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Before the

COMMITTEE ON
ARMED SERVICES

UNITED STATES SENATE

HEARING 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

Thursday, March 26, 2015

Washington, D.C.

ALDERSON REPORTING COMPANY
1155 CONNECTICUT AVENUE, N.W.
SUITE 200
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036
(202) 289-2260
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U.S. Senate
Committee on Armed Services
Washington, D.C.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:35 a.m. in Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. John McCain, chairman of the committee, presiding.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JOHN McCAIN, U.S. SENATOR
FROM ARIZONA

Chairman McCain: Well, good morning. Good morning, and welcome to General Lloyd Austin, General David Rodriguez, and General Joseph Votel.


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," to quote, 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, quote, "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 how you handle them. My fear is that you're 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'm 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, quote, "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." Again, that's in the category of, "I'm not making this up."

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. And I quote, "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's going to inflame Sunni radicalism and fuel the rise of groups like the Islamic State." I'll be interested if our witnesses agree with that assessment from General David Petraeus.

Iran is not our ally, yet we learned, just yesterday, that the U.S. is providing air support in Tikrit, which media is reporting as being fought by 20- to 30,000 Iran-backed Shi'a militia fighters and only 3- 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 model for U.S. counterterrorism a success story -- and I'm not making that one up, either -- 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 airstrikes by these concerned Arab nations stems in part of their perception of America's disengagement from the region and a total absence of U.S. leadership.

In a scenario that, again, you could not make up, while our Arab partners conduct airstrikes to halt the offensive of Iranian proxies in Yemen, the United States is conducting airstrikes 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 challenge us on an -- 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 longstanding conflicts that have resulted in large displacements of people and rising instability.
General Rodriguez, it's obvious, from our discussion this week in my office, that none of this is news to you. Yet, despite a growing array of threats, African 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. In prepared remarks, General Votel has said our special operators are deployed in 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 an enormous strain on the readiness of the force. Compounding the strain, 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 their 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.

Senator Reed.
STATEMENT OF HON. JACK REED, U.S. SENATOR FROM RHODE ISLAND

Senator Reed: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and good morning.

And let me join Senator McCain in not only welcoming the witnesses, but also thanking them and the men and women of their command for their extraordinary service to the Nation.

And you represent the combatant commands that are most engaged in the fight against al-Qaeda and ISIS, and threats that know no geographic boundaries and require a regional, and sometimes a transregional, approach to effectively dealing with them. The rise of a military-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 even the United States.

In Iraq, there's a recognition of the need for Sunni, Shi'a, 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. In fact, one could argue that, ultimately, the issues in Iraq have to have a political solution, that military
efforts will buy time but not ultimate and decisive success. Similarly, in Syria, addressing the root causes that helped lead to the rise of ISIS will require promoting the conditions for a political arrangement as well as success on the battlefield. Yet, the growing influence of Shi'a-dominated militia in Iraq, many taking orders from the Iranian Quds force, threatens to alienate the liberated Sunni community. Reports of human rights abuses by Shi'a militia may cause some Iraqi Sunnis to conclude they are better off with ISIS under the control of Iranian-backed militias. And that would be an extraordinary setback for all of us.

And, General Austin, we'd be interested in your assessment of the progress with the efforts to train, advise, and assist the Iraqi Security Forces to build up the capability of the Kurdish Peshmerga as they begin to retake territory from ISIS. We're also 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. And overnight, as Senator McCain indicated, in Yemen, you were given an additional task of supporting GCC operations in their offensive operations in Yemen. And I hope, General Austin, you can give us an update on those responsibilities and those operations.

Of course, an additional concern is the outcome of the
nuclear framework negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran. We are approaching a deadline. And the implication of success, failure, or something in between will have profound impacts in the region. And that, too, I think you have to assess.

In Afghanistan, our military forces are focused on training Afghan Security Forces, conducting counterterrorism operations, and solidifying the hard-won gains. And we all had the privilege of listening to President Ghani yesterday. I think there's a new hope and a new opportunity, and we have to move forward, understanding it's still a very fragile situation.

General Rodriguez, you are increasingly facing challenges that were located in adjacent ORs -- the rise of ISIL, Boko Haram, all of these things -- jihad in Somalia. Their operations challenge you in attempting to build the capacity up of the nations in that region and also to work with our European allies very effectively to present a united front against these terrorists. So, again, your efforts are critical. And also let me commend you and your forces for the resolve with respect to the ebola outbreak and what you were able to accomplish.

Senator McCain has made this point very clear, very eloquently. Under sequestration, all of these efforts, both civilian, military, interagency, will be hammered if it is
allowed to prevail. So, I hope you can provide assessment, not just in AFRICOM, but in CENTCOM and in SOCOM, of the effects of sequestration on your ability to operate. General Votel, as the Special Operations Forces, you are working across the globe. Your missions are critical. But, once again, I think it would help us if you could indicate where the effects of sequestration would actually undermine current and projected operations. Again, one of the points that you made is that you are sort of a global force, but you rely extensively on the base operations of the United States Army, United States Air Force, and every other service, and some civilian agencies. And that would be helpful to point out.

Let me commend you and SOCOM for all of the operations you've undertaken in the last 13 years. There's no force that's more stressed, no group of individual men and women and their families who give so much and go so often to the battle. So, thank you, General, for your efforts. And please communicate that to the men and women you lead.

Thank you very much.

Chairman McCain: General Votel, can we begin with you?
STATEMENT OF GENERAL JOSEPH L. VOTEL, USA, COMMANDER,
U.S. SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

General Votel: Good morning, Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed, and other distinguished members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the current posture of United States Special Operations Command, or SOCOM, as we refer to it. I'm especially pleased to be here with my two mission partners, Generals Lloyd Austin and Dave Rodriguez.

SOCOM was created by Congress to ensure that we always had ready and capable SOF forces to meet the Nation's challenges. Our ability to address these challenges is due, in large part, to the strong support we get from Congress, and especially from this distinguished committee. Thank you very much.

I'd like to start out by commenting on the amazing actions made daily by our Special Operations men and women: operators, acquirers, logisticians, analysts, and many others, Active and Reserve, military and civilian, the total SOF force. Alongside our conventional force partners, the 69,000 quiet professionals of SOCOM are committed to values-based excellence and service to our Nation. They relentlessly pursue mission success. And today, roughly 7500 of them are deployed to over 80 countries worldwide, supporting geographic combatant commander requirements and...
named operations.

We are a force who has been heavily deployed over the last 14 years, and our military members, civilians, and their families have paid a significant price, physically and emotionally, serving our country. We are very appreciative of the support we receive from Congress to address the visible and invisible challenges, and we never forget that, for SOCOM, people are our most important asset.

SOCOM, in conjunction with its partners, supports the geographic combatant commanders and the missions they are assigned by the Secretary of Defense and the President. If they are successful, we are successful. If they fail, we fail. Today, the United States is faced with many challenges. The spread of technology and the diffusion of power are not only being used by responsible leaders to better societies, but, unfortunately, by wicked actors to orchestrate terror and violence regionally and globally. Nonstate actors like al-Qaeda and ISIL and other violent extremist organizations, menacing state actors like North Korea, destabilizing actors like Iran, and the growingly coercive actors like Russia, are just a few examples of the entities affecting the strategic environment in which SOF forces operate. We are equally affected by the growing use of cyber capabilities and social media, which make it easy for our adversaries to communicate, coordinate, execute, and inspire their actions.
The fiscal environment is of concern, as well. While SOCOM has been well supported in recent years, I remain profoundly concerned by the impact of another round of sequestration, and not only how it impacts SOCOM, but, more importantly, how it will affect the four services upon whom we are absolutely dependent for mission support.

To address the challenging security environment, SOF provides a portfolio of options for our national leaders and the geographic combatant commanders. Through small-footprint operations and by relying on a network of purposeful partnerships, SOF provides a comparative advantage through persistent engagement, partner enablement, network focus, and discreet rapid response to crisis situations. While we support military operations across the spectrum, SOF capabilities are uniquely suited to operate and succeed in the gray zone between normal international competition and open conflict. And it is in this area that we see our very best opportunities to help shape the future environment.

To enable our efforts, I have established five priorities for the command:

First, we must ensure SOF readiness by developing the right people, skills, and capabilities to meet current and future requirements. To this end, we want to ensure effectiveness, now and into the future, with the very best
SOF operators and support personnel, enabled by the best technology and capabilities we can field. Along the way, we want to make the very best use of the unique MFP-11 funding authorities that Congress has granted us.

Second, we must help the Nation win by addressing today's security challenges. We strive to provide coherent and well-integrated SOF forces for the geographic combatant commanders, focused on optimizing our SOF activities. Nearly everywhere, you will find SOF forces working alongside, and often in support of, their conventional force partners to accomplish our security objectives.

Third, we must build purposeful relationships to improve global understanding and awareness to create options for our leaders. We don't own the network, but we are an important part of it. And working with our partners will always produce the best options for our Nation.

Fourth, we have to prepare for the future security environment to ensure that SOF is ready to win in an increasingly complex world. Ultimately, our goal is to match exquisite people with cutting-edge capability and the very best ideas and concepts to help our Nation succeed against the looming challenges we will face in the future.

Finally, we must preserve our force and families to ensure their long-term well-being. It is in this area that we are specifically focused on a holistic approach to
address the invisible challenges of stress and suicide that
are affecting our servicemembers, civilians, and their
family members.

I remain honored and humbled by the opportunity to
command the best Special Operations Forces in the world. I
am incredibly proud of each and every one of our team
members and their families.

I look forward to your questions and our dialogue
today.

[The prepared statement of General Votel follows:]
Chairman McCain: Thank you.

General Rodriguez.
STATEMENT OF GENERAL DAVID M. RODRIGUEZ, USA,
COMMANDER, U.S. AFRICA COMMAND

General Rodriguez: Chairman McCain, Ranking Member
Reed, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you
for the opportunity to update you on the efforts of United
States Africa Command. And I'm glad to be between Joe and
Lloyd today.

Let me express my gratitude for your support to our
servicemembers and their families who underwrite our
Nation's security in an increasingly complex world of
accelerating change.

Today, our Nation faces heightened strategic
uncertainty; risks to our national interests are
significant, and growing. Part of our strategic uncertainty
is our fiscal uncertainty. If sequestration returns in 2016,
I'm concerned about our ability to execute the current
strategy at a manageable level of risk.

Threats and opportunities to advance national interests
are growing in Africa. In the past year, we achieved
progress in several areas through close cooperation with our
allies and partners. We have built significant partner
capacity over the years. This capacity has played a major
role in regional efforts to contain violent extremism,
including al-Shabaab, other al-Qaeda affiliates, and now the
Islamic State of Iraq in the Levant, as well as Boko Haram.
With our support, French and regional partners have disrupted violent extremist networks, and a small number of our unilateral operations have applied additional pressure.

