

Senate Committee on Armed Services Hearing On U.S. Central Command and U.S. Africa Command  
Subject: U.S. Central Command/U.S. Africa Command

Witnesses: Army Gen. Joseph Votel, commander of the U.S. Central Command; and Marine Corps Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, testify

Location: 216 Hart Senate Office Building

Time: 9:30 am EDT, Date: Thursday, March 9th, 2017

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MCCAIN: Good morning. The Senate Armed Services Committee meets this morning to receive testimony on the posture of U.S. Central command and Africa Command.

We're pleased welcome our witnesses General Votel and General Waldhauser. We thank each of you for your decades of distinguished service and for leadership of our men and women in uniform. More than a decade and a half since the September 11 terrorist attacks our nation is still at war with terrorists that seek to attack our homeland, our interests, our allies and our partners in this fight. Our military service members are doing everything we ask of them from North Africa, to the Middle East, to South Asia.

Thanks for your tremendous talent and dedication we have made important tactical and operational progress. Our military has gradually eroded ISIS's territorial control and removed key personnel from the battlefield. ISIS has been expelled from its Libyan stronghold in Sirte and I am confident that soon the same will be true in Mosul and Raqqah. Our military has kept up the pressure on terrorists operating countries like Yemen and Somalia.

And in Afghanistan we've kept Al Qaida on the run and helped our Afghan partners hold the line against renewed Taliban assaults, but much to the frustration of the American people, this hard-won tactical progress has not led to enduring strategic gains.

In fact, the sad reality is America strategic position in the Middle East is weaker today than it was eight years ago and the positions of Vladimir Putin's Russia and Iranian regime and its terrorist proxies have improved. This is not a military failure. Instead it is a failure of strategy a failure of policy and, most of all, a failure of leadership.

The fact is, for at least the last eight years we have tried to isolate the fight against terrorism from its geopolitical context, or as General Mattis put it, two years ago, we have been living in a, quote, "Strategy free environment," unquote, for quite some time. The result is that we have failed to address and at times exacerbated the underlying conflict, the struggles for power and sectarian identity now raging across the Middle East.

We've been unable or unwilling to either ask or answer basic questions about American policy in the region. We've been reluctant to act and when compelled to do so have pursued only the most limited and incremental actions. We are fighting ISIS in Syria, but ignoring the Syrian Civil War that was its -- its genesis and fuels it to this day. We are fighting ISIS in Iraq, but failing to address the growing influence of Iran. We are fighting Al Qaida in Afghanistan by pretending the Taliban is no longer our problem We are fighting Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen but refraining from confronting the threat posed by Iran's Houthi proxies.

In short, we're treating the symptoms and ignoring disease and we should not be surprised at the results, a Middle East aflame, America's influence squandered America's adversaries embolden, America's friends disheartened and America's policy options narrowed and worsened. This is an unfortunate inheritance of the new administration.

Yet as difficult and complex as our challenges are in the Middle East, we have an opportunity to chart a new and different course. Seizing this opportunity will require more than just a plan for the accelerated defeat of ISIS. We have to raise our sights, look beyond the tactical and operational fight, and start answering some basic but difficult strategic questions. What enduring objectives do we hope to achieve across the Middle East? How will we achieve those goals? And on what timeline? And at what cost?

In Iraq, Mosul will be retaken eventually, but that will only likely reignite the battle for the future of Iraq. A battle in which we have an important stake. What is America's policy and strategy to deal with the problems that lie ahead? Combating the malign influence of Iran and its militias, addressing the future of the Kurds and their place in Iraq and extenuating the -- the disenfranchisement of Sunni Iraqis that give rise to ISIS in the first place. Likewise, in Syria.

I believe Raqqah will eventually be liberated. But the closer we come to that day, the more it becomes clear that we cannot avoid difficult questions about Syria any longer. What is America's policy and strategy concerning a political transition in Syria? The future of Assad and his regime? The fate of the Kurds in Syria? And the influence of extremes forces from Sunni terrorists to Iranian backed militias? MCCAIN: In short, what is America's vision of an end-state in Syria? In Libya, the ISIS stronghold in Sirte has been degraded. But what remains is a divided nation littered with independent militias, flooded with arms and searching in vain for legitimate governance and political unity. What is America's policy and strategy for addressing these conditions which, unless confronted, will make Libya fertile ground for extremism and anti-Western terrorism?

In Afghanistan, we have settled for a strategy don't lose. And the result is that last month General Nicholson testified before this committee that this war now in a stalemate after 15 years of fighting. After 15 years of fighting, we're in a stalemate. What is America's policy and strategy for rolling back a resurgent Taliban? For addressing terrorist sanctions within Pakistan's borders and pushing back against Iranian and Russian meddling?

In short, what does victory look like in Afghanistan and what is our strategy for achieving it? Across the region, Russian and Iranian influence is growing at America's expense. Russia and Iran even hosted Syrian peace talks in Moscow last year without America present at the table. Russia's cruise missiles crisscross the while its aircraft indiscriminately target Syrian civilians.

Iran's proxies yield -- wield lethal rockets and ballistic missiles with impunity, sensing that the nuclear shield from -- that the nuclear deal shield them from American pressure. What is America's policy and strategy to counter Russian and Iranian malign influence that often manifests itself below the threshold of open conflict? How do we restore the trust of our regional allies and partners and convince them to forgo hedging strategies that only add to uncertainty and instability? These are the major policy and strategy questions hanging in the balance.

The stakes are high not just for the stability of the Middle East and Africa but for America's national security. It is not the job of our witnesses to provide answers to these questions. That is a job of the president, his administration, and the Congress. We owe our witnesses and the men and women they lead unambiguous national security priorities, clarity in our strategic thinking, and an unwavering commitment to provide them the resources required to support the necessary courses of action.

Once again, I want to thank our witnesses for appearing before the committee today and I look forward to hearing how the military efforts will help us achieve favorable strategic outcomes.

Senator Reed.

REED: Thank you, Mr. Chairman and thank you to our witnesses not only for your appearing here today but for your extraordinary service to the nation over many, many years and also please relay our thanks to the men and women that you lead and we appreciate their efforts extraordinarily so.

You are in a situation of very challenging times in all the areas of operation. This hearing is especially timely given unfolding events on the ground in Iraq and Syria and reported completion of a strategy to accelerate efforts against ISIS. Our assistance to partners on the ground is helping them to make steady progress in reclaiming areas of Iraq and Syria once held by ISIS, most notably in Mosul.

However, the situation in Syria seems to get more complicated by the day as different actors on the ground pursue divergent goals. Russia's continued support to the Assad regime fuels the country's civil war, enables the abuse and killing of Syrian population, and allows ISIS to exploit the resulting instability for its own gains.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dunford met with his Russian and Turkish counterparts just this week to discuss deconflicting operations in Syria, a battle space that has become increasingly complicated as U.S., Turkish, Russian, Iranian, Assad regime and local partner forces converge in Northern Syria. And General Votel, we look forward to your update on these particular issues.

According to public reports, the Defense Department has presented the White House with a draft strategy that accelerates progress against ISIS. While details of this strategy have not been publicly release, reports indicate that it retains many of the core elements of strategy put in place under the Obama administration. General Dunford has described the strategy as a, quote, "Political military plan" and, quote, "A whole of government approach requiring important contribution from other non-DOD departments and agencies, most notably the State Department."

This is why it is so concerning to me that the Trump administration's budget would apparently cut the State Department by a reported 37 percent at the very time that we need a surge of diplomatic and other assistance efforts to achieve the political missions necessary to ultimately prevail in our fight against ISIS. As then-General and now Secretary of Defense Mattis warned this committee, if you don't fund the state department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition. We just can't keep buying bullets as the Trump administration is proposing.

General Waldhauser, the importance of a robust interagency is perhaps of even greater importance in your area of responsibility where you are primarily working by, with, and through partner military forces in conjunction with U.S. interagency efforts. General, as you share assessment of current and future AFRICOM efforts in places like Libya and Somalia, I look forward to hearing ways you are incorporating a whole of government approach into your planning. Such incorporation is particularly important places like these where conflict resolution will ultimately rely less on the military toolkit and more on generating the proper political conditions to sustain and build upon security gains. Turning back to the CENTCOM AOR (ph), the last few years has been a Focused on Iran's nuclear program, appropriately so. We have passed a one year anniversary of the implementation of the joint conference of plan of action or JCPOA in January and Iran appears to be living up to its commitment under this agreement.

However, the JCPOA only addresses one facet of the challenge posed by Iran, its destabilizing activities in the region, ballistic missile development efforts and unprofessional and dangerous behavior in the maritime environment continue. Sanctions related Iran's nuclear program was successful because of the extraordinary unity within the international community.

We must continue the remaining challenges in a similar way, if we are to be successful in changing Iran's behavior. Any new sanctions must be carefully applied in concert with our international partners so that we do not give Iran a pretext withdrawal from the JCPOA and risk reversing the progress that has been made on limiting their nuclear ambitions.

Last month as the chairman indicated, General Nicholson, commander of (inaudible) support and U.S.

forces in Afghanistan testified that despite significant security gains and political efforts, Afghanistan is currently facing a stalemate, further complicating the security landscape are the range of external factors, including Iran, Russia and Pakistan who seem intent upon interfering with the stability in Afghanistan.

It was General Nicholson's assessment that increased hoop levels for the NATO crane (ph) advice and assist mission, as well as the continued growth in the size and capability of Afghani airports necessary to break the stalemate. General Votel, the committee would benefit from hearing your assessment of the current situation in Afghanistan and what can be done to protect the hard-won progress that has been achieved and ensure that further progress is made.

Again, thank you both for your continued service to the nation, and I look forward to your testimony.

MCCAIN: I welcome the witnesses, and your written statements will made part of the record.

We'll begin with you, General Votel. And welcome and thanks for the service that you both render to our nation.

VOTEL: Chairman McCain, Ranking member Reed, distinguished members of the committee, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss the current posture and state of readiness of the United States Central Command. I'm very pleased to appear today with my good friend and highly respected brother in arms, General Tom Waldhauser. 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 representing 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. VOTEL: I've been in command with CENTCOM for about a year now. It has been incredibly busy and productive period.

Over the past 12 months, we have dealt with number of significant challenges in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Egypt and the Sinai, the Bab-el-Mandeb straight, and elsewhere throughout our area of responsibility. We are making progress in many areas, but as you know, there is much left -- there is much work the remains.

We are dealing also the 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 for this part of the world. Generally speaking, the central region remains a highly complex area, widely characterized by pervasive instability and conflict.

The federal security environments which reflect a variety of contributing factors, including heightened ethno-sectarian tensions, economic and certainty weaker corrupt governments, civil wars and humanitarian crises 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 interest of our partners and allies.

At the same time central region is increasingly crowded with external nation-states such as Russia and China, and they are pursuing their own interests in attempting to shift alliances. The point that I would emphasize is this, that while there may be other more strategic or consequential threats or regions in the world, 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 the global economy.

Thus, it must remain a priority and be resourced and supported accordingly. The team at U.S. Central Command remains appropriately focused on doing what is necessary to protect our national interest and those of our partners. Our strategic approach is straightforward, prepare, pursue and prevail. And I'll explain what I mean by that. We'll prepare the environment to ensure an effective posture, 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.

I would also 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 U.S. forces on the ground than in previous years. As you are seeing clearly demonstrated in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen and elsewhere throughout our area of responsibility, we have adopted a by, with and through approach that places a heavy reliance on indigenous forces.

While this approach does present some challenges and can be more time consuming, it is proving effective and is likely to pay significant dividends going forward. 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 this 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 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 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 our policy objectives and our other instruments of national power. In other words, we must rely on our military objectives and our soft-power capability 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 the 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's capability in a timely and effective fashion. Ours is a challenging and 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 necessary to protect our national interests and the interests of our allies and partners. Let me close by thanking the committee for the strong support that you continue to provide to world class team at United States Central Command and particularly to our forces located forward in the region.

