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Before the

COMMITTEE ON
ARMED SERVICES

UNITED STATES SENATE

HEARING TO RECEIVE TESTIMONY ON
THE UNITED STATES CENTRAL COMMAND
IN REVIEW OF THE DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION REQUEST
FOR FISCAL YEAR 2020 AND
THE FUTURE YEARS DEFENSE PROGRAM

Tuesday, February 5, 2019

Washington, D.C.

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8
9 U.S. Senate
10 Committee on Armed Services
11 Washington, D.C.
12

13 The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:28 p.m. in
14 Room SH-216, Hart Senate Office Building, Hon. James M.
15 Inhofe, chairman of the committee, presiding.

16 Committee Members Present: Senators Inhofe
17 [presiding], Wicker, Cotton, Rounds, Ernst, Tillis,
18 Sullivan, Perdue, Cramer, McSally, Scott, Blackburn, Hawley,
19 Reed, Shaheen, Gillibrand, Blumenthal, Hirono, Kaine, King,
20 Heinrich, Warren, Peters, Manchin, Duckworth, and Jones.

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1 OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES M. INHOFE, U.S.
2 SENATOR FROM OKLAHOMA

3 Chairman Inhofe: Good morning.

4 The committee today will receive testimony from the
5 United States Central Command.

6 I would like to welcome our witness, General Joseph
7 Votel, Commander of the United States Central Command.
8 Welcome.

9 General Votel will hand over the Central Command at the
10 end of March, and I want to thank him for his outstanding
11 service to our country over his 38-year career. General,
12 you have had a tough job at CENTCOM, and with the rise of
13 ISIS and the spread of Iran's proxies and the return of
14 Russia to the Middle East, you and the President have
15 grappled with some of the very hard decisions. Thank you
16 for all you have done to keep America safe.

17 The Senate Armed Services Committee's top priority is
18 to ensure the effective implementation of the National
19 Defense Strategy, which identifies competition with China
20 and Russia as, quote, the central challenge to the United
21 States' prosperity and security. Clearly, we do not want to
22 be the world's policeman, but without any U.S. presence, our
23 strategic competitors will rush to fill the void. We have
24 seen this repeatedly in the Middle East. When we step away
25 from partners, Russia steps in. When our military pulls

1 back, Russia pulls forward. When we do not enforce our
2 redlines, Russia tries to create its own.

3 The NDS also makes countering terrorist threats a top
4 priority. Part of this strategy has been achieved. The
5 ISIS caliphate has been defeated, but ISIS and Al Qaeda are
6 still active in the region and threaten our homeland.

7 Both priorities, competing with Russia and countering
8 terrorists, are at stake in Syria. As we draw down in
9 Syria, we must continue to support our partners and friends.
10 And I am also interested in how we are going to prevent ISIS
11 resurging. It is one thing to come out, but then, of
12 course, to stop them from coming back up. And we believe
13 that is going to happen, and the right person is here to
14 explain that to us. So we welcome you General Votel.

15 Senator Reed?

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1 STATEMENT OF HON. JACK REED, U.S. SENATOR FROM RHODE
2 ISLAND

3 Senator Reed: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

4 And, General Votel, welcome back, which will likely be
5 your last hearing before the committee. Let me thank you
6 for 39 years of exemplary service to the nation. We owe you
7 and your family an incredible debt of gratitude for the
8 contributions you have made to our national security
9 throughout your career, but especially during your
10 leadership of the Joint Special Operations Command, the
11 Special Operations Command, and now Central Command. So we
12 sincerely thank you, General.

13 The focus of the National Defense Strategy is, rightly,
14 a return to great power competition and a more resource
15 sustainable approach to counterterrorism. However, this has
16 led to some uncertainty about the U.S. military's continued
17 role in the CENTCOM area of responsibility. As we consider
18 this question, it is important that we remain clear-eyed
19 about the continued threat to the homeland posed by ISIS, Al
20 Qaeda, and other extremist groups; the malign behavior of
21 Iran; and the objectives of Russia and China in the region.

22 Each of these issues are relevant to current
23 discussions about our military presence in Afghanistan and
24 Syria. In addition to a complicated military situation,
25 resolutions to broader stabilization, diplomatic, and

1 political challenges have been far more difficult to come
2 by.