We also achieved success with other partners against other challenges. As an example, in Liberia, we supported USAID and the Liberian nation in responding to the largest ebola epidemic in history.

Another illustrative example is our support to strengthening the capacity and coordination of regional partners in the Gulf of Guinea.

Furthermore, in Central Africa, combined military and civilian efforts significantly reduced the Lord's Resistance Army's ability to threaten civilian populations.

Working closely with the State Department and our regional partners has allowed us to improve our posture and capability to protect U.S. personnel and facilities. When security in Libya deteriorated, we assisted in the safe departure of U.S. and allied personnel. Conversely, in the Central African Republic, we provided security that enabled the resumption of embassy operations.

We've had a lot of successes, but many challenges remain, and there is much work to be done. Transregional terrorists and criminal networks continue to adapt and expand aggressively. While al-Shabaab is weakened in Somalia, it remains a persistent threat to U.S. and regional
interests. Al-Shabaab has broadened its operations to conduct, or attempt to conduct, asymmetric attacks against Uganda, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and especially Kenya.

Libya-based threats are growing rapidly, including an expanding ISIL presence. If left unchecked, they have the highest potential among security challenges in Africa to increase risk to U.S. strategic interests in the near future.

Boko Haram threatens the ability of the Nigerian government to provide security and basic services in large portions of the northeast. Boko Haram has extended its reach beyond Nigeria's borders to Cameroon, Niger, and Chad.

In Somalia, Libya, and Nigeria, the international community is challenged to implement the comprehensive approaches necessary to advance governance, security, and development. Declining resources will make this more difficult.

To mitigate increasing risk, Africa Command is sharpening our priorities and improving the alignment of resources to strategy. We are coordinating with international and interagency partners to harmonize our efforts across the continent. And we are seeking to increase operational and programmatic flexibility.

We continue to provide our best military advice to policymakers to inform decisions about managing risk.
Thanks for your continued support to our mission and the dedicated people advancing our Nation's defense interests in Africa.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of General Rodriguez follows:]
Chairman McCain: General Austin, welcome.
STATEMENT OF GENERAL LLOYD J. AUSTIN, USA, COMMANDER, U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND

General Austin: Thank you, sir. Good morning. Chairman McCain, Senator Reed, distinguished members of the committee, I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear here today to talk about the broad efforts and the current posture of United States Central Command.

Up front, and most importantly, I'd like to thank all of you for your continued and strong support of our men and women in uniform and their families. I look forward to talking about them and the exceptional contributions that they continue to make on behalf of our Command and our Nation.

I'm pleased to appear here this morning alongside my teammates, General Dave Rodriguez and General Joe Votel. And I'll join them in making a few brief opening comments, and then we're prepared to answer your questions.

Ladies and gentlemen, much has happened in the CENTCOM area of responsibility since I last appeared before this committee, a year ago. Indeed, the central region is today more volatile and chaotic than I have seen it at any other point. And the stakes have never been higher. The forces of evil that threaten our homeland and our interests in that strategically important part of the world thrive in unstable environments marked by poor governance, economic
uncertainty, and ungoverned or undergoverned spaces. And therefore, it's essential that we be present and engaged, and that we cultivate strong partnerships and continue to do our part to address emerging threats and to move the region in a direction of greater stability and security. And we must be properly resourced to do what is required to effectively protect and promote our interests.

At CENTCOM, in addition to doing all that we can to prevent problems from occurring while shaping future outcomes, we spend a great deal of our time and energy managing real-world crisis. Over the past year, we've dealt with conflicts in Iraq and Syria. We transitioned from combat operations to a train, advise, and assist and CT mission focus in Afghanistan. At the same time, we dealt with a number of difficult challenges in Yemen, Egypt, and Lebanon, and in a host of other locations throughout our area of responsibility. We actively pursued violent extremist groups, and we took measures to counter the radical ideologies that are espoused by these groups. We also dealt with Iran, which continues to act as a destabilizing force in the region, primarily through its Quds forces and through support to proxy actors such as Lebanese Hezbollah.

And, while we are hopeful that an acceptable agreement will be reached with Iran with respect to its nuclear
program, either way, whether we reach an agreement or we
don't reach an agreement, Iran will continue to present a
challenge for us, going forward.

We are faced with a number of difficult issues in our
region. However, I firmly believe that challenges present
opportunities, and we make progress primarily by pursuing
those opportunities. And we do pursue them. And I am
confident that our broad efforts are having a measurable
impact.

Of course, the most immediate threat facing us now is
the threat posed by ISIL, or Daesh. This barbaric
organization must be defeated, and it will be defeated. We
are currently in a process of executing our regional
military campaign plan, and I'm pleased to report that we
are making significant progress.

At the outset, we said that we'd have to halt ISIL's
advance. And we've done that in Iraq. We said that we're
going to have to regenerate and restructure Iraq's Security
Forces and help them to reestablish their border. And we're
in the process of doing that right now. We said that we'd
have to help our partners in the region to bolster their
defenses against ISIL. And we continue to help our friends
in Jordan and Lebanon and Turkey. And we said that we'd
have to build credible ground forces to counter ISIL in
Syria and to guard against ungoverned spaces. And we'll
soon begin doing so as a part of our Syria train-and-equip program.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are making progress. In fact, we're about where we said we would be in the execution of our military campaign plan, which supports the broader whole-of-government strategy designed to counter ISIL. And we're having significant effects on the enemy. We continue to attrite its forces in Iraq and Syria. We've attacked its command-and-control capabilities. We've destroyed its training sites and storage facilities, along with hundreds of its vehicles, tanks, and heavy weapon systems. And, in doing so, we have significantly degraded his capability, its ability to command and control its forces, and also his primary sources of revenue -- namely, his refineries and crude collection points. The fact is that ISIL can no longer do what he did at the outset, which is to seize and hold new territory. He has assumed a defensive crouch in Iraq. Although he has greater freedom of movement in Syria, he's largely in a defensive there, as well. He's having a tough time governing. And this is crucial to his claims of a caliphate. Indeed, he has begun to expand into other areas -- namely, North Africa -- in part, because he knows that he's losing in Iraq and Syria, and he needs to find other ways to maintain his legitimacy. Going forward, we should expect this -- to see this enemy continue to conduct
limited attacks and to orchestrate horrific scenes in order
to create IO opportunities and to distract and intimidate.
But, make no mistake, ISIL is losing this fight. And I am
certain that he will be defeated.
However, there is still work to be done to get to that
point. And we intend to continue to execute the campaign,
as designed. And I say that because how we go about this is
very important. If we don't first get things under control
in Iraq, where there is a government that we can work with
and some amount of reliable security forces, if we don't get
things there right first, before expanding our efforts in
Syria, then we risk making matters worse in both countries.
But, done the right way, in light of the limitations that
exist, I believe that we can, and we will, be successful in
our efforts to defeat ISIL. At the same time, we can be
assured continued progress in pursuit of our principal goal,
which is to move the strategically important region in a
direction of increased stability and security.
Going forward, we will all be required to make tough
choices. We'll need to find ways to do more, or at least as
much, with less in the current fiscal environment. That
said, I remain concerned by the fact that capability
reductions can and will impact our ability to respond to
crisis, and especially in the highly volatile central
region. The resulting loss in flexibility makes the U.S.
and our interests increasingly vulnerable to external pressures.

And so, I would ask Congress to do its part to make sure that we avoid sequestration and other resourcing limitations that serve to degrade the readiness of America's military forces.

Chairman McCain, Senator Reed, members of the committee, I want to thank you once more for your strong support that you continue to show towards servicemembers, our civilians, and their families. They are the very best in the world at what they do, and they continue to demonstrate absolute selflessness. And they make enormous sacrifices on behalf of the mission in support of one another.

Thank you, sir.

[The prepared statement of General Austin follows:]
Chairman McCain: Thank you, General.

I'd ask the witnesses, do they agree with General Petraeus's comments, a few days ago, that Iran was as great or greater threat in the Middle East than ISIS? Do you agree with that, General Austin? With that statement?

General Austin: Sir, I would say that, in terms of the long-term threat in the region, Iran is the greatest threat to stability. I would say the most pressing threat is ISIL, and one that we have to deal with and defeat in the near term.

Chairman McCain: General Rodriguez?

General Rodriguez: Yes, I agree, sir, with both General Austin and General Petraeus, the short- and long-term challenges.

Chairman McCain: General Votel?

General Votel: Mr. Chairman, I agree.

Chairman McCain: So, now we are seeing -- Oh, General Austin, when were you told by the Saudis that they were going to take military action in Yemen?

General Austin: Sir, I had a conversation with the CHOD right before they took action. And so, it was shortly before. I --

Chairman McCain: Right before they took action.

General Austin: Yes, sir.

Chairman McCain: That's very interesting.
Now, you were talking about how we're defeating ISIL.
Right now, the battle for Tikrit is stalled, and we are then
launching airstrikes into Tikrit. Is that -- isn't --
that's obviously correct. And it's my understanding --
please correct me if I'm wrong -- that there's about 2,000
Iraqi military fighting there and about 20,000 the -- Shi'a
militia that are doing the majority of the fighting. Is
that roughly correct?

General Austin: Sir, it's about 4,000 Iraqi Security
Forces, combined, in that area. Currently, there are no
Shi'a militia. And, as reported by the Iraqis today, no PMF
forces in that area, as well. So --

Chairman McCain: So, there's 4,000 Iraqi. Who are the
others?

General Austin: The Shi'a militia that were there have
pulled back from that area, sir.

Chairman McCain: So, the fighting is all being done by
the Iraqi forces?

General Austin: Sir, when the --

Chairman McCain: I've only got a few minutes, and
maybe you can shorten the answer. They're pretty
straightforward questions.

General Austin: Yes, sir. The clearance of the town
of Tikrit, which is, as you know, on the west side of the
river, is being done by the Iraqi Special Operations Forces
and the federal police, with our air support.

Chairman McCain: So, why do we see pictures of
Suleimani everywhere, and leading and orchestrating this
effort?

General Austin: Those pictures were from before. And,
as you know, that effort that Suleimani and the Iranians
were sponsoring, it stalled. It stalled because they didn't
have --

Chairman McCain: So, they're no longer in the fight.

General Austin: He is no longer -- well, he was no
longer on the ground, as of --

Chairman McCain: No, I mean, the Shi'a militias are no
longer in the fight.

General Austin: The folks that we are supporting in
clearing Tikrit --

Chairman McCain: Are the Shi'a militias still in the
fight?

General Austin: No, sir, they're not a part of the
clearing operations in Tikrit.

Chairman McCain: So, we are -- the airstrikes that
we're carrying out in support are only in support of Iraqi
military activities.