As I said at the outset, the 80,000 plus soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, coast guardsman and civilians that 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 families. I know that you are proud of them as well.

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

MCCAIN: Thank you.

General Waldhauser.

WALDHAUSER: Thank you Mr. Chairman.

Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed and distinguish members of the committee; thank you for the opportunity to update you on the activities and efforts of United States Africa Command. I'd also like to also say I -- it's an honor for me to sit next to my battle buddy here, General Votel.

For the past nine months, I've been honored to lead the men and women of this geographic combatant command. Africa has an during interest for the United States; small but wise investments in the capability, legitimacy and accountability of African defense institutions offer disproportionate benefits to America, our allies, the United States. And, most importantly, enable African solutions to African problems.

Parts of Africa remain a battleground between ideologies, interests and values. Equality, prosperity, and peace are often pitted against extremism, oppression, and conflict. Today, trans- regional violent extremist organizations on the continent constitute the most direct security threat to the United States. To address this threat, our military strategy articulates a long-term regional focused approach for a safe and stable Africa.

Specifically the strategy outlines in Africa, in which regional organization and states are willing and capable partners, addressing African security challenges; all while promoting United States interests. The African Command strategy builds our partners' abilities to direct, manage, and operate capable and sustainable defense institutions. While we have achieved progress in implementing our strategy, threats and challenges still remain.

In East Africa, support African Union and European Union efforts to neutralize Al Shabaab and other violent extremist organizations operating in Somalia. And we also support the eventual transfer of security responsibilities from the African Union mission in Somalia to the Somali national security forces. In 2016 Al Shabaab regained some previously held Somalia territory. And today the group continues to conduct attacks on AMISOM forces, the national security forces of Somalia, as well as the federal government of Somalia.

Additionally, we have also seen elements of ISIS begin to make inroads into Somalia, which will further test the AMISOM forces and the federal government of Somalia as well. The instability in Libya and North Africa caused by years of political infighting may be the most significant near term threat to the U.S. and allies' interests on the continent. Stability in Libya is a long term proposition. We must maintain pressure on the ISIS Libya network and concurrently support Libya's efforts to reestablish legitimate and unified government.

This is a significant challenge and we must carefully choose where and with whom we work and support in order to counter ISIS Libya and not to shift the balance between the various factions and risk of spreading greater conflict in Libya. In West Africa, our primary focus is countering and degrading Boko Haram and ISIS in West Africa. Since 2011 Boko Haram has consistently carried out attacks against civilians and targeted partner regional governments and military forces in the Lake Chad Basin region.

With forces from Benin (ph), Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria; we are working with the multinational joint task force located in Niger to enable cooperation and expand partner capacity to ensure Boko Haram and ISIS West Africa do not further destabilize the region. The multinational joint task force has been successful in enabling multinational cooperation and coordinating National Operations and placed significant pressure on Boko Haram and ISIS West Africa.

In Central Africa, through the combined efforts of military forces, civilian agencies, and non-governmental organizations, we work to build the capacity of our partners to address regional threats such as maritime security, illicit trafficking of goods and persons, the large resistance army, and other criminal networks and enterprises. Africa-wide, we support the efforts to enable African partners to respond to humanitarian crises, mass atrocities, disaster contingencies, and to support peace operations.

Through the United States National Guard's state partnership program, along with their African partners, we've improved disaster management competency and readiness to assist civilian-led efforts. We continue to see great value in the National Guard's persistent engagement and fully support the state partnership programs efforts. Africa's security environment is dynamic and complex, requiring innovative solutions. Even with limited resources or capabilities, Africa Command aggressively works with partners and allies to execute our missions and mitigate risk.

Moving forward, we continue to focus our decisive effort on building African partner capacity and will



continue to work closely with the international and interagency partners to make small, wise investments which pay huge dividends in building stable and effective governments, the foundation for long-term security in Africa. I'm confident with your support, Africa Command will protect and promote United States interests and keep the United States safe from threats emanating from the African continent.

And finally, on behalf of the United States Africa Command, I want to thank you for the opportunity to be with you this morning and I also look forward to your questions. Thank you.

MCCAIN: Thank you, General.

General Votel, you agree that we're in a stalemate in Afghanistan after 15 years?

VOTEL: Mr. Chairman, I do.

MCCAIN: And in some measurements, maybe you could argue that when we go from control of 72 percent of the country to 52 percent, that's worse than a stalemate.

Would you agree that one of the most disturbing things about the attack on the hospital yesterday, that attack was carried out by ISIS, not by Taliban which shows at least to this person that we are seeing an increase in influence of ISIS as well as Russian providing weapons and the Iranians playing a greater role than in the past.

I guess my question is, are we developing a strategy to break the stalemate and is it going to require additional U.S. troops?

VOTEL: Mr. Chairman, the answer to your question is yes, we are developing a strategy and we are in discussions with the -- with the secretary and the department right now, both General Nicholson and I are -- are forming our best advice and recommendations to the secretary and we look forward to moving forward with that.

I do believe it will involve additional forces to ensure that we can make the advise and assist mission more -- more effective.

MCCAIN: And already you have received a capability on rules of engagement which enhance your abilities to combat the enemy, is that correct? VOTEL: That's -- that's correct.

MCCAIN: Got a very interesting and challenging situation in Syria and that is the whole issue of the Kurds, our relationship with them, Erdogan's relationship with them, the importance of the use of Incirlik, the importance of our relationship with Turkey And I met with President Erdogan in Ankara recently. He is passionately opposed to Kurdish involvement, and our support of the Kurds that I understand are going to be a very vital element in expediting the retaking of out of Raqqa.

This is a complex situation and it would take all my time as you know, to go through all this. But I think there's a possibility of an impending conflict between Turkey and the Kurds, as opposed to us are working together to try to defeat ISIS and remove them from Raqqa. Do you see that as a scenario that we should be concerned about?

VOTEL: I do, Mr. Chairman, and to that end, we are trying to take actions to -- to prevent that from occurring.

MCCAIN: Well, we find ourselves in the kind of a strange situation that we and the Russians are Allied against the Turks is out of correct as far as the Kurds are concerned, is that correct assessment?

VOTEL: I wouldn't necessarily say that we are aligned against the -- against the Turks. We certainly understand what their interests are, and we understand their concerns about the partners that we are working with. Turkey is a vital partner in this effort here. We cannot do what we're doing without them.

So our to try to -- try to work through this -- work through this tension through dialogue, through information and through identifying the alternatives that they give us a way to move forward against ISIS without damaging the long-term relationship with a NATO partner.

MCCAIN: Well as you know, we are working with an -- with the Kurds that -- an arming and training them and they are a very effective fighting force, the same Kurds that Erdogan has labeled as a terrorist organization, and reveal some a greater threat to Turkey then -- then ISIS is. Who's going to sort all this out?

VOTEL: Well, I think there has to be addressed -- certainly has been effort to Mr. Chairman at the military level, and there has to be an effort at the political level to -- to address this. And so, as...

MCCAIN: I'm not sure there's an understanding of how seriously Erdogan views this issue, and I'm not sure we appreciate the importance of -- of the role Turkey plays in our effort to retake Raqqa, particularly in the use of Incirlik and other activities that require Turkish cooperation. I hope we can -- unless something changes, I foresee a train wreck here and I'm not sure that the administration recognizes how seriously particularly President Erdogan views the threat that he views that the Kurdish - that the Kurds oppose.

Frankly, finally General Waldhauser, let's talk about Libya a second. What's the most powerful influence in Libya today and what -- what's -- briefly, what's the answer to this -- to this chaos?

WALDHAUSER: Thank you, Senator.

It's difficult to say who is the most powerful partner right now inside Libya. If you took polls, you would see that the Libyan National Army has got great support in the West -- sorry in the East, and the G&A (ph) has support in the West. So there needs to be a combination of those two organizations in order to

get to a political -- political solution there.

MCCAIN: Does it bother you that (inaudible) has been visiting with the Russians and went out to a Russian carrier and the obviously now the Russians may be showing role in Libya that they never had before?

WALDHAUSER: It is very concerning, Senator. (Inaudible) has visited, as you said, on the carrier with the Russians. He's also visited in the country of Russia. Also this week is reported in the open press, Sarraj, from the Government of National Accord, has also visited Russia.

MCCAIN: As is the case with Afghanistan that I mention, I hope we will be developing a strategy as regard to Libya as the volatility of that situation can clearly lead to the rise of ISIS and other extremist organizations as I know you are well aware, General.

Senator Reed.

REED: Thank you very much Mr. Chairman and General Votel.

You are now in the process of evaluating the mission and the strategy and, for many years, the mission seemed to be very clear with respect to Syria and to Iraq of degrade and defeat ISIS. Now there are actions -- activity, particularly around Manbij, where you are in the process of trying to separate forces.

The issue here, really, is not only define the mission but preventing mission creep in terms of suddenly find ourselves committed, not just to destroying ISIS, but to somehow refereeing a very complicated situation with Russian's Assad forces, anti-Assad forces, Turkish forces, Kurdish forces and an array of other forces that are -- you can allude to. How are you going to prevent that mission creep or is there that possibility? VOTEL: Well thank you senator and I -- yes, I do agree that if we're not careful we could find ourselves in a different situation. The presence of our forces in Manbij is -- is not new to just the current situation, they have actually been on the ground since -- since Manbij was secured here six or seven months ago. And they are principally there to ensure that ISIS is not able to reestablish itself in the area and we have undertaken a number of operations in that particular regard.

As the situation is currently played out, that is the principal focus of our -- of our elements there. They do have the benefit, by virtue of being there, to also provide over watch and to -- and to -- and I would -- I would add a measure of assurance. Not just for our local partners on the ground there but, I would also suggest, for our Turkish partners.

We understand what their concerns are about undue Kurdish influence in this particular area. So the best way that we can keep an eye on that, I think, is through our well trained soft-forces on the ground.

REED: One of the areas I touched on in my comments was the interagency and General Waldhauser, can you accomplish your mission in AFRICOM if you don't have rather robust support by State Department

and other agencies, including our European allies.

WALDHAUSER: The short answer Senator is no, we cannot. We work very closely with various agencies, UAI -- USAID, the State Department and the like. And I could give numerous examples, if you'd like, of how we partner with them and how they contribute to development, which is so important -- so important in our mission.

REED: Thank you.

And General Votel, likewise in your office?

VOTEL: I -- I absolutely agree.

REED: As we go forward in terms of the new strategy that the president's asking for. One point he made was requesting recommendation -- recommendations to changes to any U.S. rules of engagement and other U.S. policy restrictions that exceed the requirements of an international war. My sense is that the requirements and the authorities that the military's asked for is -- is one, they can do the job.

But also, they do things like minimize civilian casualties, provide for an appropriate relationship with the local populations, which helps you rather than hurts you. And -- is that still the sensitivity that you have? I mean, adherence at a minimum to international law might not be the smartest military approach.

VOTEL: Well, we -- we conduct all of our operations, of course, in accordance with the law of armed conflict and...

REED: Right. VOTEL: ... we -- we bring our values to the -- to the fight wherever -- wherever we are. I am -- I -- I don't think those are -- are particular limitations on us at this particular point. My advice here, moving forward, has been to ensure that we -- our forces have the operational agility to maintain pressure and to sustain our approach of presenting ISIS with multiple dilemmas.

And -- and really pursuing a -- a military strategy of simultaneous operations to really overwhelm them quickly. And so the preponderance of our discussions and our recommendations really fell within that area.

REED: But again, the rules that we've adopted have been based on best military policy, not just adherence to arbitrary rules. We -- we minimize casualties because it has an effect on the population that will hurt our operation, is that correct?

VOTEL: Senator, that is absolutely correct, 750,000 people in the west portion of -- of Mosul. And so we have to -- we certainly have to conduct our operations with the knowledge that that's the situation.

