that we -- that we all expect. And that as they carry out these obligations in what are extraordinary complex and difficult situations that they are making the best judgments and best decisions that they can based on the information that they have.

And in -- and I will tell you that in -- in many -- many -- many cases they -- they are making the right calls. I have visited -- I visit Iraq every month and I talked to advise and assist teams and I hear about -- about operations that we support. But I will tell you, at the same pace, I hear about operations where we choose not to strike or we choose not to do something because it didn't look right, we couldn't confirm what was going on, we didn't have a good situational awareness.

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

TSONGAS: Trust, but verify processes.

VOTEL: Right.

THORNBERRY: Mr. Russell?

RUSSELL: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, it's good to see again.

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

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

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

General Votel, you spoke of the need to use the other instruments of national power. There's a number of areas that we obviously see a need to do that, you've spoken to a lot of them. But I guess one of the most troubling things that gets the least amount of attention is Yemen and as we would see the Gulf of Aden now slip into a possible future Hormuz Strait, there's serious implication with that.

We've got 60 percent of the human population now that is malnourished. We got opportunities to do a lot of good things with President Hadi and -- and other efforts. The foreign military sales being crucial, the foreign engagement being crucial, if you could design it where you engage the other instruments of national power to support the coalition efforts as well as the CENTCOM efforts, what would it look like? What would you want that other engagement to be other than just the military?

VOTEL: Thanks, Congressman.

I think that -- you know, certainly one of the things that has to be addressed, as you've kind of highlighted here, is we have to -- we have to resolve the civil conflict that's --that's taken place there. That -- that -- that creates an environment that makes it extraordinarily difficult for us to be -- as made it difficult for us to be persistent in our efforts against -- against Al Qaida.

It's -- it's caused us to break relationships we had with Yemeni forces that we developed the records years, and it's given rise to the threat that -- that we've -- that we've already talked about this morning in -- in the Bab-el-Mandeb in the Red Sea, an area where we have 60 to 70 ships go through every day, and not just U.S., but international ships go through there.

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

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

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

VOTEL: I do and I would highlight to you that we have some very good partners in the area. Certainly Saudi Arabia on the edges here and the United Arab Emirates have been extraordinary partners for us and they have good relationships here so I do see -- I do see the ability to reestablish some of these partnerships again.

RUSSELL: Thank you and thank you, Mr. Chairman.

THORNBERRY: Ms. Rosen.

ROSEN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, General Votel for your very great insights today. I want to switch back to Iran for a moment. You know, you said you believe that Iran is one of the greatest threats to the U.S. today.

So if that's true and your assessment is true that their overall objective is to be the most powerful in the region, then to pursue this end, do you believe Iran has increased destabilizing activity since the JCPOA? And if they have, how should we react those alleged activities without risking escalation with -- and other conflicts in the region?

VOTEL: Congresswoman, I do believe they have and I believe that Iran is operating what I call a grey zone. And it's an area between normal competition between states and just short of open conflict. And they are exploiting this area in a variety of different ways.

They do it through -- through raising surrogate forces, they do it through lethal aid facilitation. They do it through their own cyber activities and they do it through their influence operations. And I think they -- they are clearly focused in this particular area and I think they have -- their efforts have increased in this particular -- in this particular area.

I think the things that we need to do is -- I think there are three broad things and I've had an opportunity to talk with some of our regional partners about it. I think we need to look at opportunities where we can disrupt through military means or other means, their activities. Particularly their facilitation aspects here. I think we need to look at opportunities where we can expose and hold them accountable for the things that they are doing. That has to be done. They have to account for their destabilize -- the destabilizing role that they are playing in the region right now.

And finally, I think we do have to address their revolutionary ideology. And that has to be addressed and certainly we play a role in that but others in the region do as well. Iran has a role in the region, there's no doubt about that and I want to be clear that we think differently about the people of Iran than we think about the leadership of Iran, the revolutionary council that runs Iran.

In my mind, those are two very distinct things and our concern is not with the people of Iran but it is with their revolutionary government.

ROSEN: Thank you. And I'd just like to switch a little bit to the greater geopolitical tensions in the region. Is terrorism really the most pressing threats emanating from the Middle East? And what's our best way to exert our influence, if that's true against those threats?

VOTEL: Well, Congresswoman, I think terrorism is what is being manifested out of -- out of what are really deep underlying issues that pervade this region. There are some serious secretarian issues across - across the region that have to -- that have to be addressed. There are disenfranchised populations. There is economic disparity between governments and the people that they -- that they lead.