General Austin: That's correct, sir. Preconditioned
for us to provide support was that the Iraqi government had
to be in charge of this operation, the -- they had to know
-- we had to know exactly who was on the ground, we had to be able to deconflict our fires, they had to have a credible scheme of maneuver, which they not only replanned, but we caused them to rehearse it, and they had to be able to talk to the folks on the ground, as well.

Chairman McCain: We -- in our airstrikes in --

By the way, I totally disagree with you about ignoring Syria. There's no strategy for Syria. And we all know that. And ISIS doesn't respect those boundaries. But, somehow you seem to, and the President does. There's no -- they know no boundaries. And so, to say that we are going to have a strategy for Iraq first and then Syria, of course, is sophistry.

Right now, in our airstrikes in Iraq and Syria, of the 12,000 sorties, 3,000 of them actually drop weapons. Is that true?

General Austin: I think that's about right, sir.

Chairman McCain: Don't we put our pilots in great danger if they're not going to drop weapons? And isn't it the argument that we really need the Joint Terminal Attack Controllers, JTACs, on the ground if we're going to be effective? Or are you going to have three out of four fighter sorties fly around in circles, and then return?

General Austin: Sir, the hours-flown-to-ordnance-employed ratio is really based upon a couple of factors.
One is, the type of enemy that we're opposing. And the second is that -- are the distances that we're dealing on a daily basis.

If you take a look at an operation like Desert Storm, where you had fielded forces and infrastructure that you could attack with preplanned sorties, then that ratio -- certainly, you'll have a greater ratio of hours flown to ordnance employed.

The type of enemy that we're facing currently is -- it started out as an extremist element that wanted to behave like an army. And because of that, we were able to attack his mass formations early on, but he very quickly resorted to behaving like an irregular force, where he began to blend in with the population. As he did that, it became more difficult to --

Chairman McCain: Which shouldn't -- which should have surprised no one.

General Austin: It didn't surprise us, sir. But, the nature of this fight is such that, you know, we need to be able to support the --

Chairman McCain: So, we're satisfied with a situation where we launch 12,000 sorties, when only one out of four actually drop weapons.

General Austin: Sir, it's --

Chairman McCain: That, General, is not a viable or,
frankly, a good use of the taxpayers' dollars.

General Austin: Sir, I would just make the point that, as we compare that ratio to what we've done in Afghanistan, it's equal to that -- because it's the same type of fighting there, principally. And the ratios are comparable. In fact, the ratios in OIR are even better than what we saw in Afghanistan.

Chairman McCain: Well, I would argue that that's comparing apples and oranges, but I -- my time has expired.

Senator Reed.

Senator Reed: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. General Austin, just again returning to Tikrit, we are operating at the request of the Prime Minister of Iraq, Prime Minister Abadi, who is the democratically elected leader, and we set conditions as to what we would require before we would be engaged. Is that correct?

General Austin: That's correct, sir.

Senator Reed: And your comments to Senator McCain suggest that the popular mobilization forces, the Shi'a militias, have withdrawn. Initially, they were engaged in the fight, but they've pulled back, and now the operation is being conducted by Iraqi regular forces, their special operations --

General Austin: Special Operations Forces and the federal police, yes, sir.
Senator Reed: It appeared, just a few days ago, in fact, that this fight would go -- succeed simply with the mobilization forces, the Shi'a militias, and -- which would have added a significant sort of a at least rhetorical claim to both the militias and to the Iranians. Now it appears that they cannot effectively clear the city without the support of the United States and our airpower. Is that --

General Austin: That's correct, sir. And I've -- if I could, make a point, here, to highlight why it failed. It's the way that the -- these forces went about trying to do this. These forces obviously were not being controlled by the Government of Iraq, they didn't have a coherent scheme of maneuver, command, and control. They didn't have precision fires to support this effort. And so, trying to go about the difficult task of clearing a place like Tikrit without that caused them to stall. And what we have done is, number one, as you pointed out, sir, highlighted a number of preconditions that must be present before we would provide ISR and employ fires. And once those conditions were met, which included Shi'a militias not being involved, then we're able to proceed.

And I'd like just -- just to highlight, sir, that, you know, three tours in Iraq, commanding troops who were brutalized by some of these Shi'a militias, I will not, and I hope we never, coordinate or cooperate with Shi'a
Senator Reed: And part of the operation in Tikrit -- and we're doing all we can to assist the Iraqi regular forces to succeed -- will be a prelude to operations in Mosul, which have always been contemplated to be conducted by Iraqi Security Forces with -- if they make the conditions, with our support. Is that accurate?

General Austin: Yes, sir.

Senator Reed: All right.

General Votel, we have the Assistant Secretary of Defense for SOLEC, and he is the service secretary-like responsibilities for Special Operations Forces, your forces. And do you have any views -- because he's established a Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council -- do you work with the Council? What's your relationship?

General Votel: Senator, we absolutely do. And I meet with Secretary Lumpkin on a regular basis. And the SOPAC, as it's referred to, the Special Operations Policy and Oversight Council that meets in the Pentagon, really provides a good forum to pull together a number of the senior leaders within OSD and, frankly, on the Joint Staff in SOCOM to ensure that we are looking at the requirements for SOF forces and ensuring that it's well coordinated within the building. And we're getting both oversight and advocacy for our activities.
Senator Reed: Let me ask an additional question. You've talked about, in your prepared remarks, the campaign plan for global special operations, which, of necessity, has to interact with the campaign plans of AFRICOM and CENTCOM and NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM, et cetera, et cetera. So, can you comment about how you manage this plan? And, just quickly, because my time expired, General Rodriguez and General Austin might make a comment, too.

General Votel: Absolutely. So, the campaign plan for global special operations is really designed to support my principal task of supporting my geographic partners out here. And it's designed to synchronize our SOF activities to help us prioritize our resources and where we are putting them in support of the GCCs. It's designed to address the partnerships that we need to have in place. It's designed to look at the things that we will do to shape the environment for the geographic combatant commanders. And then it ensures that we have provided SOF aligned to those specific areas so that they can develop the capacity and the skills and capabilities they need to best support the geographic combatant commanders.

Senator Reed: General Rodriguez, your comments on this interaction?

General Rodriguez: When we make our strategic plan, sir, our theater Special Operation Command is fully
involved. And all those things that Joe does about
allocating the forces and the capabilities across the world
all support my plan exactly how I want it to be.

Senator Reed: General Austin, a quick comment or one
for the record? My time's expiring. Are you comfortable
with the interaction?

General Austin: I am very comfortable with it, sir.

Senator Reed: Thank you.

Thank you, gentlemen.

Chairman McCain: Senator Inhofe.

Senator Inhofe: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As I told you, General Rodriguez, I was going to
concentrate my questions on AFRICOM. When Senator McCain
talked about being under-resourced, it is true that, when
you were formed, and up to the current time, you don't
really have resources. You depend on EUCOM for almost
everything. Is that correct?

General Rodriguez: We got a little bit more resources
in the last year and a half, Senator, to include a special-
purpose MAGTF, a commander's response force, a special
operations force, and we've also got a couple of key
enablers for force. But, I --

Senator Inhofe: Yeah, and --

General Rodriguez: -- also do depend quite a lot on
EUCOM capacity, sir.
Senator Inhofe: Yeah. I think you do. And I think that other things that come up, like the LRA and things like that specifically, you inherit resources to help put out those fires. However, with the restructuring, the European infrastructure consolidation, are you concerned about how that might affect what resources might be available when called upon?

General Rodriguez: Right now, the -- from the European infrastructure consolidation, most of the moves have been to the south and east to help the responsiveness of EUCOM forces to support both CENTCOM and AFRICOM. So, the ones that got enacted, I agree with, sir.

Senator Inhofe: I understand.

I don't know where you were when we put together the whole -- the AFRICOM. You know, before that, it was in three different commands, and -- PACOM, EUCOM, and, I guess, CENTCOM. And that was a wise thing to do. But, the discussion at that time was where to put the headquarters. And we were all promoting the idea that it should actually be in Africa. That continent is so huge. We understand what happened politically at that time, that -- this fear of colonization and all of that, that people just wouldn't buy it. But, the presidents would. In fact, I've talked to most of them, all of the presidents in that area. They thought that would have been a good idea.
At the time that we put it together, AFRICOM, there was some discussion that, after a period of time, they might consider making that move. Have you heard anything at all about that? Is there anything in the mill talking about --

General Rodriguez: No. Many of the African leaders have talked to me about that, but the current assessment by the Secretary of Defense is to continue to leave it where it is for the foreseeable future, sir.

Senator Inhofe: Yeah. Well, you know, the "foreseeable future" is beyond us now from when they first put this thing together. But, I don't know, I know that would still be a problem.

Let me ask you, my first experience with Joseph Kony and the LRA was way back in 2001. That's 14 years ago. Joseph Kony was old and sick then. How is he now?

General Rodriguez: He's older and sicker, sir.

[Laughter.]

Senator Inhofe: And do you think that we are getting in a position right now -- it appears to me, from the reports that we get -- and I think you'd probably agree; I'll ask you if you do agree -- that most of the stuff now he's doing is just trying to move around and avoid it. He's no longer making the hits that he did back at that time. And our involvement, which we are -- have been involved in, is actually being -- is working. General Rodriguez: Yes,
sir, it is working. And it's in a great team effort with all the country teams as well as many of the civilian organizations that have built a durability in the civilian population to better resist the problems he has. Right now, he's about -- down to about 200 real fighters, and the impact on the civilian population is very minimal. He is using illicit trafficking to continue to sustain his efforts. But, it's tough for him, because of continual pressure over the last 14 years.

Senator Inhofe: As he's being chased around -- places like CAR, Eastern Congo, even, briefly, Rwanda, Uganda, South Sudan -- it seems like it was a trail of blood following him. And it's not that way so much anymore. I just think that we haven't talked about that in a long time. We need to get on the record that some things are -- seem to be working there.

General Rodriguez: Yes. A long-term effort against Kony, with, really, you know, fairly modest resources. But, that long-term effort has done exactly what you said, it has significantly decreased his impact on any of the civilian population, sir.

Senator Inhofe: Yeah.

General Rodriguez, last year you testified that only 12 percent of your ISR requests are being met. I'm reading this from the transcript last year. Has there been any
change in this intelligence gap?

General Rodriguez: Just a little bit more, sir. I'm about 13 percent now. But, that's a great question. As far as the impacts of sequestration, just for the committee, we will lose more CAPs in sequestration than I have in the theater right now. So, you can see the impact that's going to have on our intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets. Thank you.

Senator Inhofe: Yeah. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Chairman.

Chairman McCain: Senator Manchin.

Senator Manchin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank all three of you for your service to our country and things that you do every day.

With that, General Austin, I said, last year, if I believed sending U.S. trainers and weapons to Syria would make Americans safer, I would definitely have supported it. I did not then, and what I'm hearing from the region further supports my belief. Last week, reports emerged the Department of Defense is unable to account for more than $500 million of military assistance to Yemen, including weaponry, aircraft, and equipment -- and I'm sure that you all have seen the same pictures on YouTube that we're getting, of our equipment being used for people against us and against our efforts -- all of which could potentially
fall into the hands of Iranian-backed rebels or al-Qaeda.

