

**Opening Statement of Senator John McCain  
Chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee**

**Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building  
9:30 am, Thursday, March 26, 2015**

**To receive testimony on CENTCOM, AFRICOM, SOCOM.**

Good morning and welcome to General Lloyd Austin, General David Rodriguez, and General Joseph Votel. The Committee meets today to receive testimony on the posture of U.S. Central Command, U.S. Africa Command, and U.S. Special Operations Command. I extend our appreciation to all three of you for your long and distinguished service and to the troops and their families who defend our Nation every day.

From Mali to Libya and Somalia, and from Yemen to Iraq and Syria, the old order across North Africa and the Middle East is under siege. Both the regional balance among states and the social order within states is collapsing, and no new vision has emerged to take its place. Unfortunately, the lack of clear U.S. strategy and lack of strong U.S. leadership has confused our friends, encouraged our enemies, and created space for malign influence to flourish.

Despite the fact that Dr. Kissinger testified that “The United States has not faced a more diverse and complex array of crises since the end of the second World War”, the looming threat of sequestration serves to compound that threat and help create a leadership vacuum that fuels the chaos of our current predicament.

Retired General Jim Mattis told this committee “No foe in the field can wreak such havoc on our security that mindless sequestration is achieving today”, and I couldn’t agree more. Our witnesses are uniquely positioned to describe the increased risk due to sequestration.

To navigate this chaotic time successfully, we must have unambiguous national security priorities, clarity in our strategic thinking, and an unwavering commitment to the resources required to support the necessary courses of action.

For your sake General Austin, let’s hope that your job performance is not measured by the number of crises you have to juggle, but by how you handle them. My fear is that you are expected to juggle with one hand tied behind your back. Whether it’s sequestration or direction from above not to upset Iran during sensitive nuclear negotiations – yours has to be one of the most difficult jobs on the planet.

I am deeply troubled by comments from senior Administration officials on Iran. Secretary Kerry recently said – and I’m not making this up – that the net effect of Iran’s military action in Iraq is quote, “positive.” Similarly, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Dempsey, said, “As long as the Iraqi government remains committed to inclusivity of all the various groups inside the country, then I think Iranian influence will be positive.”

General Austin, I know from our conversations, that you do not suffer the dangerous delusion that somehow Iran can be a force for good in the region – in your position you can’t afford that fantasy. Today I want to discuss our strategy to address the situation on the ground as it is, rather than as we wish it to be.

General David Petraeus gave a realistic picture in a recent interview, which is worth quoting: “The current Iranian regime is not our ally in the Middle East. It is ultimately part of the problem, not the solution. The more the Iranians are seen to be dominating the region, the more it is going to inflame Sunni radicalism and fuel the rise of groups like the Islamic State.”

Iran is not our ally, yet we learned just yesterday that the US is providing air support in Tikrit, which media is reporting as being fought by 20,000 to 30,000 Iran-backed Shia militia fighters and only 3,000 to 4,000 Iraqi Security Forces. I have many concerns and questions about how and why we are doing this which I hope you can answer for us today.

In Yemen, a country that President Obama recently praised as a model for U.S. counterterrorism, the prospect of radical groups like Iranian-backed Houthi militants in charge of an air force and possessing ballistic missiles was more than our Arab partners could withstand. The air strikes by these concerned Arab nations stems in part from their perception of America’s disengagement from the region and absence of U.S. leadership.

In a scenario that again, you could not make up, while our Arab partners conduct air strikes to halt the offensive of Iranian proxies in Yemen, the United States is conducting air strikes to support the offensive of Iranian proxies in Tikrit. This is as bizarre as it is misguided – another tragic case of leading from behind.

The complex intertwining of ISIL and Iranian problem sets in Iraq and Syria challenges us in an area the Administration has poorly handled to date – the ability to prioritize and deal with multiple crises simultaneously.

We're also seeing increasing links between ISIL and terrorist groups throughout Africa, including a growing presence in Libya and a newfound relationship with Nigeria's Boko Haram. Adding to the rising terrorist threat across the continent, Africa remains plagued by long-standing conflicts that have resulted in large displacements of people and rising instability.

General Rodriguez it is obvious from our discussion this week in my office that none of this is news to you. Yet, despite a growing array of threats, Africa Command consistently suffers from significant resource shortfalls that impact your ability to accomplish your mission.

One of the key components of our efforts to combat global terrorism is the team of men and women of Special Operations Command. As noted by General Votel in his prepared remarks, our special operators are deployed to more than 80 countries and are often our first line of defense against an evolving and increasingly dangerous terrorist threat. They defend the nation by training our partners and, when required, conducting direct action operations.

However, demand for special operations forces continues to far exceed supply, placing enormous strain on the readiness of the force. Compounding the strain is the looming threat of sequestration, which will not just degrade the capabilities of the force, but also the service provided enablers it depends on. General Votel, I look to you to update the committee on the impact of sequestration on the men and women you lead, and the increased risk to the troops you would be forced to accept as a result.

We need a strategy that spans the same geography as the threat, from ISIL to al Qaeda to Iran. Our witnesses work tirelessly to combat these threats together, and we owe them and the forces they lead better than a piecemeal approach that lacks resources and fails to address the full spectrum of threats we face.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today on these important questions.