REED: Again, gentlemen, thank you for your service and I look forward to continuing these discussions.

Thank you.

MCCAIN: Senator Inhofe.

INHOFE: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Waldhauser, we just -- as you and I discussed in my office, Senator Rounds and I just returned from the several areas in -- in -- in your command. And -- you know, when you stop and look at it, it's -- I -- it's -- it seems like it's been shorter than that, but it's been 10 years since we started AFRICOM. And AFRICOM -- the continents used to be divided in three different commands.

Now, since that time, I think there is -- we've had a lot of successes. General Rodriguez, one of your predecessors, said, "Africa is an enduring interest to the United States and its importance will continue to increase as African economies population and influence the growth." Do you agree with that statement?

WALDHAUSER: Senator, I do.

INHOFE: And it wasn't long ago when Chuck Wald had the job you have right now. He talked about the significance of Phase Zero it -- he actually wrote an article about the Phase Zero campaign. Why is Phase Zero important and how does it apply to AFRICOM? Can you make any comments about that?

WALDHAUSER: Senator, thank you. What -- what I would say to that question is that the ability to engage with the population and have -- have such exercises and engagements with agencies as was -- as was to describe; things like education, healthcare, jobs for the significant youth bulges (ph) that's in Africa is very, very important. We've got to get at these drivers that these individuals, you men especially, want to join groups like Al Shabaab.

In order to get at that part of the problem, we need to be engaged with education, healthcare, jobs and the like.

INHOFE: And to preclude something from happening...

WALDHAUSER: Right.

INOFE: ... head it off at the pass? I -- I would agree with that. We're also in Afghanistan, General Votel, and we met with the -- our service members and of course the new president and General Nicholson. And I -- I think maybe we might be -- in my opinion. Because, I -- and I might be influenced by the fact that I knew the new president's predecessor and there's no comparison. INOFE: Summing up kind of what General Nicholson said, through this -- these -- a need for a coalition commitment to Afghanistan, need for increased coalition forces for training and assisting the Afghan military. The strength and the commitment the Afghan people who want to take their country back from the insurgents shifting the

focus to winning versus not losing.

The high casualty rate among Afghan forces, the increase in territory controlled by the Taliban, importance of cutting the Taliban's access to financing their operations. Do you pretty much agree with his assessment with what the situation is there?

VOTEL: I do, Senator.

INHOFE: And do you think that maybe when we get some of these less than optimistic reports at this -- in these committee hearings that we have, that you get a little bit different idea when you're actually there? And one of the things that I think we're not factoring in enough would be the President Ghani.

And I -- kind of get an -- I'd like to have your idea as to what -- what a difference that can make. Because I -- I can remember sitting there with his predecessor and then evaluating the situation, what his commitment is right now and what he -- he really believes his people are going to be able to do.

VOTEL: Senator, I -- I absolutely agree with you. I do think we cannot overestimate the strategic advantage of having a leader like President Ghani in place. His willingness to partner his visionary ideas about this and his general approach to bringing the coalition on board I think have been very -- very good and I think they provide us a very good opportunity to build upon.

INHOFE: All right, with -- and with him and with your experience from the last fighting season that we had, since we're coming up now to the next fighting season, do you have any -- any projection as to differences we might see with that leadership and where we are right now in...

VOTEL: ... I think -- I think that we will continue to see very steady leadership from President Ghani and his government through the next fighting season. I think the challenge we will have will be sustaining the Afghan forces as they move forward. As you have noted, as others have noted, they have absorbed a lot of casualties and yet they've been resilient through that. But there is a need to ensure that they get into a normal operational cycle that allows them their cover to rebuild themselves, to reset themselves and then get back into the fight. And I think that as we move forward that will be the challenge that General Nicholson and I will have to manage.

INHOFE: I would agree with that and I think that the -- there's a -- an effect that the new president has on the fighting troops over there, on theirs that will yield a better performance. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MCCAIN: And the fighting season has begun earlier than ever in Afghanistan.

True, General?

VOTEL: I think the fighting season does not end. I agree with you, Senator.

MCCAIN: Senator Peters.

PETERS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman and thank you to both of you today for testifying, appreciate all that you do. You have a very difficult job and both of you do it with honor so thank you so much for your service to our country.

I represent in Michigan, probably the largest Arab-American, Muslim American community here in the United States and had an opportunity just recently to meet with a number of community members at the Islamic center and heard some great concern from the Yemeni- American community as to what they are seeing in Yemen in terms of Saudi Arabian operations.

What seems to be indiscriminate bombing, the killing of large numbers of civilians I think according to some estimates over -- close to 4,000 civilians have been killed in Yemen by Saudi Arabian-led air campaign which appears to them as indiscriminate and according to them does great damage to the United States. People see those Saudi attacks as related to the United States and has been increasing recruitment for folks who want to do harm to the United States because of the actions that are being undertaken by the Saudi Arabians.

So if -- if you could comment, General Votel, a little bit about what is happening There to us, and what do you assess the cause of the large number of civilian casualties that we're saying in Yemen and what can we do to reduce that?

VOTEL: I attribute -- thank you for the question, Senator.

I attribute those type situations more to the competence of -- of the forces that are operating there, and their ability to properly target. As is you are aware, we do not provide intelligence for those things, we do not make decisions for have them, but yet we have a relationship with Saudi Arabia.

And at my level and at levels below me, my ear (ph) commander, a variety of subordinate commands, we have engaged with our leaders -- with our partner leaders in Saudi Arabia to talk to them about the effects of this, and to provide opportunities for them to learn from our experience in terms of this, and improve their capabilities in this particular regard. And I think they have done that.

In addition, I personally have -- have reached out and talked to my counterpart about the importance of reaching out to international organizations like the ICRC, Doctors Without Borders, who also operate in these areas and asked that they establish relationships and begin a discussion with -- between now the Saudi Arabian government and Ministry of Defense and these particular organizations, so we can better understand what's happening on the ground and we can begin work through those. And I'm very happy to tell you that that is -- that is taking place now.

PETERS: So you would -- you would characterize this as a training issue as opposed to some other --

some other factor that's causing for it?

VOTEL: I don't attribute it to -- to deliberate decisions to target civilians. I attribute it to a growing need to develop a better and more precise targeting process for their operations.

PETERS: And are we able to assist them in that?

VOTEL: Well, we don't -- we don't -- the system directly you have with targeting on the ground, but we are able to -- through our experiences through our people, engage them and help with their professionalism and give them the benefit of our experience and tactics, techniques, procedures, processes that we use to try to absolutely minimize those types of events, and we are doing that.

PETERS: Well, it's good to hear, thank you.

General Votel, you also -- you're -- trying to move to Syria now. You were recently quoted in the New York Times about saying that we want to bring the right capabilities forward. Not all of those necessarily resident in the special operations community, if we need additional artillery or things like that I want to bring those forward to augment our operations.

And I know today in the news, there was an artillery unit that I believe is being positioned in Syria now. In your estimate, what is the right mix of conventional and special operations forces that are going to required to succeed in Syria?

VOTEL: Senator, I'm not sure I can give you an exact percentage-wise mix of this, but what I can tell you is that we operate today with our special operations forces and unique abilities they bring, through our experience over the last 15 or 16 years, we have become very comfortable and capable of operating together.

And so what -- what I have pledged to our commanders, and what I expect from them is for them to ask for the capabilities that we need, and then for us to ensure that we have the right command-and-control, the right force protection, the right resources in place to ensure that it can function properly together, and that is -- that to me is much more important than a particular mix of whatever the capabilities are.

I think as we move towards the latter part of these operations into more of the stability and others aspects of the operations, we will see more conventional forces requirements, perhaps.

PETERS: All right, thank you, General.

MCCAIN: Senator Wicker.

WICKER: Let's get back to Afghanistan, General Votel. Do the Afghan people support the presence of the



United States there?

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

WICKER: And how do you measure that?

VOTEL: I think we measure that by favorability ratings that we see of them for the government of Afghanistan and the activities that the -- that they are pursuing and I think we measure that through our -- through our direct contact with them with teams we have out there on the ground and other that interact with the -- the Afghan people on a regular basis.

WICKER: And, as a matter of fact, several years ago there was Loya Jirga convened of most Afghan -- I mean most Afghan leads and -- and they were overwhelmingly where in support of the United State's presence there to protect them against what had happened before. Has there been another Loya Jirga or -- or do we simply assume that the leadership of -- the elected leadership of the government represents them?

VOTEL: I -- I -- I'm -- there has not been another Loya Jirga I think of the same scope that you -- that you referenced Senator. But we do pay attention to the polling. I would note, in some recent polls that I've seen, the favorability ratings for -- for the Taliban are very low in the six to seven percent range, as opposed to much, much higher for the government of Afghanistan.

WICKER: You had strong praise for President Ghani. How is the relationship there between the president and Mr. Abdullah who was his nearest competitor?

VOTEL: It has improved significantly and I contribute that directly to the engagement of our ambassadors on the ground who have been personally invested in that and worked that relationship and it has a positive impact on our operations.

WICKER: Well that's good to hear. Now, the information we have, and the Chairman alluded to this, the Afghan government controls 57 percent of the countries districts, a year and a half ago that figure was 72 percent, what happened?

VOTEL: I -- think the numbers -- and Senator I -- I would tell you that there are other numbers out there, we have some slightly different ones, but they're in the general ballpark of what you're -- what you're saying.

WICKER: Generally those numbers are correct?

VOTEL: In general.

WICKER: So there's been a significant drop, as the chairman said, in a year and a half?

VOTEL: There has been -- there have been areas that -- that are in -- we would put into the contested space area here that have increased over -- over -- over the last year so certainly...

WICKER: And your testimony would be that this hasn't happened because the support among the Afghan people of our efforts has diminished?

VOTEL: No I don't -- I don't think so. I think this is a -- this is a...

WICKER: Something we did?

VOTEL: I think this effective of -- of the -- of the fighting that is taking place and of the efforts by the Taliban to be more resurgent in specific areas in Afghanistan.

WICKER: Well, OK. General Nicholson said, in talking about the stalemate, that what would break the stalemate are offensive capabilities such as special forces and allowing the air force to overmatch the Taliban. Also, he said, we have -- we have a shortfall of a few thousand troops in Afghan for the train, advise and assist mission.

Would you talk about those two aspects and would you support a few thousand more American troops to get the job done in this mission.

VOTEL: Senator, with respect to the last part of your question, that's certainly a discussion we're having with the secretary right now I -- I won't pre -- pre-stage a decision here, that's certainly his regard.

But certainly I agree with what -- with what general Nicholson's approach is. And I do agree that, you know, one of our efforts to improve the capabilities and equipment on the Afghan Air Force is a big part of this. As is improving and expanding their special operations capability.

WICKER: Thank you.

General Waldhauser, the Wasp Amphibious expedition did over 100 consecutive days of strikes. It's considered to be an impressive success. What lessons from that deployment? And are we sending you what you need to get the job done in that respect?

WALDHAUSER: The Wasp and marine aviation that was onboard that ship was a significant contributor to the GNA forces and riding Sirte of ISIS. Lessons learned at the tactical level have to do with coordination on the ground and special forces -- and special forces who were there on the ground.

But I think it's important to point out that there -- over that -- from 1 August till the middle of December there were nearly 500 strikes. Most of them came from ISR platforms, but a lot of them, as you said, came from ship. And I think the ability of zero civilian casualties in a very, very dense urban environment

underscores the training and professionalism of those who were conducting that operation.

So in sum, that was a huge asset for us. We actually borrowed from CENTCOM in order to make it happen. But that's how we have to do business these days. We -- wouldn't -- there's -- AFRICOM and CENTOM coordinate on various trans-regional asset changes. And that was an example work very well.

WICKER: Thank you, Sir.

MCCAIN: Senator Shaheen.