In Syria, we've heard reports that al-Nusra Front seized U.S. weapons from CIA-trained Syrian rebels, including 60 to 90 TOW antitank missiles. Two days ago, video footage was posted of al-Nusra, allegedly showing them using a captured U.S. TOW missile in a fight. And these are not just immediate events. We supported individuals in the '80s -- 1980s in Afghanistan, who formed elements of Taliban. Last year, in Iraq, we watched ISIS capture weapons, vehicles, and military equipment that Iraqi Security Forces abandoned, which are millions and millions and millions of dollars being used against us now, even after we spent the better part of a decade training them. We have a history of supplying weapons and training that end up being used against us.

And, General Austin, who's responsible for the weapons and equipment the U.S. has supplied in these cases? Or are these reports accurate? And will any of this bring action be taken?

General Austin: Well, clearly, sir, what -- with not having the ability to be in Yemen currently to monitor the disposition of the weapons, then certainly we can't -- we don't have the ability to oversee the safeguarding or the employment of those weapon systems. I -- that 500 million, I believe, was the amount of funds that were required for
both providing weapon systems and training. And, as you
know, training eats -- takes up -- it's pretty expensive --
Senator Manchin: This was Yemen.
General Austin: Yes, sir.
Senator Manchin: I know about the 500 million
requested for Syria.
The only thing I'm saying is, Is there nobody in our
Government, in our Defense, Pentagon, that's responsible?
Like when we give all this equipment to Yemen, and then we
see it falling apart, do we not have any way to retrieve
that?
General Austin: Certainly, in a case like Yemen, sir,
it's -- we don't have the ability to go back and retrieve
it. We don't have --
Senator Manchin: But, as we see it falling apart, we
can't take any actions at all to keep it from falling into
--
General Austin: Once we've provided the weapons to
them, sir, we --
Senator Manchin: It's theirs.
General Austin: Yes, sir. We -- and we will continue
to monitor their -- the usage of those weapons and make sure
that, if they're not being used properly, then we don't
continue to provide capability to them. So --
Senator Manchin: What -- do you all confirm -- I mean,
do you all agree with the reports of how much weapons and
the lethal volatility of these weapons being used against
us? There are weapons being used against us.

General Austin: I don't doubt that what's --

Senator Manchin: I mean, are these accurate? They're
widely reported.

General Austin: Yes, sir. If we're not there, then --
and we've provided weapons, and it's reasonable to expect
that some of that material will fall in the hands of the
people --

Senator Manchin: Well, not -- I mean, that's -- let's
just -- let's go with Mosul first, and the Iraqi forces that
abandoned. That was substantial, I'm sure. Correct?

General Austin: It was, sir.

Senator Manchin: Okay. And we know that's being used
against us.

General Austin: Yes, sir.

Senator Manchin: Okay. Then we know about Yemen now.
And we have concerns about -- you know, will this be
repeated? And it -- are we taking any steps, from what we've
seen happen? How can you assure me that Syria -- that
whatever -- whoever we support in Syria, that won't fall in
the wrong hands?

General Austin: There's no way we can absolutely
assure you that that won't happen, sir. What we do is to
try to train the folks that we're working with and providing capability to, to be responsible as they use and safeguard these weapons. And, in the event that they are not, then we certainly quit doing -- we quit providing them the capability.

Senator Manchin: And one quick question for General Votel.

General Votel, in West Virginia, I had the privilege of observing the training of some of our National Guard -- Special Force soldiers in the National Guard. And both the 19th and 20th Army Special Forces group have fought with great success in Iraq and Afghanistan, complementing our Active Duty Special Forces groups. How do you see the future of the National Guard Special Operations community moving forward?

General Votel: Well, as you just pointed out, they are absolutely integrated into everything we are doing. So, not just on the Army side with Special Forces, but on the Air Guard side. And so, some of our unique ISR capabilities, our manned ISR capabilities, will reside in some of our Air Guard and Air Reserve organizations. So, they are absolutely and totally integrated into everything that we are doing now and will do in the future.

Senator Manchin: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
1    Senator Wicker: General Austin, when it comes to fighting ISIL, I appreciate your determination, your military drive. And that's coming through. I do question the sort of optimistic note that you have in your testimony, because it just seems that things are not going as positively as you're suggesting.

2    You mentioned, beginning on page 11 of your testimony, "The President's announcement this past September, five key elements to what the administration wants to do involving coalition partners, Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, train and equip, having reliable partners to assist on the ground."

3    And then you say, "Once we do all these things, we will have defeated ISIL through a combination of sustained pressure, a systematic dismantling of ISIL's capabilities, and by effectively expanding our regional partners' CT capacities."

4    It's just hard to see -- hard to be very encouraged about that happening, at this point. And I want to ask about our partners.

5    Now, not everything we hear is in these big hearings. We've met with the King of Jordan, not in a classified setting, but the King of Jordan tells us, "We can't want this more than the Arab neighborhood wants it." And so, I do want to ask you about that. He said he'd be going back and trying to get the partners together and make this work on the ground.
I think everybody has been saying boots on the ground are going to be needed to defeat ISIL. Are those boots on the ground going have to be Iraq -- the Iraqi Army boots on the ground? Because I don't see the Jordanians really having that capacity. We met with the Ambassadors from UAE and Saudi Arabia, just the other day, and they want this coalition to take effect, and they want Egypt to be part of it. I just wonder who, in that whole list of neighboring countries, has the capacity to go in and retake this territory?

You mention, on page 12, that we're doing precision airstrikes. But, I think we all know that that's not going to get it done. And then you talk about, "The intent of the regional campaign is not simply to destroy ISIL, but -- although that's our primary objective."

So, how is this going to be wrapped up by troops going in and taking the territory back, and the United States not employing boots on the ground?

General Austin: Thank you, sir.

One of -- a couple of things that we said up front was, number one, that this would take time, because we are working with indigenous forces, we are using the Iraqi Security Forces to conduct the ground operations.

As you pointed out, sir, we've also said that you can't do this with just airpower alone. It has to be a complement
of fires and maneuver forces on the ground.

And our approach is to generate those forces by training and equipping Iraqi Security Forces. And we're --
you know, as we have halted ISIL's advance into Iraq, we've started the business of training and equipping new Iraqi Security Forces so that they'll have the ability to train --
to take back their borders and secure their sovereign spaces.

Senator Wicker: Is there any prospect of Saudi forces being there in numbers that would be significant? UAE? Jordanian forces? They've got a police force, but not much else.

General Austin: They all have some capability, sir. None of them have volunteered to come forward and put boots on the ground in Iraq right now. In Iraq, certainly Iraq needs to want to be able to take that on and take those forces in. But, to this point, as you look at what Saudi's dealing with on its borders with Yemen, it's currently focused on that right now. So --

But, to answer your question, sir, there is capability with countries in the region, but none -- no countries have come forward and volunteered to put boots on the ground in Iraq. Senator Wicker: Thank you, sir. Well, good luck to you. And again, I appreciate your determination and resolve. I hope you're as successful as you believe you will be.
General Austin: We will be successful, sir.
Chairman McCain: Senator Donnelly.
Senator Donnelly: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
And thank all of you for all your efforts.
General Votel, I'd just like to talk about a different issue for just one minute, and that is, I want to thank you for your top-down leadership on mental health with the Special Operations. Since assuming command at SOCOM, you've been incredibly frank about this challenge. And that, alone, sends an important message to the troops.
Can you talk about the psychological component of your Preservation of the Force and Family Program, and how that's going today?
General Votel: I can. Thank you for the question, Senator. We appreciate the continued support we get from Congress in this very significant challenge to us.
We are looking at a variety of things. We are looking at peer-to-peer programs that we use within organizations to help provide access to our members and their family members and others, to reach out and talk to their friends and their peers about that. And I think this is an important component of it.
Likewise, we are pursuing training programs to ensure that our leadership, our chaplains, and others are well trained in the ability to identify those behaviors that we
think are related to stress, and potentially which can lead to suicide.

And, third, I think the -- one of the most important things we are doing is trying to send the very clear message across the entire SOF force that it is absolutely normal and expected to ask for help when you need it, and you can do that without concern of stigma or any concerns about your standing within the Command. And we are putting -- really working double tides to put effort on that particular theme and message throughout this.

The real census of our program, here, is to empower people by communicating early and often, by trying to enable them, by giving them easy access to programs and resources so they can get help, and then encouraging them with this message. So --

Senator Donnelly: And will you work us to help us take the lessons that you've learned at SOCOM and work with the other parts of our military?

General Votel: Absolutely. And we are well --

Senator Donnelly: Thank you very much. Thank you.

General Austin, it appears that the efforts in Tikrit are stalled at the moment. And so, my concern, my -- one of the areas I'm looking at is, How do we empower the moderate Sunnis? Are they the key to making this work? And if you're a moderate Sunni -- and I asked this the other day -- the
concern would be, Why do you want to team up with the Shi'ite militia. When ISIS is also Sunni, they may be like the bad cousin that shows up at the event, but they're still your cousin. I mean, how do we empower the moderate Sunnis? And do you see them as the key to moving this thing along and to having success in Iraq?

General Austin: Sir, I do believe that getting the Sunni population involved is really, really important, in terms of being successful, going forward. And, you're right, the previous operation in Tikrit did stall. And it stalled because, I think, the wrong approach was taken. Those -- many of the forces that were being employed were not controlled or supervised by the Ministry of Defense or Government of Iraq. That has recently changed. As of the last several days and today, when we -- yesterday, when we started supporting this effort. We think that this effort will begin to move forward with the employment of the Special Operations Forces and the help of our enablers.

But, I think --

Senator Donnelly: Can you --

General Austin: -- that it's absolutely key that, number one, the government has to be accommodating to both the Sunni and the Kurd population, and we have to increasingly get the Sunnis involved.

Senator Donnelly: Can you help make that happen?
Because the concern is Abadi -- a lot of the folks that surround him are still from the previous administration. And the other part about this is, you've had extraordinary experience in the al-Anbar area, in all the service you've done for our country throughout Iraq. Can you help to identify the key Sunni moderate leaders to make them part of this? And is that what's going to -- you know, you look, and you say, "Hey, we think we're going to get it right this time." How do you think this turns out?

General Austin: Sir, to answer both your questions, we are encouraged -- we continue to encourage the leadership in Iraq to do -- to be more accommodating to the Sunni population and do some things that are demonstrable, that are -- that they -- that increases their confidence in the leadership, in the government. And you may know that we are helping the Iraqi Security Forces and the Government of Iraq reach out to the tribal elements in Anbar and bring in some of those elements to train and equip them and get them involved in the fight, as well. And those that we have trained and equipped have performed remarkably well.