And so these -- these deep underlying issues in many cases still remain across the region. And those have to be -- those have to be addressed and -- I think the way that we see this -- this -- this being manifested is in violent extremism that we see the rise of ISIS.

When go back and look at why that came up the -- the -- the desire for young men and in some cases young women to join organizations like Al Qaida or ISIS. They are looking for a job. They're looking for money. They're looking for relationships. They're looking for economic opportunity that may not (inaudible) community.

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

ROSEN: So considering that we're going to be -- creating a bill fairly soon. Where do we best put our resources to fight this? What -- what do you need?

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

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

ROSEN: Wonderful, thank you.

THORNBERRY: Ms. McSally.

MCSALLY: Thank you Mr. Chairman.

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



VOTEL: Congresswoman I do not know that number.

MCSALLY: I mean there's media reports. I'd love to hear back from you on what you think the number is. But it's in the tens of thousands, is that probably fair?

VOTEL: I think that's fair.

MCSALLY: Thank you.

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

More for my colleagues, I want to make sure we understand what the laws of armed conflict are. That if we have a legitimate target, we do everything we can to minimize civilian casualties, but we're not allowed to target civilians, we never target civilians. Is ISIS targeting civilians

VOTEL: I believe they are.

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

VOTEL: Yes it is.

MCSALLY: So ISIS is violating the laws of armed conflict. For again -- for my -- my colleagues the -- the standard for the LOAC is that we make feasible precautions towards limiting civilian casualties, while we're hitting legitimate military targets. The last administration went above and beyond this, far higher

than I've ever seen before in my 26 years in the military, using near certainty that no civilian's will be killed.

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

So this -- what General Dunlap calls a moral hazard of inaction of us doing nothing on legitimate targets because of this near certainty standards, from my view, actually allow the terrorist free reign to continue to kill civilians, tens of thousands. And also I now believe that what we're seeing the change here is that ISIS know that they can use human shields to avoid being hit. It's their air defense system.

Additionally, it's my view that as we move closer into the urban combat in the Mosul and they're using human shields civilian casualties are going to go up. This is a horrible element of war that ISIS started this war.

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

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

MCSALLY: Great, thank you. I look forward to continuing to talk to you in the classified realm. But look, this all line of thinking that somehow because we're engaging the enemy -- and -- and unfortunately again, the investigation is ongoing on this latest attack us.

Somehow it's our fault that as we're engaging the enemy that perhaps civilians are being killed either by mistake or because the enemy is using a tactic that actually have them become part of the target. That is

on them, not on us, and if we -- if we then move back further and allow more terrorist to live to fight another day because of this narrative, then we're going to actually open up more civilians to be killed by these terrorists.

Is that a fair line of thinking?

VOTEL: I -- I -- I share your concern, congresswoman.

MCSALLY: Great, thank you.

I also want to ask -- and maybe this is more for the classified setting, when we're identifying combatants and non-combatants -- this used to be a pet peeve of mine, sometimes I'd be in VTC's where we're getting ready to schwack (ph) some bad guys in Somali, and I would hear the terminology of whether there is women and children versus men. There are combatants and non-combatants. And what we saw in Yemen is we had a bunch of women that were actually shooting at our -- our troops. That's been reported in the media. So can you confirm with me that we're still using the terms and our analysis of combatants and noncombatant, and we're not making assumptions that just because you're a woman, you're not a combatant? That is not the law of armed conflict.

VOTEL: We -- we -- we do think of that -- and look at it that way.

MCSALLY: OK, great. Thank you.

Thanks Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

THORNBERRY: Mr. Langevin?

LANGEVIN: Thank you Mr. Chairman.

General Votel, welcome back before the committee. I want to thank you for your testimony, but most especially if you service and the men and women who serve under you.

We're grateful for all you do to defend the nation. as our cyber capabilities are maturing, particularly with the U.S. cyber command are being stood up and the training and deploying about our cyber mission teams, can you please discuss with us your views on the impact of our cyber operations against ISIL, how effective they have been a what more can be done to enhance them?

VOTEL: Thank you, Congressman.

And I -- and I look forward enough to talk about this the classified setting as well. But what I can tell you here is that I think with the great support of Admiral Rogers and the -- and the team at -- at cyber command, we have a forged a very close relationship between CENTCOM, cyber command and their subordinate elements. And I would throw SOCOM in there as well.

That has allowed us to use this capability to have effects against this particular enemy. And I do think we are starting from there where we didn't have much experience in this, We are actually creating effects on the ground. I would share with you that this is an extraordinarily, extraordinarily savvy enemy and so they have capabilities in this area and we will need to continue to evolve in this.