SHAHEEN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And, General Votel and General Waldhauser, thank you both for your testimony and for your service. General Votel, there's already been reference to that Marines who have arrived in Syria.

The Washington Post story this morning reports that the battalion landing team; 1st battalion, 4th Marines; will man the guns and deliver fire support for U.S. backed local forces who are preparing an assault on the city. First of all, is that accurate? And does -- should we take that mean an assault is imminent in Raqqah?

VOTEL: Well, certainly I -- we won't talk about any of -- timings of any of our particular operations. But our intention here with this -- and this fell within the authorities that are -- that are provided to me right now, was to ensure that we had redundant capable fighters support on the ground to support our partners. And ensure that we had -- we could take advantage of opportunities and ensure continued -- the continuing progress that we've been seeing.

SHAHEEN: And are you comfortable that that gives us that progress and support that we need...

VOTEL: In -- in conjunction with our -- with our excellent coalition air forces, yes. I am very confident that that will help us.

SHAHEEN: Thank you. Yesterday in our meeting and -- we heard similar comments from General Nicholson when he was here talking about Russian influence in Afghanistan. They're trying to legitimize the Taliban and undermine our mission and NATO's mission there. Can you talk about what alternatives we have to respond to Russian activities there?

VOTEL: I think the -- I think the best alternative that we have is to ensure that we demonstrate our commitment to the mission that we have in place here, with the -- with the government of Afghanistan. Certainly with our -- you know, with our two -- two-fold mission we focused on counterterrorism. And then, of course; the train, advise and assist missions.

So the most important thing we can do is send a very clear message that we are going to see this

mission through and support of the government of Afghanistan in the way that they've required with military capabilities and other things; to ensure that they can be successful.

SHAHEEN: And to what extent does our effort in Eastern Europe with NATO affect Russia's ability to undermined what we're doing in Afghanistan? How much are they -- do they need to be focused on what's happening in Eastern Europe?

VOTEL: From my perspective, I'd like them totally focused Eastern Europe and not on Afghanistan if we can -- I'm being a little facetious here, but I -- I'm not sure I can comment that there's necessarily a direct relationship between -- between that, Senator.

Certainly I think that, you know, if their attention can be drawn to other -- other challenges, other problems, that they are focused on that -- that helps us.

SHAHEEN: Thank you.

General Waldhauser, in your statement, you point out that long- term success in slowing the progress of Boko Haram and ISIS in West Africa requires Nigeria to address development governance and economic deficiencies which are drivers of terrorism in that region. As we look at the future where one in four Africans are Nigerian, what happens in Nigeria has a huge impact on what happens throughout the west -- rest of Africa, is that -- do you agree with that?

WALDHAUSER: I most definitely do. With 182 million people in that country, it's the seventh largest country in the world, what happens there has a significant impact not only on the continent but it could be in Europe and United States as well.

SHAHEEN: And to what extent do we feel like they are addressing the threat from Boko Haram and also addressing those deficiencies that have existed there?

WALDHAUSER: Senator, two weeks ago I was in Abuja and talked with the acting vice president and he's very, very aware of the fact that there's still much work that needs to be done in Northeastern Nigeria both with Boko Haram and ISIS West Africa. And I came away from that visit in a positive way because there have been some human rights issues with the Nigerians.

SHAHEEN: Right.

WALDHAUSER: But they -- they are taking that on. I mean, they're making some progress there. I think the -- the acting vice president -- or acting president understands they're still a threat. Boko Haram is weakened a bit but they're still a threat. ISIS West Africa is still there and they are still a threat. But this Lake Chad Basin region task force has been doing fairly well with at least trying to keep the problem inside the Nigerian borders.

SHAHEEN: And are they working to address the historic divisions between the Christian southern part of the country and the Muslim north? Are there any initiatives underway that help to resolve some of those historic conflicts?

WALDHAUSER: Senator, I'm not aware of any per se. I would just say that in my discussions with senior leadership there two weeks ago, they have a fairly wide-ranging and overarching strategy where they want to go which ultimately will turn over Northeastern Nigeria to the police forces.

SHAHEEN: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MCCAIN: (OFF MIKE)

FISCHER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Votel, since the nuclear deal with Iran was announced, Iran's behavior in the region, its support for terrorism, and its domestic repression, it appears to have gotten worse. Iran wields significant power in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen and it seeks to destabilize our key allies. What do you see as Iran's goal in the region?

VOTEL: Senator, I believe Iran seeks to be the regional hegemon, to be the most influential country in the region.

FISCHER: And how would you characterize Iran's regional behavior since the nuclear agreement? Has it improved or has it worsened?

VOTEL: I would describe it as destabilizing to the region. It has not been helpful to anything that I can see going on across the region.

FISCHER: How would you characterize Iran's relationship with Russia in the region?

VOTEL: Again, not having firsthand knowledge on that, I guess I would characterize it as they -- they are -- they find areas of cooperation. I am particularly concerned how both Iran and Russia have cooperated to prop up the Assad regime and make them stronger.

That is certainly of some concern, so I do see that level of cooperation being very unhelpful to the things we are doing across the -- the region. I don't know what the long-term views of each of these countries might be and how that might play out, but it certainly looks like they are taking the opportunity of convenience to -- to join -- join efforts in some regard.

FISCHER: And I wanted to ask you your year long-term view with regards to the United States and our

position in the region. First of all, just with Iran's destabilizing activities, but also with their relationship with Russia. Can you -- can you give us in your best opinion how that affects the United States and our involvement?

VOTEL: I can, Senator. And I offer you my observation, it's based on my travels throughout the region over the last year and meeting with our partners across so many of the countries and I -- my consistent take away here is that the -- the partners in the region would -- would strongly prefer to have a relationship with the United States over -- over another nation then might -- might be external to the Middle East. And I think that is an opportunity for us to move forward on.

We have long-term historical relationships with many of these countries and we should capitalize on that as we move forward, and I think that offers us the best opportunity.

FISCHER: As we look over the last year, we've seen Iran has escalated its harassment of our vessels, our personnel in the Persian Gulf, and just last week multiple fast attack vessels from that IRGC came close to and U.S. Navy ship in the Strait of Hormuz, and they forced it to change direction. What is CENTCOM doing to address that harassment that we're seeing Iran?

VOTEL: First off, we are ensuring that our maritime forces have all the right rules of engagement to and - and capabilities and training and techniques to -- to deal with that and I do believe they are effectively doing that. One of the first things I did after coming into command was get on a ship and go through the Strait of Hormuz so I can see it with my own eyes, and I was extraordinarily impressed with the maturity of our sailors and the judgment of our leaders as we -- as we went through that.

More broadly, I think we have to hold Iran accountable for their actions. No other nation operates the way they do in the Arabian Gulf; nobody does that in the Arabian Gulf, and they -- they need to be held accountable for that and they need to be exposed for those types of unprofessional unsafe and abnormal activities.

FISCHER: Sounds like you are very concerned with Iran's growing asymmetrical capabilities and that includes it's acquisition of advanced cruise missiles I would assume?

VOTEL: It does, Senator.

FISCHER: What about naval mines, ballistic missiles and UAVs, and how do those threats -- I guess when we're looking at -- at our interests in the Persian Gulf and our allies' interest in the Persian Gulf, how do - how do those growing threats effect that?

VOTEL: Well, they way they affect us is they provide Iran with a layered capability where they can use their fast boats, they can use cruise missiles, they can use radars, they can use UAVs to potentially dominate specific areas.

So this is -- this is a concern, and it is something that certainly we look at our capability, it is something that we have engaged our partners in the region on, on how we work together to -- to mitigate the effects of that layered approach that Iran pursues in these critical chokepoints.

FISCHER: Thank you sir.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

MCCAIN: (OFF MIKE)

WARREN: Thank you Mr. Chairman and thank you for being here.

I would like to return to an issue raised by Senator Reed. There's a big debate going on right now, as you know about military spending and, of course, we need a strong military but the military is not the only element of our national security strategy.

Spending on security outside the military budget is very small, diplomacy and development combined is about one percent of our annual budget but it includes programs that promote democracy, human rights, the rule of law, that boost economic growth, that improve access to education, that fight hunger, that treat infectious disease and that provide disaster relief around the world.

General Votel and General Waldhauser, you command our armed forces in some of the most active and dangerous parts of the world. Do you think the activities of the State Department and other civilian partners are a waste of time and tax payer money?

VOTEL: I do not Senator.

WALDHAUSER: Senator, nor do I. They're a big part of what we do.

WARREN: Thank you and I agree. But the Trump Administration's blueprint budget would increase defense spending in some areas by massively slashing through other programs that are critical for our national security.

You know, not every international problem is the same and the right tool is not always a military response. Knee-capping our State Department by cutting an already small foreign aid budget makes America less safe and it's just not smart. I'd like to turn to another issue and that's the ongoing fight against ISIS in Iraq and in Syria.

General Votel, you contributed to the Pentagon's plan to accelerate the fight against ISIS which Secretary Mattis delivered to the White House last week. I have every confidence that the U.S. Military can defeat ISIS on the battlefield and help retake strategically important cities. But what I want to ask you is about what comes next.

You're going to be mediating between the armed opposition forces that dislike each other intensely in cities where existing infrastructure has been completely destroyed with a population that has been traumatized and displaced. What will it take to create conditions for normal life to resume in Mosul and Raqqah?

VOTEL: I think it starts -- certainly following up our military operations with good local governance and getting -- addressing humanitarian aid of -- addressing issues like demining of restoring basic services to the people of -- of -- trying to bring additional aid in there so small business and other things can get going. And then the bigger aspects of -- of governance can begin to take place.

So, as we look at our military operations, particularly as we look at places like Raqqah or Mosul, what we have tried to do is ensure that our military planning is very closely linked to the political planning that has -- what comes next? So that we don't just finish a military option and then just leave.

It is important that we have local hold forces, it is important that we predetermine the local governance that's going to come in and begin to take this over. So I think that's an extraordinarily important point in the transition from military operations to the stability operations and things that comes next I think is a - is a significant lesson learned for us -- relearned for us many times and it is something that we have specifically focused on in this campaign.

WARREN: Thank you. I'm -- I'm very glad to hear that General. You know, planning for peace is hard. We didn't do it after we toppled Saddam Hussein and we are still paying a price for that blindness today. And I don't want to see us turn around and make that same mistake again.

I think we need to be very careful that we don't create an environment that breeds the next generation of extremists and I am grateful for your work in this area. I'm grateful to both of you for all that you're doing. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

REED: On behalf of Chairman McCain, let me recognize Senator Cotton.

COTTON: Thank you.

Gentlemen, welcome back to the committee. General Waldhauser, you were speaking with Senator Shaheen about Nigeria and the role that it plays, not just in the African continent, but around the world.

Could you speak a little bit about what President Buhari's absence from the country means and what the status is right now of Nigerian politics for the committee?

WALDHAUSER: Senator, I would just have to say that open source reporting indicates that he's still in --



in London receiving medical help. That was a topic that was not discussed with his officials when I was there. But what did I observe was Acting President Osinbajo has done extremely well. He's very competent.

He was a very -- I would say, very wide view of the problems and issues and he seems to want to get after them. And he was definitely generally interested in making things happen. And I thought we had some very frank discussions with him on the way ahead and -- with regards to our support for, you know, the defeat of ISIL in West African and Boko Haram.

COTTON: OK. What -- what's the level of political consensus and stability between the north and the south in that country right now?

WALDHAUSER: I really couldn't give you a fair assessment of that. That wasn't -- wasn't part of the discussion. I didn't -- didn't -- we didn't have that topic.

COTTON: I understand. Looking to the east, would you please discuss the strategic implications of China's new base in Djibouti? And what it means for our presence there and throughout the horn of Africa? WALDHAUSER: So the Chinese base is right outside Camp Lemonnier, about four miles or so from our base. The intention for that location was to provide a port for their ships to have in the area. They do -- they have about 2200 peacekeepers on the continent. This the first time for them that they've kind of journeyed in that direction.

