

**Opening Statement of U.S. Senator Jack Reed
Ranking Member, Senate Armed Services Committee**

**Room SDG-50
Dirksen Senate Office Building
Thursday, March 26, 2015**

**To receive testimony on U.S. Central Command, U.S. Africa Command and U.S. Special Operations Command programs and budget in review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2016 and the Future Years Defense Program.
(As Prepared for Delivery)**

Good Morning. Let me join Senator McCain in welcoming our witnesses. Collectively you represent the combatant commands who are most engaged in the counterterrorism fight against al Qaeda and ISIS – threats that know no geographic boundaries and require a regional and, sometimes, trans-regional approaches to counter.

The rise of a militarily capable ISIS threatens to erase national boundaries between Iraq and Syria. And the areas under ISIS control are providing a training ground for foreign fighters who threaten to spread violence upon returning to their homes in Europe, Asia, or the United States.

In Iraq, there is a recognition of the need for Sunni, Shia and Kurdish factions to overcome their divisions to confront the ISIS threat. Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi has taken steps to begin to address Sunni and Kurdish grievances, and in these efforts he needs our support. Similarly in Syria, addressing the root causes that helped lead to the rise of ISIS will require promoting the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict there.

Yet, the growing influence of Shia-dominated militia in Iraq, many taking orders from the Iranian Qod's force, threatens to alienate the liberated Sunni communities. Reports of human rights abuses by Shia militia may cause some Iraqi Sunnis to conclude that they are better off with ISIS than under the control of Iranian-backed militias. General Austin, we would be interested in your assessment of the progress of efforts to train, advise and assist the Iraqi security forces and to build the capabilities of Kurdish peshmerga, as they begin to retake territory from ISIS. We also are interested in your views on the growing influence of Iran in Iraq and the threat it poses over the long-term to Iraq's stability.

An additional concern is the outcome of the nuclear framework negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran. The fast approaching deadline, deal or no deal, will have implications for the security of the region and beyond.

Overnight in Yemen, CENTCOM was provided the additional task of supporting GCC operations in Yemen. I hope General Austin will provide us an update on the latest developments on this front.

In Afghanistan, our military is focused on training Afghan security forces and conducting counterterrorism operations to solidify the hard-won gains of the past decade. President Obama's decision, at Afghan President Ghani's request, to keep U.S. forces in Afghanistan at current levels through 2015 is a positive step.

General Rodriguez, you are increasingly confronting similar challenges to CENTCOM. The continued threat from al Shabaab in Somalia, the ongoing conflict and associated security vacuum in Libya, a growing terrorist threat in the Maghreb, and Boko Haram's expansions are causes of deep concern. Your command – with its limited resources – is attempting to build the capacity of interested partners in the region and, where possible, to team up with willing Europeans allies to amplify our efforts. I'd also like to highlight AFRICOM's herculean effort to blunt the spread of Ebola in Africa in recent months and commend you and your forces for their actions.

Under sequestration, your efforts and those of the civilian agencies of our government will be hammered. I hope you will provide your assessment of these impacts on efforts by both AFRICOM and your civilian partners to address challenges in Africa.

General Votel, it is appropriate that you are with us today given that deployed special operations forces, or SOF, are heavily concentrated in the CENTCOM and AFRICOM areas of responsibility. Despite the importance of these missions, SOCOM is not exempt from current budget pressures and the threat of sequestration. For example, given that SOF depend on general purpose forces for key enabling capabilities such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, airlift, logistics, and more, I am especially concerned about service cuts to this enabling support as they protect other areas of their budget.

I would like to commend SOCOM for its focus on addressing the stress on SOF and their families caused by high operational tempo over the last 13 years. SOCOM – to its credit – has recognized the need to deal with this stress in a holistic manner and through programs that are tailored to the unique requirements of special operators and their families.

Thank you again to our witnesses and I look forward to your testimony.