Senator Donnelly: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman McCain: Senator Fischer.

Senator Fischer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Votel, when we met last week, you talked about how the resources allowed you to meet threats with moderate
risk. And over the past year, we've seen that terror threat increase, smaller problems become more serious, they become crisis. And then this -- do you believe that this is part of the result of the strategy that accepts moderate risk? Are we less able to nip those problems in the bud and so that they grow into these serious threats?

General Votel: Senator, thanks for the question.

I -- first of all, I think we can continue to -- I think all commanders operate in an area where they're constantly balancing risk of their forces and the missions that are being done on a regular basis. And I think that's what I'm principally paid to do.

As we move forward and continue to deal with the changing and complex situations -- for me, I think it gets down to prioritization. And, for us, what we will attempt to do is offset the risk that is associated with increased operations by ensuring that we prioritize on those operations for which we can have the biggest impact and we can help support the broadest national objectives.

Senator Fischer: Is Libya a place where we're going to accept moderate risk?

General Votel: That -- again, I think that perhaps may be a policy question. Certainly, from my perspective, working with my partner in AFRICOM, we are looking at the things that we can do to address the threats that are in
Libya today.

Senator Fischer: Thank you.

General Rodriguez, in your opening statement, you say that, "Libya-based threats to U.S. interests are growing. If left unchecked, I believe they have the highest potential among security challenges on the continent to increase risk to U.S. and European strategic interests in the next 2 years and beyond." You also described Libya as "emerging as a safe haven, where terrorists, including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq in the Levant-affiliated groups can train and rebuild with impunity." That, to me, doesn't sound like we're on the right trajectory.

Do you think our approach to Libya is not adequate? Are we accepting too much risk?

General Rodriguez: Thanks, Senator.

For -- first of all, for -- to make sure everybody's clear on what we're doing in and around Libya, we're -- a significant effort is going in around Libya to prevent that from spilling over. So, when you look at what is happening in Tunisia, in Niger, Chad, and Egypt, we're working with our partners, as much as we can and as much as we're -- have the authorities to do that, to strengthen their capacities to limit the spillover of that effort. We're also working with our European partners to increase their effort there. And we are supporting, at this point in time, the U.N.
effort to come to a diplomatic solution. And anything past
that will require a policy decision, ma'am.

Senator Fischer: How would you rate the success of the
efforts that you just described? The spillover, the work
with our European partners in the U.N.

General Rodriguez: The work with our partners has, for
the most part, gone very well, with the exception of one or
two sensational attacks that you read about in Tunisia the
other day; but their capacities have continued to grow, and
they handle that threat every day, as does Niger and Chad.
And the work of the -- the European efforts in the U.N. has
not had as much progress as anybody wants, to date, yet,
ma'am.

Senator Fischer: Okay, thank you.

And, General Votel, if I can just return to that idea
of moderate risk for my closing questions here. Over the
long term, do you think that, if we see risk continue to
increase, and those smaller problems continue a -- to
accumulate -- how do we prioritize that? If they're viewed
as smaller problems at the time, but yet they continue to
escalate and become greater and greater risk to this
country, not just the region they're in, how are you going
to prioritize? How are you going to address it, and do you
have the resources you need?

General Votel: Thanks. Thanks, Senator.
Right now, I think I do have the resources that I need to support the GCC commanders at a moderate level of risk for the things I'm being asked to do today. What I think we will do for the future, as I mentioned in my opening comments here, I think SOF plays a particular role in the gray zone, in the area before operations, before we get to open conflict. And so, I think the important piece that I bring to the geographic combatant commanders is our ability to come in and help shape, develop partnerships, to help build capacity, and support relationships in all of those areas so that we can strengthen partners before big problems grow into -- or, before small problems grow into big problems. And I really think that is the direction in which we should be focusing SOF into the future.

Senator Fischer: General Rodriguez, did you have a response?

General Rodriguez: Thanks, Senator.

The -- as far as the prioritization is going, again, that's done by the policymakers, relative to our national security interests. And then, the input we put, in addition to the risk, is what our partners can handle and what they're doing, themselves. And we prioritize it based on a whole-of-government and interagency effort and who can help most in different places. So, I think that's what is done every day in the Defense Department, ma'am.
Senator Fischer: Thank you, gentlemen. And thank you for your service.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman McCain: Senator McCaskill.

Senator McCaskill: Thank you.

I'm now determined that budget gimmicks have no attachment to party, that both parties are capable of using budget gimmicks as we approach the challenges of sequestration and defense spending. It is now being used, in the current budget we're debating and the budget that passed the House yesterday. Rather than confront sequestration and be honest about the challenges we have in our base budget that we've all given a lot of time, in terms of rhetoric, to, we are now going further down the road of using OCO as a slush fund. It's not good for fiscal accountability. It's not good for restoring faith of the American people that we can face the tough decisions and not retreat to rhetoric and gimmickry that is not really true. We're not going to build a -- as my colleague has said, we're not going to build a PX someplace in America with OCO funds. The question is, Can we use -- and I'll ask you all -- Do you believe that the Army can buy back force strength with OCO funds?

General Austin: I do not, Senator.

Senator McCaskill: Do you believe that the Navy can
address the shortfalls in shipping with OCO funds?

General Rodriguez: No, ma'am.

Senator McCaskill: Okay.

I just think that we've got to be -- and I'm -- believe me, I'm not saying that we come to this with clean hands, as Democrats. We don't, because we have engaged in gimmickry, also. But, I know that the Chairman wants to face this head-on, and I know it's a challenge in this political environment. But, I did want to bring it up, that we have obviously not met the challenge with the budget as it's currently configured.

I wanted to specifically ask you, General Austin, about something that's very troubling to me, and that is that I've been told that there has been a determination that Operation Freedom Sentinel is a new contingency operation. It -- do you see it as a new contingency operation?

General Austin: It's a continuation of our efforts, Senator, so, you know, I -- in terms of the types of things that we're doing, you know, we're continuing to train the -- and advise and assist the Afghan Security Forces. But, in terms of, you know, how we account for the funding, that's -- that we're allocating to that, that's a different issue.

So --

Senator McCaskill: Well, the reason I'm asking this is, I'm told that there is an effort underway of naming a
new lead Inspector General in Afghanistan, as opposed to SIGAR of the Special Inspector General on Afghanistan. And I think, if that determination is made -- I just want to make sure everybody understands -- that's going to impose a lot of additional burdens, in terms of oversight requirements, on contracting. You know, I know there's continuity in SIGAR. I don't understand the value right now of changing Inspector Generals at this point on the projects that are ongoing that the Special Inspector General in Afghanistan is aware of and is working on. I don't get it. And if there is really a sincere attempt to replace him by labeling this a new contingency, somebody's going to have some explaining to do, I think, to me and, I hope, others on this committee, as to why that would be a good idea. Are you aware of an effort to do that at this point?

General Austin: I don't know -- I am not aware of the effort. But, certainly, I'll go -- I'll find out, I'll look into it, Senator.

[The information referred to follows:]

[COMMITTEE INSERT]
Senator McCaskill: That would be terrific. As you know, we've worked very closely with the Special Inspector Generals, both in Iraq and Afghanistan. I think the body of work they have done is incredibly helpful to our Nation’s military. As we look at how we honestly confront sequestration, one of the ways is being better stewards of the resources that we have allocated to these efforts.

General Rodriguez, I understand that most of the servicemembers who deployed to Africa as part of the ebola response, Operation United Assistance, have begun returning home. Is there any effort to keep track of the number of contractors around this effort and how many of them have been pulled and how many of them remain in ebola as we continually try to stay on top of contractor costs?

General Rodriguez: Yes, ma'am, there is. There's a very, very strict accounting that is done. We've had oversight from the DOD IG from the beginning, and we were very cognizant of the challenges with contractor oversight and also paying too much money for contracts that's out of line with what the USAID as well as the host nation is providing. So, we have a strict accounting on it, yes, ma'am.

Senator McCaskill: That would be terrific. We'd love it if you would share that with --

General Rodriguez: Yes, ma'am.
Senator McCaskill: -- with our office.

[The information referred to follows:]

[COMMITTEE INSERT]
Senator McCaskill: And also, General Austin, if you could share with us how many contractors have been plussed-up in Iraq as a result of our efforts against ISIL. You know, we had gotten to the point that we were just counting contractors in Afghanistan, now we're back to counting contractors again in Iraq. And we would appreciate an update on that number, also.

General Austin: Yes, Senator. I'll take that for the record.

[The information referred to follows:]

[COMMITTEE INSERT]
Senator McCaskill: Thank you so much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman McCain: Senator Cotton.

Senator Cotton: Thank you, gentlemen, for all your service and for the men and women who sit behind you, not just on behalf of all the troops you represent, but you, personally. I know you've spent many years downrange.

General Austin, I want to return to the topic Senator McCain was addressing about our airstrikes in Tikrit. So, do I understand you correctly to say that there are now no Iranian forces in Tikrit?

General Austin: The forces that are clearing Tikrit are ISF forces, Special Operations Forces, and federal police. And, as of this morning, when I checked with my commanders, the Shi'a militia and PMF have pulled back.

Senator Cotton: So, do -- by "pull back," do we mean there are still Shi'ite militias, like the Badr organization or even Iranian forces from Quds Force, in the vicinity of Tikrit?

General Austin: I'm sure they're still in the area. I'm sure that there are forces probably on the east side of the river. And, as you know, Tikrit is -- the city of Tikrit is on the west side of the river.

Senator Cotton: Do we know the whereabouts of Qasem Suleimani?
General Austin: To my understanding, Qasem Suleimani is -- you know, my last update, he was not in Tikrit or in that area.

Senator Cotton: In any way have we implemented fire control measures to ensure that we don't strike any of the Shi'ite paramilitary forces or Iranian elements that are in the vicinity of Tikrit?

General Austin: We certainly have -- we've caused the Iraqi Security Forces to develop a scheme of maneuver that can effectively accomplish the mission of clearing the town. And our fires are supportive of that effort. And so, we're focused on that. We always do everything that we can to ensure that there's not excessive collateral damage. But, our focus is on the ISF forces that we're supporting.

Senator Cotton: Would you consider it collateral damage if members of the Quds Force, to include Qasem Suleimani, was in the vicinity of an American airstrike?

General Austin: I would consider that unintended consequences.

Senator Cotton: Does Qasem Suleimani have freedom of movement within Iraq?

General Austin: I believe he does, Senator.

Senator Cotton: General Votel, 6 months ago, President Obama cited Yemen as a example of a success of our counterterrorism strategy. Do you believe Yemen is a
success story today?

General Votel: Certainly with the withdrawal of our
SOF forces over the weekend, it's certainly put us in a
different posture right now, particularly against the threat
that we were focused on, there, of al-Qaeda in the Arabian
Peninsula. So, it's much more challenging today than it was
when we had people on the ground.