The -- so right now, it's due to be completed later this summer. I would just say (ph) to concerned that I have for an operational perspective is the operational security when we operate so close to a Chinese base. And the Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti area is not only AFRICOM, but CENTCOM uses it, SOCOM uses it, TRANSCOM, UCCOM (ph) and the like.

So it's a very strategic location. And visiting Djibouti officials twice, I've talked with their president and expressed our concerns about some of things that we -- that are important to us about what the Chinese can or should not -- or cannot do at that location.

COTTON: Thank you.

General Votel, you've already spoken with several senators this morning about the stalemate in Afghanistan. For many years now, we on this committee and many leaders in the executive branch have been lamenting the existence of sanctuaries for the Taliban and other terrorist group in Pakistan.

As you think about the strategy to break this stalemate, what's the role of eliminating those sanctuaries inside Pakistan? And how do -- how do you plan to get after this long standing problem?

VOTEL: Thank you, Senator.

Pakistan, of course, is -- remains a key partner this in -- in this fight here. I've been encouraged by my meetings with the -- the new chief of army staff, General Bajwa and his commitment to -- to help address this. They have done some things that have been helpful to us.

Most recently, they've -- they've -- they've supported General Nicholson in some places on the border, making sure they were well coordinated and doing the activities on their side of the border. That's a very positive sign and a move in right direction. And they have done things against the principal concerns we have; the Haqqani network and Taliban. But what we do need is we need -- we need that to be more persistent and continue to focus in that particular area. And so we will continue to engage with partner -- with Pakistan throughout this. I think it is key to ensure that Pakistan and Afghanistan have a very good relationship. There are -- certainly are tensions along border along the common border between those countries and so I think a key role that we can play is in helping move that relationship forward.

COTTON: Let me ask you about a seam on the map between you and Harry Harris (ph), but it's an important seam because it involves Pakistan and Afghanistan and India in PACOM. To what extent do you think Pakistan's Afghan policy is driven in part by its India policy?

And in particular whether or not a -- a independent Afghanistan conducting its own foreign policy might be adverse to Pakistani interests.

VOTEL: Senator, I think Pakistan's view of the region, I think as they look at their interests, I think it -- it plays very largely in how they look at both sides of their country.

COTTON: OK. One final question.

Since the 1970s, Russia's influence throughout the Middle East has been minimal thanks in large part to the diplomacy of Henry Kissinger and Presidents Nixon, Ford. How would you assess the level of Russia's influence in the region today?

VOTEL: Russia is -- is attempting to increase their influence throughout the Middle East as we've seen in Syria, we've seen them do things certainly with -- with our longstanding partner, Egypt and others across -- across the region. So it is my view that they're trying to increase their influence in this critical part of the globe.

COTTON: Do you think they've been successful in any of those attempts thus far?

VOTEL: Well they certainly have been successful in supporting the Assad regime and so that's certainly an example of that and I -- I'm hopeful that we'll be able to reassert our own relationships as well.

COTTON: Thank you, gentlemen.

REED: On behalf of Chairman McCain, let me recognize Senator King.

KING: Thank you, Senator Reed.

General Votel, let's talk about four areas where we're engaged in conflict; Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan. By the way, I want to compliment you on your written statement. It is a primer on the region that I think should be required reading for everyone in this body. It's very well done, very thoughtful and comprehensive.

Who are our allies in Iraq, who are we fighting next to? The ISF, right?

VOTEL: That's correct, Senator.

KING: And the Kurds?

VOTEL: The Peshmerga, the...

KING: ...Peshmerga.

VOTEL: In the northern part of Iraq.

KING: And what religion are the members of the ISF and the Kurds?

VOTEL: They are -- they are Muslims.

KING: And in Syria, we've got the Syrian Democratic Forces and also the Kurds?

VOTEL: We have Syrian Kurds and we are working with -- with local Syrian Arabs, Turkmen and in some cases local Christian forces.

KING: But the vast majority of those forces are Muslim, is that correct?

VOTEL: That is correct.

KING: And in Yemen, UAE, Saudi Arabia, those forces are Muslim?

VOTEL: Absolutely.

KING: And in Afghanistan, the ANSF, the Afghan National Security Forces, also Muslim?

VOTEL: They are Muslim.

KING: And your -- one of the statements you made in your opening comments were that our strategy rests upon, quote, "A heavy reliance on indigenous forces." Is that correct?

VOTEL: That is correct, Senator.

KING: And it's fair to say that the vast majority of those indigenous forces are Muslim?

VOTEL: That is the case today.

KING: So it would be a mistake as a matter of national policy, rhetoric or discussion if we attempted to alienate or marginalize -- marginalize Muslim citizens of anywhere in the world because these are our allies in all of the fights that we're engaged in, in your area. Isn't that correct?

VOTEL: I believe it is -- it is correct, Senator.

KING: And you talked about restoring trust with our partners in the region. Our partners in the region are all based upon Muslim societies, isn't that correct?

VOTEL: They largely are. This is largely a Muslim -- Muslim area. Second area -- and this has been discussed to some extent but again, it's in your report on page three and five of your -- of your statement. The -- the goals that you define "cannot be accomplished solely through military means," you say. "The military can help create the necessary conditions; there must be concomitant progress and other complementary areas, reconstruction, humanitarian aid, stabilization, political reconciliation."

On page five you say, "However solely military response is not sufficient. We must -- this must be accomplished through a combination of capabilities if we're going to achieve and sustain our democratic, our deterrence posture, our strongest deterrence posture."

Again, just to put a fine point on what has been discussed previously, to solely rely on military strength in solving these very complex and difficult problems would be a serious mistake. Would you agree?

VOTEL: I would agree, senator. I think we have to have a combination of all of our elements of power -- hard power and soft power.

KING: Thank you.

Next question, this is a slightly different subject. How -- in your work with a lot of these allies, you work with these countries with the Iraq and other countries in the region. How would it be received in the Arab world if the united states relocates it's embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem without a settlement of the Palestinian- Israeli conflict?

VOTEL: I think that from my personal discussions with some in the region, I think that it would -- it would

create some challenges for -- for some of those countries.

KING: Some challenges? Can you explain? Serious challenges?

VOTEL: (inaudible) it could potentially be -- very serious.

KING: And does that include are a staunch ally, Jordan?

VOTEL: I believe it, yes sir, it does, senator.

KING: Thank you.

Final question to -- to both of you. Foreign military sales and foreign military financing programs, are they appropriately calibrated to meet your needs in the region? My sense is that -- that is an area where we could -- we could use some work.

VOTEL: From my perspective, senator, the importance of the foreign military sales and foreign military funding programs is to help build capability for our partners that's interoperable with us. They generally want to buy U.S. equipment that comes along with training, comes along with sustainment and it makes them more interoperable with them.

I think we have to take a long-term view in terms of this, and now I think it is our interests for our partners in the region to use -- use capabilities that are interoperable of ours.

KING: General Waldhauser, in just a few seconds I have left, a quick update on the status of ISIS and Libya?

WALDHAUSER: The status of ISIS in Libya is they right now are regrouping. They're in small numbers, small groups, we try to develop intelligence. But after they left Sirte, we developed intelligence, we bombed them on January 18 and they were in southern part of -- of -- of Libya. They've scattered again now. They're in small groups try -- trying to regroup.

KING: No longer in control Sirte?

WALDHAUSER: Correct, no control in Sirte. They were out of Sirte in the middle of December.

KING: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MCCAIN: By the way General Votel, just to complicate things further, Barzani, the leader of the Iraqi courage, does not support the KRG, the Syrian Kurds, right?

VOTEL: That is correct, Chairman.

MCCAIN: Senator Ernst.

ERNST: Thank you Mr. Chair, and thank you gentlemen for being here today, and your time and attention to all of our questions.

General Votel, we had an interesting conversation the other day and as the chair the emerging threats and capabilities subcommittee, you mentioned something to me that I thought was very interesting and something that I am concerned about. And that's the increasing threat posed by ISIS' ability to use drones.

We had a great conversation about that, and what they're using is, you say was kind of a modified commercial off the shelf drone. And can you tell us about that emerging threat and maybe describe for those -- for those on the committee exactly what they're using and what those capabilities are?

VOTEL: Thank you Senator -- I -- what we're seeing I think are commercially acquired drones, they're generally quad-copters that are available, I think, very, very easily by anybody online or at other places. Hobby -- hobby -- hobbyist locations and what they're able to do is obviously operate them for purposes of their own surveillance and -- and as you've -- as we've seen in the news there's, in some cases they've been able to rig grenades and other things to them.

And so that -- they have been able to achieve some -- some affects with that. So it's -- it's concerning to our partners, it's certainly concerning to us and I think it's a -- it's a reminder of just how savvy and challenging of an enemy that we are dealing with here. And I think it requires us to make sure that we are equally savvy in our approach to this and we have -- making sure we have the right tools to defend against these types of -- these types of threats.

ERNST: Absolutely. Thank you. It reminds me of the early part of the Iraq war when the forces there were using remote controlled cars with explosives as a first form of IEDs and -- and of course they grew technologically advanced. And I see something so simple as this that could become much more complicated over time. Do the Iraqi forces have the capabilities to defeat those drones?

VOTEL: We are working on providing them the capabilities. Right now they -- they -- they enjoy protections against these threats and a number of areas largely because we have the -- we have capabilities with our forces that are accompanying them and are located in those -- in their locations.

ERNST: Very good. Thank you. And we also spoke about troop numbers yesterday and how random some of those numbers tend to be when you have that artificial boundary of a country line between Iraq and Syria and if you could please share with the committee -- what is our role in that? Should that role be of troop numbers and where those troops are located be left up to our on the ground combatant

commanders? If you could just share a little bit of that conversation.

VOTEL: Senator, I think the more we can provide agility for our commanders on the ground to make decisions about where they need forces and when they need it I think that's -- that's -- that's the most appropriate thing that can be done. I think we are most successful when we enable our very good and well qualified leaders and people on the ground to make decisions in the situations in which they see it.

So I am -- I am for making sure that we try to provide them the agility and the -- and the process around that. We certainly understand why it's important to look at things like numbers and stuff like that, it certainly drives our resources and budgeting and other aspect of that. So that certainly has to be taken into consideration but I -- I look at this more from a flexibility and agility standpoint for our commanders on the ground.

ERNST: Thank you very much. And General Waldhauser, thank you as well. As you know, Tunisia has sent more foreign fighters than any other country to join the ranks of ISIS abroad and, in addition to supplying the foreign fighters, Tunisia struggles with containing the terrorist activity on their own soil and so much that they -- they've had physical wall built along the border with Libya in attempt to deter terrorists from entering their country.

Is AFRICOM currently equipped to address the potential influx of ISIS fighters returning home to Tunisia as we strike them elsewhere, whether it's in the Middle East or other places? WALDHAUSER: Senator, I'd have to characterize Tunisia as one of the bright spots on the continent. They are in the process of transforming their military to be more capable of dealing with terrorist threats. They have purchased equipment from the United States which we are helping them with right now, helicopters and the like.

We have people on the ground who are training, advising and assisting their special operations forces. And I believe the wall that you refer to is a technical -- technical equipment provided by DITERA (ph) as well as Germany to help them contain the fighter -- foreign fighter flow back and forth, between especially Libya and Tunisia.

But the bottom line, they're a bright spot. I visited them twice and their in the right -- they're headed in the right direction. They are struggling with what to do with foreign fighters who return. But again I think that's -- that's -- that's not a negative against them.

ERNST: Very good. Well, I appreciate it. Gentlemen, thank you very much for your input.

REED: Thank you. On behalf of Chairman McCain, let me recognize Senator Blumenthal.