I would also add that some of our partners, some of our coalition partners have unique capabilities in this area and they have been well-integrated into this as well. So I do think we are beginning to have good effects with this but there certainly is more that we need to do.

LANGEVIN: Good. And I look forward to following up and getting some more details when we get into the classified session. Let me ask you this; in your opinion, is the current Joint Task Force Ares Command and Control construct effective, efficient, synchronized, and deconflicted with other operations taking place in the CENTCOM area of responsibility? Or -- and also, how would you characterize support and integration with teams from U.S. CYBERCOM?

VOTEL: I think -- I think they're excellent in both cases. In fact when we recently hosted a congressional delegation down at CENTCOM to talk about the things we're doing, we actually invited JTF Ares to come in and be part of that because we consider them to be that close of a team member.

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

LANGEVIN: Thank you.

Another topic, we obviously rely heavily on special operations forces for operations around the globe. The authorities and capabilities of SOCOM allow us obviously to keep the footprint small and carry out unique activities.

However, that utility may have led to an overreliance on SOF. As the former SOCOM commander and current CENTCOM commander, what are your concerns in this regard? And what actions can we take to decrease the high demand for SOF around the globe such as increasing eventual forces training capability?

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

So I do support -- you know, obviously the very continued support of them. I will tell you, one of the things that does concern me a little bit about SOCOM and some of the very unique capabilities that they have is that many of them are heavily leveraged in OCO. Some of the very unique capabilities -- again, we can talk about these in a classified session, are very heavily leveraged in OCO.

And that concerns me about the sustainability of concern to me as a SOCOM commander and now it concerns me as a CENTCOM commander who are very dependent on that. So I am concerned about that. I think we need stabilize that and I think we need to make the commitment to give SOCOM the things they need to serve the nation.

Beyond that, Congressman, I would tell you one of the things I am most proud of being the SOCOM commander -- or being the CENTCOM commander, is the very close relationship between our SOF forces and our conventional forces. It is almost indistinguishable how they are able to operate and that comes for a variety of reasons. Certainly our experience over the last 15 or 16 years working together and the fact that a lot of our leaders know each other, not just professionally, but personally, but I -- I want to assure the committee and I want to assure the American people that we are fighting the enemy together. We're not fighting each other here and that was not always the case in the military.

But I am very pleased with how our conventional and SOF forces are working very, very closely together with our interagency partners as well.

LANGEVIN: Very good, General.

Well, as a former SOCOM commander, I have great confidence that you're going to balance that force just right and you're in a unique position So thank you for what you're doing, I look forward to the classified section.

I yield back.

THORNBERRY: Mr. Bacon.

BACON: Thank you Mr. Chairman.

And I want to thank General Votel for your leadership and your team. So many challenging problems in your AOR and it's not just one, two, three, it's just hard.

So I know you and your team work very hard at that and we appreciate it. I'm -- associated with the comments to some of our colleagues here that say that we need to get a congressional authorization for force, I think we do. I think what we did in 2001 and 2003 aren't applicable. And I feel like we've got to work towards that in Congress.

And I also wanted to say that I agree with your comments on Iran. I think you're right on target. My fourth deployment there, I think when I was in there 2007 and 2008, I believe roughly half of our service men and women were killed due to actions from Iran with the explosive -- or the EFP's and various support they were given to the Shia militias. And I dare say it would be probably about a 1,000 of our service men and women over time are killed due to their Iranian actions.

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

VOTEL: I do Congressman. I think we do have the -- the outline of a -- of a -- of a good strategy to address the things that you're -- that you're highlighting here. As you are aware, one of the first things that the new administration did was direct the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State to come up with a plan to address and defeat ISIS more -- more completely.

And I think the acknowledgement of that is both the Department of Defense, Department of State and many others in the government here. I think is an acknowledgement that we need to -- that we do need to do that. We need to go after their finances, we need to go after where they are physically, we need to go after the conditions that give rise to these particular organizations.

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

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

BACON: One follow on. In 2007 and 2008 we had great success, largely because the Sunni tribes came over and started helping us against the fight -- against Al Qaida. I think on a grander level we need to have that Sunni help, like you're alluding to. But our agreement with Iran, I believe undermined the trust of many of the Sunni countries.

I've heard that from some of our Sunni friends, because I think they fear Iran, just as much as they do ISIS in many cases. Have you seen that same trend when you talk to our Sunni friends? Is there concerns with what we did the past two years, three years with Iran? And have you seen that undermine that ability with us to work with our Sunni friends?