3 Bringing our troops home should always be our
4 objective, but it must be done in a deliberate and well-
5 thought-out manner in concert with our partners and allies.
6 In the case of Syrian withdrawal, contradictory statements
7 by the President, his National Security Advisor, and other
8 administration officials have only served to underscore that
9 this decision was anything but thoughtful and deliberate.
10 If public reports are accurate, the President may be about
11 to make similar quick decisions with respect to Afghanistan.

12 The conflict in Afghanistan has occurred at great cost
13 in terms of both lives and resources. However, in
14 considering the prospect of conflict termination, we must
15 also weigh the cost of getting it wrong. ISIS, Al Qaeda,
16 and an estimated 18 other terrorist groups are still present
17 in the region, and some within the intelligence community
18 assess that external plotting would surge upon our
19 withdrawal.

20 We must also consider our allies and partners that have
21 fought alongside us. As former Secretary Mattis said, "our
22 strength as a nation is inexorably linked to the strength of
23 our unique and comprehensive system of alliances and
24 partnerships." The allies and partners who joined us after
25 9/11 and have sacrificed with us in Afghanistan deserve to

1 be included in conversations with respect to the future of
2 the conflict.

3 Regarding the decision in Syria, the President's
4 statement that ISIS is defeated may be premature. According
5 to the intelligence community assessment released last week,
6 ISIS in their words, "very likely will continue to pursue
7 external attacks from Iraq and Syria against regional and
8 Western adversaries, including the United States. General
9 McKenzie made a similar point in December when he said "ISIS
10 probably still is more capable than Al Qaeda in Iraq at its
11 peak, suggesting it is well positioned to reemerge if
12 pressure on the group is relieved."

13 The security and stability of key partners in the
14 region, most notably, Iraq, Israel, and Jordan, is bolstered
15 by our continued presence. While our deployed forces do not
16 have a military mission to counter Iran, I agree with our
17 military leaders that there is a derivative benefit
18 associated with their presence and the reassurance it
19 provides. We should not take these partners for granted.
20 If we were to withdraw precipitously from the region, we
21 would risk the reemergence of ISIS, squandering gains made
22 in Iraq, destabilizing Jordan and increasing the pressure on
23 King Abdullah, and allowing Iran and its proxies to become
24 further entrenched, thereby posing a greater threat to
25 Israel.

1 No one, myself included, is in favor of endless wars or
2 indefinite deployments of U.S. troops to dangerous parts of
3 the world. Far too often, we view the use of the U.S.
4 military as the solution to every problem. I share the
5 frustration of Americans that we have, thus far, been unable
6 to fully achieve our foreign policy objectives in
7 Afghanistan, Syria, and elsewhere.

8 However, just as decisions to employ the U.S. military
9 must be given great consideration, so too must decisions to
10 disengage military, with particular attention paid to the
11 second and third order effects such a decision will have on
12 our security and foreign policy interests. I do not think
13 sufficient consideration has been given to these issues to
14 date.

15 General Votel, we look forward to hearing your views on
16 these and other issues.

17 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

18 Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Reed.

19 Now that a quorum is present, I would ask the committee
20 to consider and approve a Senate resolution authorizing
21 funding for our committee from March 1st through February
22 28th. The funding resolution is completely consistent with
23 the minority and majority leader in the January 9th
24 agreement.

25 Senator Reed: So moved.

1 Senator Wicker: Second.

2 Chairman Inhofe: I would entertain a motion. Is there
3 a motion?

4 Senator Reed: So moved, Mr. Chairman.

5 Senator Wicker: Second.

6 Chairman Inhofe: All in favor, say aye.

7 [Chorus of ayes.]

8 Chairman Inhofe: Opposed, no?

9 [No response.]

10 Chairman Inhofe: The ayes have it.

11 All right. General Votel, you are recognized for your
12 opening statements.

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1 STATEMENT OF GENERAL JOSEPH L. VOTEL, USA, COMMANDER,
2 UNITED STATES CENTRAL COMMAND

3 General Votel: Senator Inhofe, Ranking Member Reed,
4 distinguished members of the committee, good morning and
5 thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Senate
6 Armed Services Committee today. I come before you
7 representing the over 80,000 men and women working
8 tirelessly across the Central Command area of
9 responsibility. They represent the very best of our nation,
10 and I am proud to stand among them as their commander. All
11 of these great Americans have families in communities across
12 our country that support their service members from near and
13 far, and we are equally proud and appreciative of their
14 service and sacrifice.