BLUMENTHAL: Thank you -- thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank both of you for your service. And, as you did in your testimony General Votel, the outstanding men and women under both your commands who make us proud and would doing such

great work under your command.

I want to join Senator King in thanking you for your testimony, which is a -- very, very enlightening for me, elucidating outline of the challenges. And I would note, for my colleagues particularly, in your description of the next generation of cyber warriors -- or the use of cyber warfare by our adversaries; going from the rather rudimentary weapons of the roadside bombs to the much more sophisticated use of cyber and, as my colleague has point out, drones and other challenges that face us there. I want to focus on Iran.

In response to Senator Fischer's question about whether Iranian aggression has increased since the nuclear treaty you pointed out that their conduct there has been destabilizing. The word you used was destabilizing and abnormal. And of course we know Iran has tested an anti-ship ballistic missile there, a new Russian-made S-300 missile air defense system, as well as harassing a Navy ship

(AUDIO GAP)

BLUMENTHAL: ... and stated (ph) for (ph) moves (ph) by sending an Iranian frigate within -- I think 150 yards. Smaller boats within 600 yards. Last month the Iranian's fired a medium-range ballistic missile in violation of U.S. security council resolution, resulting in United States sanctions enforcement against 25 individuals and entities. That action was in violation of the U.N. Resolution, but none of these other activities are in violation of the nuclear agreement, are they?

VOTEL: The -- the -- my understanding, Senator, is the nuclear agreement did not address any of those other aspects of the Iranian threat.

BLUMENTHAL: But would you agree with me that they do demand a response from the United States?

VOTEL: I would absolutely agree, Senator.

BLUMENTHAL: And -- and much more aggressive -- not only sanctions, but warnings and actions against their partners in this effort; most prominently the Russians.

VOTEL: I -- I -- I would agree. I -- I think we should use a combination of both diplomatic and other security-related tools here, economic tools, to -- to address this concern.

BLUMENTHAL: Would -- would you agree with me that the Russians, through the Iranians, in effect are testing us in that area? Because they are in effect aiding and abetting the Iranians in this increasing destabilizing activity.

VOTEL: Well, I would -- I would, Senator, and I would -- I would certainly point to a place like Syria where these two countries have essentially propped up a regime here and made them more capable, more powerful and kept them from collapsing, so...



BLUMENTHAL: But when we complain about the Iranians and all of us probably in this room would agree with you that they are the major destabilizing influence in that area, we're talking as much about the Russians as we are about the Iranians.

VOTEL: Senator, I believe in my comments here I was specifically talking about the -- about the Iranian threat. That is the one that we confront with certainly, as I mentioned also in my opening statement here, we are concerned about external actors and what their interests are in -- in the region as well. And those can contribute to more destabilizing aspects as well. So I think they have to be addressed -- they both have to be addressed.

BLUMENTHAL: And how would you suggest that we should address the Iranian destabilizing influence of this regime?

VOTEL: I think the variety of things. I think the most important thing is to -- is to work with our regional partners here to ensure that we have a common -- common approach to this. I think in some cases we should look at ways that we can disrupt their activities through a variety of means, not just military means.

We have to expose them for the things they're doing, they have -- they should be held accountable for those things. And I think we have to contest their revolutionary ideology. And it's not just the United States but it has to be those in the region. Iran has a role in the region, they have been around for a long period of time, nobody is trying to make Iran go away but we are concerned about the destabilizing behavior that they pursue on a regular basis.

BLUMENTHAL: My time is expired but this topic is one that I think is -- is profoundly important. I will have some more questions that I hope you and your staff perhaps can answer and maybe in a different setting as well.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

REED: Thank you.

On behalf of Chairman McCain, let me recognize Senator Perdue.

PERDUE: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It's an honor to be here before you two gentlemen. Thank you for your great careers and what you're doing for our country today. And I hope you'll take this message back to your troops that everything they do over there is not missed on us.

I have a question about ISIS. I'd like to talk about -- General Votel, first of all, I think one of the first

things that the president has done is ask for a 30 day review of the current strategy and so forth. Where are we in that process and what types of things can we expect to see in terms of our strategy there? And I'd like you also to address, what is our end game? And can you talk about that today or should we wait until we see the 30 day review?

VOTEL: Senator, I think it's most appropriate for the secretary who is -- who I believe has presented his findings to the new administration and I think he's probably the person who is most appropriate to talk about -- talk about the decisions and end states that will come out of that.

PERDUE: OK, fair enough. With regard to ISIS in the Sinai, right now Egypt -- there are daily efforts there, I think. Can you give us an update on what is being done and what other countries are involved in the fight with ISIS? And give us an order of magnitude of the size of that action in the Sinai.

VOTEL: The Egyptians have deployed -- several months ago have deployed forces into the Sinai and specifically around -- around the area where the multinational forces. That has been helpful, that has helped address a threat that was emerging there. They have been -- they are engaged on a regular basis in -- in fighting Isis in that particular area.

Egypt is addressing this. They -- we are helping them in some areas, particularly with the -- with some of our expertise in Explosive (ph) provides explosive devices, they have asked for that. And so we've been keen to help them with that in this particular area.

PERDUE: Do we have any troops on the ground in ISIS -- or Sinai?

VOTEL: We do not have any troops on the ground that are fighting ISIS. We do have troops on the ground in Sinai that are associated with the multinational force mission. PERDUE: Thank you.

General Waldhauser, I want go back to a question that was earlier asked of you about China's presence in -- in the Africa. In particularly the base of Djibouti. Given what Russia's done with Crimea and now Lattakia and at Tartus.

Are you concerned that -- that we'll see other activity of base building in Africa -- have you had other indications of either Russia or China developing permanent positions of presence in that -- in that theater?

WALDHAUSER: Senator, in 2013, the Chinese laid out a strategic plan of one belt, one road where they'll have commerce that starts in China, goes down through the -- to Indonesia, stretch Malacca across over to -- to Djibouti, up into Europe and back. And that's roughly 60 countries and 40 percent of the global GDP that goes on in that area; it's all about trade. This is their first endeavor in an overseas base and it won't be their last away.

PERDUE: Thank you, sir. I want to ask one more question real quick, I'm about out of time. But in

Somalia and Sudan, there's a -- a growing threat that there's a real serious famine that's about it to happen if and hasn't started there. What -- what will that do to the military situation in that -- in that area?

WALDHAUSER: First of all, in Somalia, senator, this right now is the most pressing issue to the brand-new president who was just elected just last month. Right now, there's over 6.2 million individuals who have been affected by it. It hasn't been to my knowledge, actually declared a famine yet, but in terms of combating al-Shabaab and the like, movement of people in those large masses has an impact on military operations.

But the bottom line is Somalia is right now, we have counterterrorism operations we're trying to build up the national security forces, but that -- a famine for the brand-new president, and in this fledgling national government is the biggest thing on their plate. They have to do well because they can't provide for this famine, then Somalia, which has been without a national government for over 20 years is going to question what the purpose and -- and what contributions they will make.

PERDUE: Thank you, sir. One last real quick question. In (inaudible), I was fortunate enough to -- to -- to meet and visit with some of your great Marines there who have got a very (inaudible) mission. Unfortunately, late last year, they had to move about half of their air assets back to U.S. for training.

Can you talk about readiness with regard to their mission in Africa?

WALDHAUSER: Senator, the impact right is really capacity for us. So we've had to kind of center their activity mostly in Western Africa. And so some of the missions we have in Eastern Africa that they would be able to deploy to in the past, we'd to coordinate with CENTCOM, and we've actually use Marines from (inaudible) in CENTCOM on the ground in Djibouti to take care of crisis response activities, specifically South Sudan that we had at that time.

So the readiness of the airplanes has gotten better, but when you go from 12 to six, the capacity is cut in half, and the impact is, we've got to do a better job coordinating and sharing assets because the Africa continent is extremely large.

PERDUE: Yes, sir. Thank you, thank you both.

MCCAIN: (OFF-MIKE)

DONNELLY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you both for your service. We are -- we are so grateful for your hard work. General Votel, as -- as we move forward and Mosul and some of the ISIS fighters head out. What -- what efforts do we have in place to try to capture them before they head to Raqqa or to other areas or where are they -- where are they heading out to?

VOTEL: Well, Senator, thank you for the question and I -- our intention of course is to prevent them from

getting out and so the first part of all of our operations is to isolate the areas where we are -- where attacks are taking place by our partners and where we're bringing in our enabling capabilities so that we don't let anybody get out or get in.

Being a desert this is obviously very porous area so there -- there probably are some that get out. I think they are generally moving into the middle Euphrates River Valley which is, you know, a location that is -- excuse -- equidistant between Mosul and Raqqa.

DONNELLY: Awhile we were in -- we were just outside Haditha in Anbar Province. Meeting with the -- the Iraqi leaders there and I just wanted to follow up to -- at that time they were close to starvation for a lot of their citizens. It was extremely difficult for all of their families. Where are we now in terms of solidifying Hadith, Fallujah, Ramadi, those areas and are they -- are they working with us and with the central government?

VOTEL: Senator they are and we are making progress with the humanitarian aid and the needs of the people out in -- out in all of those areas and this I think is an area we have to pay particular attention to as we move forward into -- particularly in the large urban areas is that our military operations have to have -- planning for those has to be done in conjunction with humanitarian aid planning and -- and providing for the needs of the people that will be left behind. So I think this is a key aspect for us.

DONNELLY: As we head toward Raqqa -- we've seen that Marines have come in -- are you getting everything that you need in terms of equipment, manpower, all of those things to take Raqqa back?

VOTEL: We are, Senator, and I am certainly in discussions with the secretary about what we might need going forward.

DONNELLY: Because I think our feeling is we don't want to -- we don't want to not get this done as soon as possible because we didn't -- we didn't provide you with the necessary equipment, necessary personnel. As we look at Raqqa and moving forward, obviously there's a lot of complication with the Turks and with others. How are all those pieces coming together for you?

VOTEL: Well -- as you know Senator this is an extraordinarily complex -- complex area here and so we're trying to work with a -- with an indigenous force that has -- that has tensions with a NATO ally. And so, that's not a -- that's not an easy situation to move through but I -- I think the way we are addressing it is -- is in the right way. We are being as transparent as we can. We are providing information. We are looking for options on a day to day basis to ensure we can mitigate and minimize the tension that exists in this area.

So I won't -- I won't try to tell you that there's an easy way through all this complexity, there's not. It's going to take a lot of hard work, it's going to take military work, it's going to take diplomatic work as we move forward and I'm -- I -- I -- I do believe that is the approach that we're taking and I think that, ultimately it -- it will help -- it will work for us.

DONNELLY: I was going to follow up, you were kind enough to come by my office to -- to follow up and say -- I think your idea of complete transparency, here's what we're doing, here's what we're working on, here's how we plan to do it and to try and cooperate as much as we can with other countries but to tell them, this is -- this is the plan and this is where we're going, seems to make a lot of sense to me.

As you look at what has gone in the Arabian Gulf -- we just saw another incident with our ships recently and as -- as we move forward the distances seem to be less. They get closer and closer. Do we have a plan ready to go where at some point we say, you know, "You've crossed the red line" and if they continue that we take appropriate action?

VOTEL: Senator, I am very confident in our ship captains and our crews for them to deal with the situation. I do believe they have the right rules of engagement, they have the right tools to prevent things. And then, in case that they -- prevention does not work or deterrence is not work, then they have the capabilities to -- to defend themselves and take action. So I -- I am very confident in our people.

DONNELLY: My guess is -- is that there will become an X crosses Y point. And I just want to make sure that our captains and all of them are ready. And -- and I have the same confidence. General Waldhauser, as you -- as you look at your -- your area of command, what do you see as our biggest challenge right now that -- that you are dealing with?

WALDHAUSER: Senator, I think the biggest challenge perhaps is -- is the development piece for the demographics of a youthful population, 41 percent of the continent is under the age of 15. We've gotta find a way to get at education, healthcare, hopelessness, livelihood and the like in order to give those individuals a future.