Senator Cotton: General Austin, do you consider Yemen
a success story today?

General Austin: Certainly Yemen is a very troubled
country today, with the challenges that it's facing and the
activity of the Houthis. And so, I think the country's in
turmoil.

Senator Cotton: General Austin, approximately 10
months ago, the President released five Taliban commanders
in exchange for Bowe Bergdahl, who yesterday was charged
with desertion by his chain of command. I believe their
house arrest agreement expires in 2 months. Is that
correct?

General Austin: I believe that to be correct, Senator.

Senator Cotton: Do we know what will happen to those
five Taliban commanders in 2 months in Qatar when that
agreement expires?

General Austin: I don't, Senator.

Senator Cotton: Will they have freedom of movement
both inside and outside Qatar at that point?

General Austin: I think that's -- I would probably have to consult the Qatar Government -- Qatari government and also the elements in our government that are charged with monitoring the movement of these elements. So, I can't answer that, Senator. I can take that for the record and try to do the research on it.

[The information referred to follows:]  
[COMMITTEE INSERT]
Senator Cotton: I would like to get an answer for that for the record. Thank you, General Austin.

And I'll address this to General Austin and General Rodriguez. Given the situation in Yemen, if there were action by militants there to block the Mandeb Strait, I presume that American forces would immediately act to reopen that strait.

General Austin: We would work in conjunction with our GCC partners to ensure that those straits remain open. It's one of our core interests, to ensure that we have free flow of commerce through both straits.

General Rodriguez: Yes, sir. We'd also work with both the host nations of Africa as well as our European partners to support those efforts, sir.

Senator Cotton: Thank you, gentlemen. I appreciate your answers. And, once again, I appreciate your service to our country.

Chairman McCain: For the record, I'd like a response to Senator Cotton's question. Do you consider Yemen a success story, or not? Yes or no. It's pretty simple, straightforward question.

General Austin: It's currently not a success story, sir.

Chairman McCain: General Votel?

General Votel: I agree, Senator, it's not a success
story today.

Chairman McCain: Thank you very much.

Senator King.

Senator King: When the President made that statement, he was talking about our antiterrorism efforts against AQAP, was he not, General Votel?

General Votel: I believe that's correct, Senator.

Senator King: He wasn't talking about Yemen, itself. He was talking about the success of our counterterrorism against AQAP. Naturally, the deterioration of the situation in Yemen has compromised that.

My followup question is, How much has it compromised it? Are we able to maintain that counterterrorism effort against AQAP, or is that in abeyance, pending the dust settling in Yemen?

General Votel: Well, I think right now, Senator-- I think what we'll obviously be doing is working in conjunction with General Austin's headquarters and our other partners in the area to try to look at how we regain situational awareness and understanding of what's happening on the ground, and then look at how we can continue to address the threats that emanate from Yemen.

Senator King: Thank you.

I'd like to just briefly associate myself with Senator McCaskill's comments about using OCO to solve the
sequestration problem. It obviously doesn't go the base budget. And it's unpaid for. It's just absolutely the wrong way to approach this problem. And I hope that Congress can find a more realistic and responsible solution to sequestration.

Also, General Austin -- again, without -- because you've talked to Senator Donnelly about this -- it seems to me that it's critically important that we use the leverage that we have, which apparently was used in the Tikrit battle, to be sure that this isn't a Shi'ite militia-led offensive. Because if this becomes another version of a war of Shi'ites against Sunnis, we've lost. This has to be inclusive. And I hope that your relationship with the -- with President Abadi and the Iraqi government emphasizes that, because it's -- it's just essential to a successful outcome in Iraq, regardless of the short-term strategic advantage in Tikrit or Mosul or -- would you agree with that?

General Austin: Sir, I would. And I would say, further, that we take -- I take every opportunity to emphasize those exact points to the leadership in Iraq when I engage them.

Senator King: And it sounds like that -- this airstrikes in the last couple of days in Tikrit were, in fact, conditioned on that kind of consideration. Is that
correct?

General Austin: That's correct, sir. This operation had to be under the control of the Government of Iraq and Iraqi Security Forces. There had to be a force, once the city is cleared, to maintain stability in that city. And that force needs to be an Iraqi Security Force. And so, those things -- those conditions were met, early on, in terms of the planning and the synchronization. And so, we were able to provide them some support.

Senator King: Well, I certainly hope you stay that, but I think you can argue that a lot of the problems we're having in Iraq now are because of the Maliki government's failure to be inclusive. And we can't make that mistake again.

Let's turn for a moment to Afghanistan. We heard a wonderful, strong, passionate speech from President Ghani this week. I'm concerned that we're still in a calendar-driven status in Afghanistan. And even though the President has allowed troops to stay through 2015, the -- we're still talking about Kabul-only at the end of 2016. Do you believe that's going to be sufficient in order to support the Afghans? I mean, we've made such progress there. I would just hate to see us pull out, in terms of air support, authorities for air support, and train-and-direct services. Give me your thoughts on that.
General Austin: Sir, I certainly agree with you that the new leadership in Afghanistan causes all of us to be encouraged and optimistic. And I think, from what I've seen both President Ghani do and also the CEO Abdullah do, in terms of reaching out to the international community, in terms of reaching out to the folks in the region as well, it's all encouraging. The relationships with the security forces, they're supportive of the security forces. Their statements of common goals with the U.S., I think, all very encouraging.

So, I think this gives us opportunities -- new opportunities that, you know, we didn't have before. And we really have to think about what we want our relationship to be with Afghanistan, going forward, and what it means for the region.

Senator King: Well, I certainly hope you will counsel the White House to think seriously about what I would consider a modest additional investment to maintain the tremendous gains that have been had. It's not for sure that the regime in -- or the Government of Afghanistan can withstand the Taliban on their own. And, after what we've invested over the past 13 years, to walk away at the -- at 5 minutes of midnight and see it all collapse, I think would be a real shame. So, I hope you will urge that on the policymakers, based upon General Campbell and the other
information you're receiving from the field. They need not only those troops, but they need authorities, they --

President Ghani talked about air support. I think that's going to be crucial. So, carry that message, will you, sir?

Chairman McCain: Senator Ernst.

Senator Ernst: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Gentlemen, thank you very much for being here today, and also to your staff. Thank you for your many years of combined service to the United States.

General Votel, I just want to mention, in your testimony today -- I would like to thank you for mentioning not only our Active Duty forces, but the Reserve and National Guard components, your operators, your logisticians, your analysts, and so forth. It's all one team, one fight. So, I appreciate you acknowledging that today.

Something else that you brought up, and a couple of others have mentioned, too, is stress and suicide with our Active Duty members and with our veterans, those that have gotten off of Active Duty. It is important that we continue with resiliency programs and making sure that, not only are they physically fit for the fight, but they're mentally fit, as well. So, thank you for bringing that forward. A number of us are working on initiatives to make sure that they are well cared for.
I would like to address my question and thoughts --
General Austin and General Votel. Last week was the 12th anniversary of our entrance into Iraq with the Iraq War. We've had 3,000 -- excuse me -- 4,000 American servicemen and -women that have lost their lives in Iraq. And we've had another 40,000 that have been injured in that war. And I want to thank you for your service in that war. I know all of you have engaged, at one point or another, in the war in Iraq. Many of our servicemen and -women will come home with not only invisible injuries, but physical injuries that will impact their lives for many, many years. But, before we ever entered into Iraq on March 20th of 2003, the Iraqi Kurds were already engaged and preparing the battlefield before we ever got there. They have been an important part of our effort in Iraq. And so, I would like your thoughts on involving -- more involvement of the Iraqi Kurds, the Peshmerga, in this fight, and, really, what their role has been from 2003 forward. If you would please address that.

General Austin?

General Austin: Thank you, Senator.

And I agree. You know, I was, as you probably know, with the elements when we went into Iraq, back in -- you know, 12 years ago. And -- whereas, I didn't initially make it all the way up to Kurdistan, I can tell you that what the Kurds were doing in the north at that point in time was very
instrumental to the forces, our forces that followed in or
flowed in later and facilitated our work there.

Most recently, with their efforts in the current fight
against ISIL, they really have done a terrific job. And,
you know, I've talked with President Barzani and his staff,
on numerous occasions, about, you know, what we're doing,
what the requirements were, and what they needed to do more.
As you look at what they've done in the north up there, in
terms of actually inflicting damage on ISIL, I think their
efforts have really shaped this overall fight in a very
positive direction. And they continue to do more on a daily
basis. So, they're a big part of this fight. They've
punched above their weight class, and I think they will
continue to do so.

Senator Ernst: General Votel?

General Votel: Thank you, Senator.

I absolutely agree with what General Austin said. I
would only add that a key part of the Kurdish relationship
really has been the long-term relationship with them. And
so, they were a key partner with SOF forces when we were
there from 2003 through 2011, and helped us address a
variety of networks. And I do believe that the great and
enduring relationship that we have had with them, from a SOF
force to Kurdish force aspect, really was one of the initial
successes we were able to achieve when we went back in there
late last summer. We were able to quickly renew those relationships, draw on those partnerships, and get going very, very quickly in some areas. And so, that -- to me, that highlights the importance of that -- of the long-term relationship that we've been able to develop with them.

Senator Ernst: Do you believe that our resources would be best utilized if we were directly arming the Peshmerga, the Kurdish forces?

General Votel: Well, I think that -- that, I think, is a policy question. Certainly, they are very capable forces. And so, I do think they would make good use of any resources that are provided to them.

Senator Ernst: Yes, I think they have been an exceptional force and ally to our American forces in that region.

Thank you very much, gentlemen, for your service, and also to your staff for being here in support today.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman McCain: Senator Kaine.

Senator Kaine: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you, to the witnesses, for your strong testimony this morning.

I want to begin with Yemen. I was intrigued with the account in news this morning about the Saudi and other action in Yemen; and, in particular, the number of partners
that have been part of this. In addition to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, Jordan, Morocco, there is press report that Egypt is involved, and, perhaps a little surprisingly, Pakistan and Sudan. So, nine nations, in addition to Saudi Arabia, springing into action to deal with this threat of the Houthi takeover of the government in Yemen.

I'm gratified by that. I want to see a region that will stand up and try to deal with its own problems, rather than telling us, you know, quietly, that they think it's a problem, and not doing anything.

But, I was also struck by the fact that those nine nations haven't come together and acted with dispatch against ISIL. They're involved, but they are not acting with dispatch against ISIL, even nearly a year into ISIL's sort of accelerated taking of territory in Syria and Iraq.

And, just -- you know, as experts who have spent a lot of time in the region, what explains why these nine nations would react with such speed and force to the Houthi takeover in Yemen, but would not be so engaged in the fight against ISIL?