15 I am honored to be joined today by the CENTCOM senior
16 enlisted leader, United States Army Command Sergeant Major
17 Bill Thetford. Command Sergeant Major Thetford has been
18 with me my entire tour at CENTCOM and for the 5 years we
19 served together in other commands before that. He is the
20 most experienced soldier in our outfit, and his support and
21 steady leadership helped us navigate very treacherous waters
22 over the years. He is representative of the people we have
23 across this command and, indeed, throughout the armed forces
24 of our nation. Command Sergeant Major Thetford and his wife
25 Allie will retire after 38 years of service later this

1 spring, and our nation owes them an incredible debt of
2 gratitude. We could not have been served better.

3 There is no other region in the world as dynamic,
4 hopeful, challenging, and dangerous as the CENTCOM area of
5 responsibility, made up of the areas we typically refer to
6 as the Levant, the Middle East, and Central and South Asia.
7 It is an area of great contrast and contradiction. It is an
8 area rich in history, culture, and resources, but also an
9 area pulsing with sectarianism, violence, poor governance,
10 corruption, disenfranchisement, profound human suffering,
11 and economic disparity. It is also an area where we retain
12 vital interests, preventing the tax on our homeland,
13 countering malign and destabilizing influence, containing
14 the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and
15 ensuring freedom of navigation and commerce through critical
16 international waterways. It is worth noting that four of
17 the five major competitors or threats identified in the
18 National Defense Strategy, China, Russia, Iran, and violent
19 extremist organizations, reside or are contested in the
20 CENTCOM area of responsibility every day.

21 In the final 2 weeks of 2018, CENTCOM supported the UN
22 Special Envoy in the establishment of a nascent ceasefire in
23 Yemen, enabled the efforts of the U.S. Special
24 Representative for Afghanistan, Reconciliation, began
25 planning for the orderly and professional withdrawal under

1 pressure of U.S. forces in Syria, while maintaining our
2 coalition efforts to support the Government of Iraq and the
3 Iraqi Security Forces in addressing the remnants of ISIS in
4 that country. We monitored and mitigated the unprofessional
5 acts of Iranian naval forces in international waters and
6 observed the professional mature actions of the U.S.-advised
7 Lebanese armed forces as they maintained stability along the
8 border with Israel. Those 2 weeks were not an aberration
9 for the command. They were business as usual, as they have
10 been in CENTCOM nearly every day since its inception in the
11 early 1980s.

12 Today in Afghanistan, the conditions-based South Asia
13 Strategy is working, and we continue to use military ways
14 and means to advance our end state of reconciliation. We
15 recognize this conflict will not be resolved solely by
16 military force, but our military pressure serves as an
17 enabler to a whole-of-government process and more directly
18 supports diplomatic efforts led by Ambassador Khalilzad.
19 While these efforts have had recent promise, our mission has
20 not changed. We will continue our military pressure in
21 support of our national objectives until they are met.

22 In Syria and Iraq, the unrelenting work of the 79-
23 member Defeat ISIS coalition, the determination and bravery
24 of our Iraqi Security Force and Syrian Democratic Force
25 partners, and the support of multiple international

1 government organizations has largely liberated the so-called
2 physical caliphate of ISIS. An area of 34,000 square miles
3 of territory which they once controlled is now reduced to an
4 area less than 20 square miles. The successful partnership
5 with the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Iraqi Security
6 Forces was instrumental in these gains against ISIS.

7 But it is important to understand that even though this
8 territory has been reclaimed, the fight against ISIS and
9 violent extremists is not over, and our mission has not
10 changed. The coalition's hard-won battlefield gains can
11 only be secured by maintaining a vigilant offensive against
12 the now largely dispersed and disaggregated ISIS that
13 retains leaders, fighters, facilitators, resources, and the
14 profane ideology that fuels their efforts.