Because we could -- we could knock off all the ISIL and Boko Haram this afternoon; but by the end week, so to speak, those ranks would be filled. We -- we know from those who have kind of come out of the forest and given themselves up, so to speak, that the reason they joined was they needed a job, they needed a livelihood.

It's not for the most part, in -- in those regions, about ideology, that's not the driver. It's those factors I just talked about that drive them into that line of work, because there's nothing else for them to do so. I think the youth bulge in the demographics and providing development and a way ahead for that -- for those youth are very, very important.

DONNELLY: So we can't fight our way out of it. What we have to do is try to give them hope and dignity and purpose, I guess.

WALDHAUSER: Exactly. I mean, I'm not the first. Many people, especially those in uniform, have said we can't kill our way to victory here. And this is about the long term investment in capacity building. Because at the end of the day that's was going to try to help solve the problem, especially on the African

continent.

DONNELLY: Thank you. Thank you both for your service.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MCCAIN: (OFF-MIKE)

TILLIS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Votel, thank you for spending the time with me in my office this week. And General Waldhauser, welcome to the committee. Thank you both for your service. And I'll -- I'll ask this of both of you; one area that I'd like to get your feedback on is foreign -- foreign military financing, foreign military sales.

To -- to what extent do we need to focus on that with some of our partner nations that you believe is helpful to you completing your missions in each of your commands? And General Votel, we'll start with you.

VOTEL: Thank you, Senator. I -- I think foreign military funding, foreign military sales are extraordinarily important...

TILLIS: Can you get more into specifics about certain areas where we need to really look at on a more immediate basis?

VOTEL: I -- I -- I do. I think, certainly looking at ballistic missile capabilities for some of our Gulf partners is an important area. Certainly some of the aircraft programs out there; there's a great desire to have U.S. programs in many of these countries. And -- and those are certainly areas we have to pay a -- we to pay...

(CROSSTALK) TILLIS: What sort of capabilities? In -- in the -- Egypt, Senator Purdue asked you questions about the Sinai and increasing threat in that region because of the consolidation of ISIS and other -- other entities. What -- what kinds of things would be helpful in particular to Egypt in that area? VOTEL: Well, certainly, the suite of counter-improvised explosive device equipment we have out there; running from jammers to protected vehicles and a variety of things in between I think would be extraordinary helpful to them.

TILLIS: Do you have any specifics?

And then, General, I want -- General Waldhauser, I want to go to you with the same line of questioning but any specific things that you should -- that you can provide us, any specific areas where we need to take a look at and maybe get back to where we're helping build that partnership with Egypt...

VOTEL: Senator, from -- we do and I -- with your permission, we'll look for an opportunity to come and talk with you specifically about that so we can get into some -- into some detail about what we think would be most useful for Egypt and in fact for other partners across the region.

TILLIS: Thank you. And General Waldhauser, same line of questions.

WALDHAUSER: Thank you, Senator. Interestingly in Africa, the foreign military sales is a very interesting choice. Many of the countries that deal with are not financially in good shape and consequently the ability to pay and ability to fund for long term parts blocks behind that is a difficult task.

So I'm not suggesting that we should alter the rules or change the rules but I think we need to be very flexible when we deal with some of these poor countries and make sure we understand their absorptive capability so that what we're selling them, they not only can use them in the first few years but there'll be a parts block behind that, if you will.

There'll be an institution of logistical infrastructure behind that that will allow them to keep these pieces of equipment whether they be vehicles or maybe C-130 airplanes, keep them in good shape for years ahead -- years to come.

TILLIS: Thank you.

On another subject, and it relates to foreign military aid, we -- General Votel, when you were in my office, we were talking about Afghanistan and when I was there the year before last, at the time there was a concern that there was going to be a drop off in foreign investment and the tools that Afghanistan needed for its economic development which is a key part of stabilizing the country.

What's the current situation there?

VOTEL: I think the situation looks good both from a NATO standpoint and from a much broader international standpoint. The donation conferences and other things that have been convened here over the last year...

TILLIS: Are we building a reliable stream or is there just -- is there another clip that we have to be concerned with...

VOTEL: I think we are building a reliable stream out to the 2020 timeframe and in some cases beyond that. So I -- I think the -- the international community has stepped up to the plate in this particular area.

TILLIS: Thank you.

General Waldhauser, when General Votel and our -- and the people that we have assisting countries

and CENTCOM are successful in Mosul and Raqqah, it seems to me that that could -- the good news is maybe we're getting some level of success there. But I've got to believe that that's going to potentially cause some additional challenges for you.

Can you talk about the ones that you're specifically concerned with?

WALDHAUSER: Senator, any time you put pressure on the network and disrupt or dislodge ISIL from a certain area, movement will occur. So that means the border countries to where that took place are very concerned about foreign fighters moving back and forth.

And so that is one of the big concerns that we have and one of the issues that we have to deal with when we conduct operations, it's important that the neighbors of those countries know what we're trying to do and understand why we're trying to do that so we can help them with the foreign fighter flow if movement should occur.

TILLIS: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

MCCAIN: (OFF MIKE)

KAINE: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thanks to the witnesses. The Marine Corps doctrinal publication entitled "Strategy" has this phrase in it. What matters ultimately in war is strategic success, attainment of our political aims, and the protection of our national interests.

History shows that national leaders both political and military who fail to understand this relationship sew the seeds for ultimate failure even when their armed forces achieve initial battlefield success. Battlefield brilliance seldom rescues a bad strategy. I've been heartened by the American military's performance on the battlefield, very heartened, with our partners against ISIL in Iraq and now Syria. And though we wouldn't want to predict anything about timing, I think there we're any continue have battlefield success. What is our political strategy, say following the fall of Raqqah that would lead us to have a belief that there's going to be a better next chapter to follow in Syria, especially?

VOTEL: Senator, I'm not sure I can comment on what the political -- what the political strategy is. I do believe this is a key aspect of what Secretary Mattis and the administration are discussing right now with respect to what this -- what this looks like long-term.

KAINE: And General Votel, I think that's a good answer. You - you're not commenting because the political strategy is really for the political leadership, not the military leadership, the administration and Congress, and you -- you understand that Congress has a role in this as well, not just the administration.

VOTEL: That I do, Senator.

KAINE: We are -- we are pursuing a war now based on an authorization that was passed in September of



2001. It's now you nearly 16 years old. Do you think it would be helpful in terms of articulating a political strategy that would put the military mission into a context and defined an end result in a potential desired future state if Congress were to grapple with the question of the authorities in the and the -- and the -- the -- this desire in political strategy?

VOTEL: Yes Senator, think the current AMUF is -- is -- has provided what we needed, but I do believe an updated -- an update authorization certainly would send a stronger commitment to uniform the military them of our -- of our commitment and desire to support them.

KAINE: In the CENTCOM space, it -- if the military mission succeeds and Raqqa were to fall; do you still believe that the American mission against isolate Al Qaida will take a long time?

VOTEL: I -- I -- I do. I think we -- this is a very savvy enemy and they are adapting like we are adapting on the battlefield. They are adapting...

KAINE: Just like the ISIL attack in...

(CROSSTALK)

KAINE: ... dressed as doctors, attacking the hospital. This is a threat that's not going away just because Raqqa were to fall, correct?

VOTEL: That's right. They will begin to adapt to other forms and we will need to be persistent against that and we will need to work with our partners to address that both Iraq and Syria.

KAINE: Well, my colleagues know, because I've said it a lot and others view it the same way that this question of authorities, I do think it's past time for Congress to address it, whether you think the 91401 AMUF legally covers the battle against ISIL or not. There's prudent reasons at a minimum, and I think legal reasons as well, that we should tackle it.

On the question of legal authorities, traditionally you need -- you need two kinds of legal authorities to be engaged in a military mission. You need a domestic legal authority and you need an international legal justification as well. The most common international legal justification for military action in somebody else's territory is that they invited.

We're -- we're conducting military actions in Iraq with these request and supported the Iraqi government, we're conducting military operations in Afghanistan with the support and request of the Iraqi government. We just got conducted a DOD ground operation for the first time in Yemen with the request in support of Yemeni government. Are we deploying Marines in Syria at the request or with the permission of the Syrian government?

VOTEL: We are not, senator.

KAINE: What is the international legal justification for the U.S. taking military action in another country without the request of that country? We've criticized nations such as Russia, for example, for undertaking military actions in the Ukraine or Crimea without the request of the government.

VOTEL: Thanks, senator. I think we certainly make a judgment about the ability of government to make a decision. In that case, I think in what we are doing in Syria, we are looking at that as an extension of the - of the authority to operate from -- from Iraq.

KAINE: Iraq has had us in, and we're cooperating with Iraq where they're in Iraq at their request but -- but I guess the bottom line is there is no such request from Syria we don't judge that -- that government capable of making such requests.

We don't really recognize the legitimacy of Bash al-Assad's government, but you were saying that the international legal justification for American military action in a country that hasn't asked us is the fact that we're engaged in a military action in country next door that has asked us?

VOTEL: I believe we extend -- we are -- we are being extended that authority by -- by our leadership to conduct those operations, principally because we are operating against an enemy that operates on both side of that -- of that border.

KAINE: If I might, one last question with respect to Yemen. We have had hearings in this committee about the ground operation in Yemen which, to my knowledge, was the first ground operation by DOD forces in Yemen. There were a number of questions raised by that, I don't want to go into the classified briefing but questions about, was the mission compromised in some way in the advance, what -- what intel was gained.

Was -- there was some after the fact justification of the mission using video that actually had been taken in another mission. Is the DOD conducting an ongoing investigation of that mission to determine all lessons learned, what worked, what didn't and what we can do better?

VOTEL: Senator, thank you. Let me -- let me answer this a little more comprehensively.

KAINE: Great.

VOTEL: First and foremost I am responsible for this mission. I am the CENTCOM commander and I am responsible for what's done in my region and what's not done in my region so I accept the responsibility for this. We lost a lot on this operation.

We lost a valued operator, we had people wounded, we caused civilian casualties, lost an expensive aircraft. We did gain some valuable information that will be helpful for us. Our intention here was to improve our knowledge against this threat. A threat that poses a direct threat to us here in the

homeland. And that was -- that was what we were -- what we were focused on.

We have -- there have been a number of investigations that have been initiated. Most of these are regulatory or statutory in terms of things that we normally do. I -- when an aircraft is -- when we lose an aircraft there is both a safety investigation to ensure that we disseminate lessons learned so -- for the broader fleet. And then there's also a collateral investigation that tries to determine the specific reason why that -- why that -- why that happened and establishes accountability over that.

We have done an investigation into -- into the civilian casualties. That has been completed. The -- the helicopter investigations are ongoing. The civilian casualty aspect has been -- has been completed and we have made a determination based on our best information available that we did cause casualties, somewhere between four and 12 casualties that -- that we -- we accept responsibility -- I accept responsibility for.

We have done a line of duty investigation and a statutory investigation on the death of Senior Chief Owens to determine that he was in the line of investigation. The key mechanism that I have, Senator, is -- is the action after review. And this is something we do with every operation we do and the intention here is to -- is to review the operation in great detail to understand exactly what happened and it is done with the chain of command in place and we have done that and I have presided over that.

Based on my experience, nearly 37 years of service, I've certainly appointed a lot of investigations and I've done -- been through a lot of these after action reviews. When I go through these things there are some specific things that I am looking for. I am looking for information gaps, where we can't -- we can't explain what happened in a particular situation or we have conflicting information between members of the organization. I am looking for indicators of -- of incompetence or poor decision making or bad judgment. The -- throughout all this. So what I can -- what I can tell you is that we did an exhaustive after-action review on this. I -- I presided over that, it was to me. It went down to a level including people who were on -- on the specific objective. As a result of that, I was satisfied that none of those indicators that I identified to you were present.