General Austin: Sir, like you, I am very encouraged that we've seen what we've seen here in -- recently, with a number of nations coming together to address a problem. The core of these nations is -- are GCC nations. And I
certainly believe that they all think that Yemen is a very critical piece of real estate, just based upon the geography. Most important, it shares a border with Saudi Arabia and Oman. And I think -- so, the GCC countries are naturally predisposed to helping protect another GCC country. And then, the relationships between the Saudis and the Egyptians and others are really what's driving their participation there.

I would remind you, Senator -- I know you're -- you -- you are very, very well aware of this, but -- the night that we flew into Syria for the first time, we had five Sunni Arab-led nations fly in that formation with us, which is really unprecedented. And we continue to see them offer support to -- in terms of -- you know, they -- material support, and they also have offered to train and equip forces. But, throughout, they have remained with us, in terms of flying strikes against Syria. So, they have continued to participate in that. Now, as they begin to focus on the Yemen problem, naturally, because of resources, we'll probably see less of an effort in Syria.

Senator Kaine: The -- you indicated that you thought -- in response to earlier questioning -- that you thought that ISIL was our most pressing challenge, but Iran was our greatest long-term challenge. Is a possible explanation for the force of the action against Yemen is that all of these
nations believe that Iran is their more pressing challenge, and actually don't think of ISIL as the same kind of pressing challenge that they view when they look at Iran?

General Austin: I can attest to the fact that they do see ISIL as a pressing challenge, sir. I do think that a big driver here is that -- you know, that the geography associated with this -- Yemen border, Saudi, and Oman -- and clearly a direct threat to their homeland. So --

Senator Kaine: Each of you work in the military lane, but with partners. Partners: State, AID, DOJ, DEA, DHS, the intel agencies. There's been questions here about the effect of sequester on the military mission. But, would you not also agree that, to the extent that sequester affects your allied agencies that you work with in your COCOMs or in Special Forces, that that is also an aspect of sequester that we need to take seriously if we're trying to avoid challenges to our national security?

General Austin: I agree, Senator.


General Votel: I definitely agree, Senator.

Senator Kaine: General Rodriguez, the attack in Tunisia was particularly troubling. Tunisia, small country, but, you know, kind of a bright spot, in a way, in terms of how they have come out of the Arab Spring with a constitution, with Islamic parties participating in
democracy, even stepping back from power. What has your
observation been about the Tunisian government's -- newly
formed, newly elected government's reaction to the terrorist
attack at the museum in Tunisia? And what's your assessment
of how they are, going forward, and how we can help them
succeed?

General Rodriguez: I think that their response has
been very effective. Their military institutions are strong
and was also a stabilizing influence as that -- they went
through that transition. And we continue to work with them
to build some of their capacities with some of our
interagency partners. Those elements were involved in that
effort. And we continue to also share intelligence with
them. And we will continue to build up their capacity to
ensure that they continue to move in a positive trajectory,
sir.

Senator Kaine: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman McCain: Senator Sullivan.

Senator Sullivan: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And, gentlemen, thank you for your service.

Mr. Chairman, I want to let -- wanted to let you know,
10 years ago, as a Marine Corps major, I had the privilege
of serving with General Austin. And I can tell you he's one
of the finest officers I've ever served with. So, I'm very
heartened that he's in this very important position.

Chairman McCain: He's not generally very nice to
marines, so I'm glad to hear that.

[Laughter.]

Senator Sullivan: I see he's got one there on his
staff, so, keeping in full tradition of the CENTCOM respect
for the Marine Corps, I appreciate that.

General Votel, I wanted to ask you a question relating
to -- really some clarification. You know, one of the
things I think it's very important for us, in the Congress
and in the military and in the administration, is to speak
with language that's -- gives our citizens a sense of what's
really happening. And one of the things that you hear a lot
about now -- President, the administration, talks a lot
about, you know, "winding down combat operations," "combat
operations are over," "we've ended combat operations in
Afghanistan." That's been stated several times. The
President of Afghanistan even mentioned that in a joint
session of Congress yesterday. But, you also mentioned that
we have a robust CT effort. So, aren't we kind of speaking
out of both sides of our mouths? Isn't a robust CT effort
the very definition of combat operations? And don't we
still have combat operations going on in Afghanistan?

General Votel: We are -- Senator, thanks for the
question -- we are obviously supporting our Afghan partners
in their execution of what could be termed as combat operations, at their effort.

To your first part of your question with respect to, you know, counterterrorism, you know, counterterrorism, I think, is -- as we pursue this here, isn't -- is not just the kinetic aspect of it. And --

Senator Sullivan: But, it is kind of the epitome of combat operations.

General Votel: It is --

Senator Sullivan: Aren't American soldiers, when they're conducting combat operations in Afghanistan, or counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan -- isn't that the definition of combat operations? They're going in with weapons, killing bad guys. Correct?

General Votel: We are not doing that today. What we --

Senator Sullivan: There's no --

General Votel: -- are doing --

Senator Sullivan: There's no CT operations where we're engaged --

General Votel: There are --

Senator Sullivan: -- with the enemy?

General Votel: There are CT operations. But, CT operations involve not only helping and enabling our partners, who are helping us with our CT objectives, the
conducted discreet action that we are taking, like kinetic
strikes that are specifically against threats there, and
then how we address the overall ideology and narrative
aspect of this. So, there --

Senator Sullivan: But, our CT operations are not
members of the U.S. military in action against enemy forces?

General Votel: Right now, today, we are not putting
people as -- in unilateral U.S. operations in against forces
on the ground in Afghanistan. We are supporting our Afghan
partners as we get after those, and we are doing other
operations related to those networks.

Senator Sullivan: Okay. I -- again, I think that
clarification is important, just because -- seems to me if
we have Special Forces operators in Afghanistan, in direct
combat, we should let the American people know. But, if
you're saying that's not the case, that there's no combat
going on, there's no SF actions, direct actions, against al-
Qaeda operatives or anything else like that -- is that --

General Votel: Senator, I'm not saying there's no
combat going on. What I'm saying is, there's no unilateral
U.S. combat going on. We are working through our partners
when we do operations on the ground.

Senator Sullivan: Do we have JTACs on the ground,
either in Syria or Iraq, calling in missions?

General Votel: We have JTACs that are operating at
command-and-control locations --
Senator Sullivan: But, they're not on the ground --
General Votel: They're --
Senator Sullivan: -- front-line troops calling in --
General Votel: They're certainly not accompanying forces forward, doing operations.
Senator Sullivan: General Austin, I was wondering --
you know, you mentioned the whole-of-government approach with regard to ISIL. I appreciate that. Appreciate the fact that you're focused on the military aspects of that. But, what are the other instruments of power that we're bringing to bear with regard to -- American power with regard to ISIL? And -- I just haven't really seen the administration articulate that at all. You mentioned it in your testimony. I think that's very encouraging. But, what is it? We haven't really seen it. Again, I know it's not your realm that you're responsible for, but it would be heartening to know what other instruments of our American power we're integrating to the fight with regard to defeating ISIS.
General Austin: There are a couple of important things that have to be done, Senator, as you know, in order to really defeat this enemy. The kinetic piece of it's one issue. But, you really have to take -- do some very constructive things to begin to cut off the enemy's ability
to resource themselves. So, countering the threat financing
is one issue. And then stopping the flow of foreign
fighters, or slowing down the flow of foreign fighters.
Both of those issues have to be worked by, you know, our
government -- whole-of-government, and they have to be
worked in conjunction with other countries, not only in the
region, but internationally.

And also, there is a requirement or a need to counter
the narrative. And so, I think we have to do more there. I
know there are some initial steps that have been taken to
begin to do that, but there's a lot of work yet to be done.

Senator Sullivan: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman McCain: Senator Ayotte.

Senator Ayotte: Thank you, Chairman.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here and for
what you've done for our country, and continue to do.

I wanted to ask, General Austin again, a couple of
questions about Yemen. Senator Kaine had pointed out that
there were -- in addition to the Saudis, there were nine
other countries that were participating in this coalition to
assist in Yemen. So, just to be clear, we've been,
obviously, participating, State Department side, on
negotiations with Iran for -- very intensely, probably for
the last year, at least, if not more. And during that
period, what has Iran been doing in Yemen? And is it not
the fact that Iran's influence in support of the Houthis
which is, in part, prompting the Saudis and others to engage
in this?

General Austin: Certainly, Senator, Iran is -- has
been enabling the activity of the Houthis as they've done
what they've done. And I would go further to say that, you
know, Iran's desire is to be a hegemon in this region.

Senator Ayotte: Meaning regional domination.

General Austin: Right. Right.

Senator Ayotte: Yeah.

General Austin: And it -- as it seeks to increase its
influence in various countries, it does so through the reach
of the Shi'a populations in those countries. That won't
allow Iran to dominate any specific country in the region,
but what it does do is, it increases -- it serves to
increase sectarian tension, and thereby, it serves as a
destabilizing effort.

Senator Ayotte: Let me just be clear. When we're
talking support, both -- I know, General Votel, you're
familiar with this, as well -- when we're talking about the
support, we're talking about money and arms, aren't we? I
mean, we're not just talking about, "Boy, we support you,
because you're Shi'a." I mean, we're talking about actual
support. Aren't they giving -- on the ground?
General Austin: Yes, we -- yes, Senator, we are
talking about material support, as well. And -- but, again,
I think that support is provided through the Shi'a --
Senator Ayotte: Through their proxies --
General Austin: Right.
Senator Ayotte: -- they give them the money and the
arms, which has undermined our interests in the mission that
we had, and cooperation that we had, to try to deal with al-
Qaeda. Isn't that right, General Votel? In Yemen?
General Votel: I -- yes, Senator, I think it is true.
Senator Ayotte: So, the other thing I wanted to ask
about, General Austin, is Bahrain. We have an important
partnership in Bahrain, do we not? In fact, we have the
location there of the United States 5th Fleet, correct?
General Austin: That's correct, Senator.
Senator Ayotte: And what's Iran doing with regard to
the Bahrain Government right now, which is a Sunni
government? As I understand it, they are also trying to
destabilize that government, which, of course, would, in my
view, threaten our interests there.
General Austin: Correct, Senator. We see the same
reach through the Shi'a population, which increases
sectarian tension and serves as a destabilizing effect.
Senator Ayotte: Which -- you know, obviously, Bahrain
is a different country than Yemen, but it's a similar
playbook in a different country, is it not?

General Austin: It's a similar approach. I --

Senator Ayotte: Similar approach, but I -- I mean, obviously, they're very different countries.

General Austin: Yes, ma'am.

Senator Ayotte: But, I think we need to be clear here what Iran's activities have been. And, as I look at your testimony, you -- one of the things you pointed out, General Austin, is that the Iran routinely engages in malign activity through the Iranian threat network. Iran is also engaging in malign activity through support to proxy actors, such as Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas, which threatens the sovereignty and security of Israel. This has all been going on in addition to undermining our interests in Yemen, correct?