15 As the Defeat ISIS campaign in Syria transitions from
16 liberating territory to enabling local security and
17 addressing the ISIS clandestine insurgency, U.S. ground
18 forces will depart Syria in a deliberate and coordinated
19 manner while we concurrently consult with allies and
20 partners to implement stabilization efforts. These details
21 are being developed now and will ensure campaign continuity
22 and capitalize on the contributions of the international
23 community to prevent a resurgence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

24 Today in Yemen, a fragile ceasefire in the Port of
25 Houdeidah is a promising, albeit challenging-to-implement

1 step demonstrating the willingness by both sides to
2 negotiate, and which will, hopefully, allow the United
3 Nations to expand efforts to end this humanitarian disaster.
4 Towards this end, CENTCOM supports the international
5 diplomatic efforts and the work of the UN Special Envoy to
6 facilitate the peace process by providing advice and
7 assistance and serving as an interlocutor through our
8 trusted relationships in the region to help ensure
9 transparency, cohesion, and positive momentum. We also
10 remain steadfast in reminding the Saudi-led coalition
11 partners of their obligations under the Law of Armed
12 Conflict and ensuring that the fight in Yemen does not
13 spread across the region sowing more instability and
14 threatening critical infrastructure and U.S. lives and
15 interests.

16 And so it is in the Central Region today and every day:
17 great promise and opportunity mixed with contradiction and
18 conflict.

19 Let me conclude my remarks where I started with our
20 people and their families. In an era of great change when
21 we consistently ask our people to do more with less, the
22 service and sacrifice of these men and women and their
23 families in support of our nation is both humbling and
24 inspirational. For over 17 years of sustained conflict
25 across the CENTCOM area of responsibility, our soldiers,

1 sailors, airmen, marines, coast guardsmen, and civilians
2 have answered the call with an unwavering commitment and
3 devotion matched only by the families who support them. We
4 could not have accomplished what we do without all of them,
5 and they deserve the very best capabilities and support we
6 can provide from weapons and communication systems to health
7 care and housing. I ask for continued strong support from
8 Congress and from the American people to provide our service
9 men and women everything they need to accomplish their vital
10 missions and lead healthy, fulfilling lives in continued
11 service to our nation.

12 Thank you again for allowing me to represent the men
13 and women of CENTCOM before you today. I look forward to
14 your questions.

15 [The prepared statement of General Votel follows:]

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1 Chairman Inhofe: Thank you very much, General Votel.

2 I want to bring up three things that have grown into
3 some controversy, and they should not have, and just very
4 briefly get your opinion on that.

5 First of all, as we draw down, I had made some
6 statement characterizing what the President's position was
7 in Syria. And I was challenged by some not too friendly
8 media on this. And I would like to quote what the President
9 actually said initially. He said we will have a slow and
10 highly coordinated drawdown -- this is all a quote -- and we
11 will be leaving at a proper pace while at the same time
12 continuing to fight ISIS and doing all else that is prudent
13 and necessary. Do you think these are the proper conditions
14 and this is your understanding also of his position?

15 General Votel: In the instructions that I have been
16 given and that we issued down to our organizations in Syria,
17 that represents our approach, a very deliberate approach to
18 how we depart Syria.

19 Chairman Inhofe: Yes. I think that was certainly our
20 understanding.

21 Do you believe that the territorial state of ISIS will
22 be eliminated by the time the U.S. withdrawal is done?

23 General Votel: I do, Chairman.

24 Chairman Inhofe: And what is being done to prevent
25 ISIS from reemerging at this time?

1 General Votel: Well, we continue to work with our
2 Iraqi Security Force partners and international coalition
3 here to continue to keep pressure on ISIS, and we continue
4 our efforts by, with, and through our partners in Syria and
5 in some cases for them to keep pressure on ISIS as they
6 continue to present threats to us. We should expect that
7 they will attempt to attack us and continue to regenerate
8 themselves, and we will continue to put pressure on them to
9 prevent that.

10 Chairman Inhofe: Very good.

11 The second area that could be subject to some
12 misinterpretation has to do with Yemen. I am concerned that
13 disengaging our partners in Yemen will undermine Israel,
14 bolster Iran, and increase human suffering. In your
15 assessment, what are the costs of disengagement from our
16 partners in Yemen?

17 General Votel: Certainly it is a very significant
18 humanitarian disaster in Yemen. But I do believe departing
19 from our partners there removes the leverage that we have to
20 continue to influence them, which I think we have used in a
21 positive manner, and I think it further endangers Americans
22 in the region.

23 Chairman Inhofe: Yes. I appreciate that.

24 Then the third one has to do with the IMET program. I
25 have always been very partial to that. Primarily my

1 activity has been in Africa. It has been so successful not
2 just in Africa but around the world that we see China and
3 Russia both, particularly China, trying to beat us to the
4 punch in the IMET program, recognizing that some of what are
5 middle officers are getting training in a country that they
6 are wed forever. We have seen this happen. But the thing
7 that is disturbing right now is China is starting to do the
8 same thing. So what do you see as far as the benefits of
9 IMET? And is China moving in on us?