I think we had a good understanding of exactly what happened on in objective and we've been able to pull lessons learned out of that that we will apply in future operations -- in -- in the past. And as a result, I the determination that there was no need for an additional investigation into this particular operation.

KAINE: So the only investigation that continues is the -- the investigation on the loss of the helicopters is still not complete?

VOTEL: That -- that is correct, Senator.

KAINE: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

MCCAIN: Just to follow up, General, I -- there's been a lot of conversation about this particular mission. And the point that some of us are trying to make that the heroism and sacrifice those who serve has nothing to do with the mission itself.

In other words, we honor their sacrifice no matter what happened in the mission. And when you have women and children killed, as you pointed out; loss of a \$70 million aircraft; you do not capture anyone is was part of the mission, that mission is not a success. But that happens in war.

There's a thing called the fog of war. They did the best they could under very difficult circumstances. And I hope the process of your investigation -- when heavy fire was encountered why the decision was made to continue the mission I still don't think this committee has an answer to that question.

But it does not question the loyalty and sacrifice and bravery when question the mission. And unless we tell people the truth -- the absolute truth, then we are going to revisit another war a long time ago where we didn't tell the American people the truth and we very heavy price for it.

There's 55,000 names engraved in black granite not far from here. And the American people were not told the truth about whether we were succeeding or failing in that war. And then, because of that, it all collapsed. So I hope that we won't forget that lesson. And in no way does it detract from the heroism and professionalism and sacrifice of the brave men and women who serve under your command.

Senator McCaskill.

MCCASKILL: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I -- I couldn't -- I just want to underline the comments you've just made. And I do think it's important that we get answers to the questions about what happened at that moment in very difficult circumstances, admittedly. The heavy fire occurred and the decision was made to continue.

And I'm also anxious to have questions answered about the real value of the intelligence that was gathered. I think there has been some mixed signals about the value of the intelligence that was gathered. I want to talk to you today -- I've spend an awful lot of time working on contracting and contingencies.

And I remember my very first trip to -- to Iraq included a stop in Kuwait to look at contracting. And I had an encounter with a general there that I will never forget. I will always admire him for being so honest with me, because I was pointing out all of the these massive problems with contracting; especially LOGCAP I, LOGCAP II and all of those associated contracts. And -- and he looked at me and he said, "Senator, I wanted three kinds of ice cream in the mess yesterday and I don't care how much it cost."

Now, while I admired him for his honesty, it kind of underscored for me that contracting oversight was

not a core capability many times within commands, within contingencies. If it were, we wouldn't have this long trail of mistakes made going all the way back to Kosovo on contracting.

So I was upset yesterday when I saw the DOD IG report coming out of Kuwait where they said that ineffective monitoring of contractor performance for the Kuwait base operations, particular concern that the contracting office of representatives which we've worked very hard -- I mean, at the point in time I was over there, it was -- the worst guy in the unit got handed the clipboard, had no idea what he was supposed to do in terms of contracting oversight and didn't do much.

We've done a lot of work on this; training and making sure people understand and with standing up the contracting command. So the fact that there's no consistent surveillance of these contracts in Kuwait, no assurance that the contract requirements have been met, and the entire \$13 million performance bonus was paid even though it's not clear that it was earned.

And maybe most worrisome, this environmental and health hazard that has been allowed to languish. It's fairly clear from reading this report that a stagnant wastewater lagoon went unresolved, that it was probably never constructed correctly, and it's really impacting the health and safety of some of our men and women that are stationed there.

So I need you to reassure me that we have not taken our eye off the importance of contracting oversight. And this is not just you, this is also the ACC and the 408th contracting support brigade.

VOTEL: Thank you -- thank you, Senator. I absolutely agree with you and I recognize my responsibility as the CENTCOM Commander and as a senior leader in the Department of Defense to ensure that the expenditure of our national treasure and our resources is done in an effective and efficient manner and I look forward to an opportunity to talk with you specifically about this situation in Kuwait.

MCCASKILL: I would like that very much and we'll look forward to hearing from you directly because I want to -- the thing that was the most frustrating about the contracting through much of the Iraq conflict before we did the contracting reforms that the wartime contracting commission set out and we codified all of those, most of them in this committee. It was -- the amount of money that was wasted was astounding and we just can't afford it. We just can't afford it.

Let me briefly, in the time I have remaining, I know that they have covered Russia as it relates to what's been going on in Afghanistan. I'm not sure that it's been touched on what's going on in Nigeria and would love you to speak to that, General Waldhauser, about the fact that we refuse to sell them the Cobra attack helicopters because of the history of human rights problems and undeterred by that history, of course, Russia stepped up and now sold them attack helicopters and are now training the Nigerian military including the special forces instead of the United States.

Could you give us any assessment of the impact of that that Russia has stepped in where our better judgment said it wasn't a good idea and is now taking on that primary role with the Nigerian Special

Forces?

WALDHAUSER: Senator, not only Nigeria -- excuse me, but other countries in the continent. If it's -- if there are easier ways to get to military sales, if countries come in, China, Russia, North Korea, for example; if they come in and don't have a lot of strings attached, then sometimes it's -- it's easier for those countries to purchase weapons systems from others than the U.S. So we try to accommodate certain financial situations.

I know the DISC (ph) people that work for OSD try hard to accommodate that and we look closely at the absorption capability of these countries. But again, in many occasions, human rights is not an issue when it comes to weapons sales from countries other than the United States.

MCCASKILL: Well, I think it's something we need to worry about, because it is obviously a powerful way to spread the influence and power of Russia, and I think we all, on the matter what our party is have figured out in the last six months that this is a real threat to our country and to our a national security thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MCCAIN: Senator Graham?

GRAHAM: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think you've been asked about the soft power and the need for it. Both of you said it's an important tool in the toolbox to win war, is that correct?

VOTEL: That's correct, Senator.

WALDHAUSER: Yes Senator, yes.

GRAHAM: And you're war fighters extraordinaire, so I appreciate you putting your plug in for soft power. Let me dig in a little bit. Can you win the war without it?

WALDHAUSER: I don't believe you can, Senator. You have -- everything comes from security. Once you have a secure environment, development needs to take place and that's where soft power kicks in.

VOTEL: I agree with General Waldhauser.

GRAHAM: So really, this war is about a glorious death being offered by the terrorist and a hopeful life by the rest of the world, is that a pretty good description of what we're trying to do, is offer a hopeful life to compete with a glorious death?

VOTEL: I think in -- I think in -- in -- in very general terms, I think it is about that. It is about offering alternatives to people, to the situations that they find themselves in.

GRAHAM: And the good news is that most people over there don't want what ISIL is selling. There's not

a big demand for that product. Is that a fair statement?

WALDHAUSER: Certainly on the African continent, that's true; very true.

VOTEL: I would agree with that, Senator.

GRAHAM: Very few fathers and mothers want to turn their daughters over to ISIL if they don't have to. Is that at a fair statement?

VOTEL: It is, Senator.

WALDHAUSER: Yes Senator, it is fair.

GRAHAM: And is it a fair statement we're not going to win this war without partners in the faith? The only way we can win this war is to have fellow Muslims fighting with us against ISIL.

VOTEL: It's my view that we have to have local -- local forces engaged in this.

WALDHAUSER: That's what by, with, and through is all about, Senator.

GRAHAM: OK, and is it fair to say that most people in the faith reject this hateful ideology?

VOTEL: That is true, Senator.

WALDHAUSER: I agree.

GRAHAM: So I want the committee to understand that any budget we pass that guts the State Department's budget, you will never win this war. As a matter-of-fact, ISIL will be celebrating. What is Russia trying to do in Libya, General Waldhauser?

WALDHAUSER: Senator, Russia is trying to exert influence on the ultimate decision of who becomes and what entity becomes in charge of the government inside Libya. They're working to influence that -- that the decision.

GRAHAM: They're trying to do in Libya what there've been doing in Syria?

WALDHAUSER: Yes, that's a good way to characterize it.

GRAHAM: It's not in our national interest to let that happen is it?

WALDHAUSER: It is not.

GRAHAM: OK. The political situation in Libya is pretty fractious -- fractured?

WALDHAUSER: It's very fractured, Senator.

GRAHAM: So, the commander of their military is at odds with the -- the political leader supported by the U.N., is that there is fair?

WALDHAUSER: That's fair, yes.

GRAHAM: And if we don't fix that it's going to be tough moving forward?

WALDHAUSER: We've got to get the entities specifically Hofter (ph) and the government of the national accord together to make an accommodation in order to get any government moving forward.

GRAHAM: Would you say that Secretary Tillerson is very important in this regard?

WALDHAUSER: Very important, Senator.

GRAHAM: So we need to put that on his radar screen?

WALDHAUSER: We need to -- yes we do.

GRAHAM: OK. Syria, the Kurds that we're training General Votel, are they mostly aligned with the YPG -- are they YPG Kurds?

VOTEL: They are, senator.

GRAHAM: Is it fair to say that in the eyes of the Turks, the YPG Kurds are not much better, if any better than the PKK?

VOTEL: Senator that is the view of -- of -- of the Turks.

GRAHAM: Is it fair to say that the YPG Kurds have a -- sort of the communist Marxist view of governing? That's what their manifesto says anyway.

VOTEL: Senator, I think it's -- I think it's fair to say that there is some affinity back towards that.

GRAHAM: So is it fair to say that we've got to be careful about over utilizing the YPG Kurds? Not only will it create problems for Turkey, other Kurds in the region don't buy into their agenda also.

VOTEL: I think it is -- I think it is important and that is why, as we look to a place like Raqqa, we are attempting to do that with the majority Arab forces.



GRAHAM: Is it fair to say that how we take Raqqah can determine the outcome of Geneva, in terms of a political settlement?

VOTEL: I think it -- it's certainly a key -- a key operation that we'll -- we'll support that.

GRAHAM: Is it fair to say that the balance of power on the ground, in terms of Assad's regime that he's in a good spot?

VOTEL: He is in a better position than he was a year ago.

GRAHAM: That the opposition has basically melted away because Russia, Iran and Assad have gone after them full -- full throated.

VOTEL: The support that's been provided by Russia and Iran have certainly enabled the regime.

GRAHAM: Is it fair to say that most Syrians want two things, to get rid of ISIL but also to get rid of Assad because he slaughtered their families?

VOTEL: The -- the Syrians that I've talked to, I think, would -- would agree with that.

GRAHAM: Is it fair to say it's in our national security interest for Damascus not to handed over to Assad, a proxy for Iran, in any final settlement? That you cannot have Iran dominating Damascus?

VOTEL: Senator I think that is a -- that is certainly a decision for our political leadership to make but it's certainly -- I -- I think there is a strong consensus that way.

GRAHAM: Final thought. How we take Raqqah will determine if we can get a political settlement in Geneva, if we don't change the balance of military power on the ground, go outside of this Kurdish construct, reassure the Arabs that we're a better partner than we've been in the past, we're going to give Damascus to the Iranians?

If we'll help those Syrian Arabs who want to fight and take their country back from Assad and his brutal dictatorship, I think we (ph) change the balance of power on the ground and get a better deal in Geneva so if the Trump Administration's listening, how you take Raqqah will determine how successful we are in neutralizing an Iranian influence and Russian influence.

Mr. Chairman, you've been terrific on this issue, I want to thank you for your leadership.

MCCAIN: Thank you.

I thank you generals for your appearance here this morning it's been very helpful to the committee and to the United States Senate. I know it's not your favorite pastime, but I think it's very important that we

hear directly from you. Thank you for your leadership and we do want you to be assured that we'll do everything we can to support you as we go through what is a very complicated and difficult challenge.

Senator Reed?

REED: I simply want to thank you gentlemen for your service and for your testimony today and please relay our thanks to the men and women who serve so well with you. Thank you very much.

MCCAIN: This hearing is adjourned.