General Austin: That's correct.

Senator Ayotte: So, you know, this is obviously, I think, as we look at this issue of the regional -- attempt at regional domination by Iran, this is of deep concern to us, in the long term, and even in the short term, in terms of how this region can be destabilized further. Is that true?

General Austin: There is a significant concern, for a long time -- long-term effects, in terms of this type of behavior destabilizing the region and having effects in
other parts of the globe, as well.

Senator Ayotte: And, in fact, I think could further
fuel sort of a Sunni-Shi'a fight in the region if they
continue their efforts towards regional domination. Would
you agree?

General Austin: Yeah, I would.

Senator Ayotte: Thank you.

I just wanted to comment, as well, on Senator Cotton's
question to you about the status of the Taliban five. And I
know that you're going to get back to him on it, but I have
to say, I find it shocking, the fact that you are Commander
of AFRICOM and that the State Department has not already
coordinated with you. It's not -- not putting this on you,
is -- my point is, the fact that we've got these dangerous
-- you're -- you know, you're the Commander of CENTCOM.
These two countries, Qatar and also where the Taliban five
is from and could return and could prevent -- and present
great danger into Afghanistan. It would seem to me that you
would be, I would hope, most closely consulted on this. So,
I'm actually kind of dumfounded that they aren't consulting
you now and that there doesn't appear to be a plan.

So, you know, I look forward to the followup, but, you
know, to the State Department, to everyone else out there,
to this administration, seems to me the Commander of CENTCOM
needs to be brought in this, in terms of the five potential
commanders that could get back on the ground in Afghanistan and threaten our troops.

Chairman McCain: Senator Lee.

Senator Lee: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thanks, to all of you here today, and to the men and women who serve under your command, and all you do to help protect us.

Last year, I expressed some reluctance regarding the Syria train-and-equip program, based on concerns that any lethal assistance that we may provide might end up inadvertently -- or, in some cases, perhaps purposely -- end up in the hands of some of the very extremists that we're attempting to fight against. And that could possibly fuel further violence in the region.

While I believe that the servicemembers who are under your command, who are in the process of executing this program, are the most skilled in the world at what they do -- and that's really what gives this program the very best chance of success -- the losses of U.S.-provided equipment by the Iraqi Security Forces last year, and in Yemen this year, are stark lessons that the fluid and volatile nature of the Middle East can compromise even our best-laid plans.

I'm further concerned that, for this program to have the best chance of success, the United States will need to become more militarily involved in this conflict than many
Secretary Carter stated recently, when referring to the forces that we train and equip in Syria, that, quote, "We will have some obligation to support them after they're trained," close quote. Yet, we don't know what that support would look like, nor do we know, at this point, what the costs associated with that would look like.

This program, as part of the administration's strategy to address the ISIS threat, should be fully and openly debated in this body so that the American people might have a say in how their military forces are used.

General Austin, since this program was conceptualized, it was reasonable to expect a situation in which Syrian rebels we armed might face a larger or better-equipped army -- larger or better-equipped enemy. Why was the decision made to start the train-and-equip program -- why was that decision made before determining whether the United States would provide further protection or support for the groups once they were trained and equipped and returned to Syria?

General Austin: It was made because we will need a -- an element on the ground to complement the work that we're doing with our fires to begin to counter ISIL in Syria. And, you know, my best military advice as we go forward is that, as we introduce forces that we've trained and equipped, then we should provide them support. We should
not only look to provide them fires, we should provide them logistics, we should provide them intel support, as well.

And so, I think that gives them the best opportunity for success.

Senator Lee: So, do you think that Assad's forces in Syria will attempt to attack some of these opposition members that we've trained and equipped? And, if so, what level of military involvement should we expect from American forces?

General Austin: I think there's a likelihood that that can happen. We'll try to -- initially, as we put forces in and begin to build combat power, we'll put them in those positions where they are focused on ISIL. That's the first task at hand. And then, again, if they are attacked, then I think we should protect them.

Senator Lee: What do we do if the forces that we train and equip end up attacking Assad's forces?

General Austin: Well, initially, that's not the -- that's not what we -- we're focused on. So, we will discontinue providing support to those forces if they vector off and do things that we haven't designed them to do initially and asked them to focus on initially.

Senator Lee: Do you think that the success of the opposition groups that we're training and equipping, that we're supporting, do you think that'll require a new
governing structure in Damascus? And, if so, would the U.S. military be involved in helping to facilitate that change?

General Austin: I think eventually forces will need to plug into some type of structure, for sure. And again, that's not what the military typically does. But, again, this is a whole-of-government approach, here, so --

Senator Lee: Okay, thank you, General Austin.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman McCain: General, I'd just like to follow up on what Senator Lee said. In Syria, these young people we are training and we send them back into Syria, if they're attacked by Assad, we're not going to protect them?

General Austin: Sir, I --

Chairman McCain: Are we going to protect them?

General Austin: My thought -- my recommendation would be that we protect them, no matter who's attacking them. So, we have to protect these forces once we've trained them and put them on the ground.

Chairman McCain: Well, are we going to have any provision to protect them?

General Austin: We currently don't have that, that policy decision, sir. But, as I --

Chairman McCain: So, we're going to train them to go back into Syria; and, if Bashar Assad barrel-bombs them, we don't have a policy yet as to whether we protect them, or
General Austin: We -- currently, sir, that decision has not been taken, and --

Chairman McCain: Well, then why are we training them if we're not going to be able to tell them that we're not going to -- whether we're going to protect them, or not?

General Austin: I'm very hopeful that we will be able to tell them that, sir.

Chairman McCain: Well, I'm very hopeful, too. But, hope really doesn't stop barrel-bombing.

Could you -- could I ask you again when it is that the Saudis notified you that they were going to begin attacks in Yemen?

General Austin: Sir, I had a discussion with the Saudi CHOD the day of the attack, so it was not much before that they actually started the attacks.

Chairman McCain: Isn't that quite a commentary on our relationship with Saudi Arabia and the other 13 countries in their coalition, that they would -- on literally the day of their attacks, they tell you that -- tell the United States of America that they're going to launch a major campaign? I mean, that is really a fantastic indicator of the deterioration of the trust and confidence that these countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, have in us. And it authenticates what has been quoted quite frequently, that
some people believe it's better to be an enemy of the United States than a friend. And -- I mean, this is really quite remarkable.

And again, finally, I do not know how you recruit young people to fight, and tell them that they're going to back in to a country, and we don't have a policy yet whether we're going to protect them, or not. General, that's immoral. It's not only unworkable, it's immoral to tell people to not -- to tell the -- be able to tell them that, if we train and equip them to go in and fight, that we're not going to -- that we haven't yet got a policy on whether we're going to protect them, or not. I would say that that would also be something of a disincentive for recruitment.

So, I hope, for the sake of these young people's lives that we are training now, that we at least have a policy decision as to whether we're going to protect them, or not. And, of course, the best way to do that is with a no-fly zone, which has been recommended, years ago, without any result from this President.

Senator Gillibrand.

Senator Gillibrand: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to follow the Chairman's line of questioning. So, what do you believe the strategy is for this new campaign? And what's the ultimate goal? In Yemen, sorry.

General Austin: I don't know what the Saudis -- the
specifics of their goals and objectives. I can tell you that they're interested, number one, in protecting their homeland -- they have a border with Yemen, obviously -- and also, that they received requests from the President of Yemen to help with military assistance. So --

Senator Gillibrand: What advice have you given, or will you give, the President about what our role should be?

General Austin: Our current position is that we'll help the Saudis with intelligence and logistics and planning support. And again, they're great partners, and I think they're very much appreciative of the help that we'll provide them.

Senator Gillibrand: What's your assessment of the likelihood of success?

General Austin: In Yemen?

Senator Gillibrand: Yes.

General Austin: Again, Senator, I don't currently know the specific goals and objectives of the Saudi campaign. And I'd have to know that to be able to assess the likelihood of success.

Senator Gillibrand: Well, I do hope you get that information sooner than later, because, you know, more than $500 million in U.S. military assistance to Yemen can no longer be accounted for and has fallen into the wrong hands. We have a role in Yemen that we have to have much greater
accountability for. How does something like that happen?
And, given the instability in the region, what steps should
the U.S. be taking to protect or prevent losses like that in
the future?

General Austin: Yeah, so the $500 million, as I
understand it, Senator, were -- is the amount of investment
over an 8-year period that we've made to help the Yemeni
government, the Yemeni military forces, or security forces,
build capacity. This not only includes materials, but it
also includes training. And, as you know, training can be
somewhat costly. When we are there, we have the ability to
monitor how this equipment's being used. But, of course, you
know, the embassy's no longer there, and it doesn't have a
Office of Security Cooperation that would typically do these
tings. And so, we don't have that ability, currently. If
we have the opportunity to go back in and partner with the
new government, or a government, then I think, you know,
that'll be a -- one of our focus areas.

Senator Gillibrand: Well, given that the Houthis are
still in control, how do you believe we should deal with al-
Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, given the state of Yemen?

General Austin: Thanks, Senator. I think that, as we
have done and will continue to do in every case where we
don't have people on the ground but there is a threat there
that we need to concerned about, we'll use every
intelligence-collection capability that's available to us to continue to monitor what's going on with this extremist network. And we do have resources that are in the region that we can use to apply to counter this network once we've developed the appropriate intelligence.

Senator Gillibrand: And what do you see is the presence of ISIL in the region? And is that going to be affected by the state of Yemen today?

General Austin: If I could get you to -- if I could ask a question on -- get you to ask that question again, Senator, I missed a piece of it. How do I see --

Senator Gillibrand: How do you see the threat of ISIL in that region?

General Austin: Well, I think the threat of ISIL in the region, Senator, is the most pressing threat that we're facing. And, as I --

Senator Gillibrand: In Yemen. I'm still on Yemen.

General Austin: In Yemen, that's really undetermined. I know that the most recent attack was attributed to an ISIL element in Yemen, but I think the intelligence agencies are still working their way through that, you know, to determine the veracity of whether or not this is really a hardcore ISIL element or someone claiming to be ISIL or, you know, what this really is. Clearly, AQAP is dominant in that country. And whether or not ISIL and AQAP can coexist is
left to be seen.

Senator Gillibrand: Thank you very much.

Chairman McCain: I thank the witnesses, and --

Senator Cotton: Senator McCain, can --

Chairman McCain: Senator Cotton.

Senator Cotton: One point, to follow up on something that he just said. There's a Breaking News Alert from the Associated Press, General Austin, that Egypt and Saudi Arabia have begun a ground incursion into Yemen. Did Saudi Arabia or any other country give you or Central Command advance notice of this, if this report is accurate?

General Austin: No, I did not have advance notice of that.

Senator Cotton: Thank you.

Chairman McCain: That's quite a commentary.

This hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:37 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]