VOTEL: Truthfully, Congressman I have. I've had Sunni leaders and other Arab leaders tell me that -- that -- that same thing. And so I know there is -- certainly is a perception out there about and as you know, oftentimes perception is truth in -- in -- in many quarters here. VOTEL: So that is why is why I think one of the key things that we have continued to emphasize with our people and with the -- with the -- with our leadership is the importance of building and rebuilding trust with our partners in the region.

These are -- there are difficult situations here and they're not all perfect but we have to -- I think it is better to be engaged with them and to be their preferred partner.

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

BACON: Thank you very much.

And Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

THORNBERRY: Mr. Lamborn?

LAMBORN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And General, thank you for the job that you're doing, and I'm so glad you are there now, especially given your -- your past track record.



When it comes to Yemen, I'm really glad that we are taking steps now to support our allies in the area and our friends in the area. When I've talked to people from the Emirates, for instance, their -- their concern is and ISIS them. That's a concern, but they're concerned about Yemen and that Iranian proxy war that's going on there.

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

VOTEL: Well, Congressman, it's still a bit early. I mean I think there are some vital -- you have to be very, very concerned about (inaudible), that it will impact...

(AUDIO GAP)

VOTEL: ... them. That's -- that's...

(AUDIO GAP)

LAMBORN: ... it is seemingly double...

(AUDIO GAP)

VOTEL: ... specific indicate...

(AUDIO GAP)

VOTEL: Well, congressman, I -- I -- as I mentioned a little earlier, I mean I there are some vitally -- you have to be very, very concerned about (inaudible) that it will impact...

(AUDIO GAP)

WILSON: ... through the Iraqi army success.

VOTEL: Thank you, Congressman. And let me just -- just say on behalf of CENTCOM, we appreciate all the contributions of team Wilson there, and we -- we are very, very grateful it. Turning to -- turning to Mosul, the Iraqi security forces are making, I think good progress.

This has been extraordinarily challenging fight. It took them about 100 days to secure the eastern side of the -- of the city. They did that, at a cost of 490 killed and about just over 3000 wounded. So it is an extraordinary price that they paid for that. They very quickly were able to get themselves focused on the western part of the city and they are now engaged in -- in what -- what we're seeing is a very, very, very difficult fight there.

Some of their elements are -- are engaged in what is known as the old city, here, a very dense urban area; much, much more complex and much more favors the defender than it does the attacker. And so they have got their -- their hands full as they -- as they do this. I would just note that the Iraqi security forces -- so -- just so far in about 37 days have sustained about 284 killed and a little over 1600 wounded in -- in the western part of the city.

The keys to success here have been I think the very close relationship they had with both U.S. and coalition advise and assist teams and the ability for the Iraqi Security Forces to come together. As you know, institutionally they -- they've got some challenges here. They've got federal police that answer to the Ministry of Interior, they've got Iraqi Army that answers to Ministry of Defense. They've got counterterrorism forces that answer to the Counterterrorism Directorate.

And so these are all separate ministries, but what they have been able to do successfully is get a common commander in place among all of those different pillars of security here who really performs a very good integrating fashion. And so they are operating much better in conjunction and in synchronization with each other and I think that has -- that has really paid off.

And what is -- what has been a very difficult and will continue to be a very difficult fight in the weeks and perhaps months ahead.

WILSON: It's so important. The American people need to know the city is over a million persons. It's the second largest city in the country of Iraq and how important it is that it be liberated and the subjugation and oppression that the people must have faced in the last year, two years.

And it was so encouraging for all of us last week on the Foreign Affairs Committee to have the opportunity to be with Prime Minister Abadi. I'd met him in Baghdad last month and it's just so impressive and also the Minister of Defense Hiyali. Again, it's just -- that country I think has very positive leadership for you to work with.

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

VOTEL: Well, as you know, they've been focused on -- I think mostly focused on helping the regime accomplish some of their objectives in the Western part of the country and they, I think, have been successful with that. I think Russia has achieved probably many of the objectives that they set out to -- to pursue as they got in there. A government that's favorable to them access to ports, access to airfields, influence in the region.

So I think they have accomplished that. They have, I think, begun to -- they are continuing to support regime forces now in this case as they fight ISIS. So to the extent that they are doing that, that is -- that is, I would admit, helpful to what we're doing. I would share with you, Congressman, that we do share a very congested airspace with the would share with you, Congressman, that we do share a very congested airspace with the Russians.

We have a deconfliction mechanism in place. It is generally a very professional interchange. We talk with them very frequently to coordinate -- not to coordinate but to -- to deconflict our operations in what is a very compressed airspace over -- over northern -- northern Syria. That generally goes pretty well, we are looking to make that a little bit more robust to ensure that we continue our freedom of action here as we continue to pursue the campaign.

WILSON: Thank you very much.

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

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