10 General Votel: Thank you.

11 Mr. Chairman, I think China is opportunistic, and they
12 are going to look for places that they can step in where we
13 or others may create voids.

14 To your comments on IMET, I think IMET, International
15 Military Education Training, funding dollar for dollar is
16 perhaps one of the best tools that the Department of
17 Defense, Department of State can wield in building our
18 partnerships throughout the region. Typically the people
19 who take advantage of these resources and come to our
20 schools in the United States often rise to positions of
21 leadership in their countries. They do not forget the
22 experience they had in our military schools, and most
23 importantly, they do not forget the American people. And I
24 think this is an extraordinarily wise investment for us to
25 continue to make.

1 Chairman Inhofe: I sure agree with that. And you are
2 probably aware that in Africa, China has invited at one
3 meeting 50 of the leaders of the 52 nations in Africa to
4 China, wining, dining, and all this trying to move in on
5 that program. It is one we have to all be very sensitive to
6 because they realize the benefits that we have received from
7 that program.

8 Senator Reed?

9 Senator Reed: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

10 First, General Votel, let me join you in recognizing
11 the Sergeant Major. Thank you for your service, Sergeant
12 Major. Generals only become generals if they listen to
13 their first sergeants and sergeant majors.

14 [Laughter.]

15 Senator Reed: General Votel, thank you again for your
16 extraordinary service in so many different ways.

17 When General McKenzie was here, he stated that ISIS
18 probably still is more capable than Al Qaeda in Iraq at its
19 peak, suggesting it is well positioned to reemerge if
20 pressure on the group is relieved. And you point out a
21 staged withdrawal from Syria almost, in effect, lessens some
22 of the pressure that is on ISIS.

23 Do you concur with the General that there will be some
24 renewed vigor with respect to ISIS?

25 General Votel: I do agree, Senator.

1 Senator Reed: And we are trying as an alternative
2 approach to at least posit the idea that we can conduct air
3 strikes from Iraq and we can have forces in Iraq. Is that
4 the fallback position?

5 General Votel: Senator, right now, we are working
6 through a variety of planning scenarios for how we would
7 potentially continue to maintain pressure on ISIS as we
8 withdraw out of Syria. I think that is probably a
9 discussion more appropriate for the closed session, but we
10 certainly are looking at all options for how we might do
11 that.

12 Senator Reed: And, again, this might be something that
13 you can touch upon later, but there have been some
14 indications that the SDF, given the announcement, which was
15 rather sudden, of our plans to pull out, have made
16 approaches to the Assad regime to work out kind of an
17 understanding of how they might cooperate or at least
18 tolerate each other. Is that something that has been --

19 General Votel: Senator, I think something we have
20 learned in our experience there, certainly in my experience
21 there, that all these parties talk to each other all the
22 time. And so we do expect that that is occurring.

23 Senator Reed: Turning to Afghanistan, there are two
24 major functions. One is train and equip the Afghan forces
25 and counterterrorism. If we withdraw, presumably the first

1 elements that will go are the train and equip, and the last
2 elements would be counterterrorism because we have threats
3 in the region. Is that a fair summary of sort of the
4 process?

5 General Votel: Senator, again, I think this is
6 probably that would be better discussed in a closed session.
7 But I think we have a more sophisticated way of looking at
8 that. We understand the importance of both of those
9 missions.

10 Senator Reed: Turning then to the situation of
11 Afghanistan again, if we were to withdraw -- and there is
12 mounting pressure and mounting sort of evidence that that is
13 a path that might be pursued -- we still provide the Afghan
14 Security Forces about \$4 billion a year in sustenance. So
15 if we were to withdraw our forces, we would still have to
16 maintain the \$4 billion a year contribution or those Afghan
17 forces would disintegrate. Is that an accurate assessment?

18 General Votel: There certainly would need to be
19 continued support to the Afghan forces. The amounts
20 certainly we would have to look at. But, yes, I think that
21 is accurate, Senator. Again, that money there without us I
22 think does make it challenging.

23 Senator Reed: Indeed, because I think one of the
24 things we provide with the presence is to a degree at least
25 the money is being spent appropriately. I think the

1 experience we have had elsewhere is if we just send money,
2 it gets to places that we do not want it to go. Again, I
3 think as you are withdrawing, this has to be a very, very
4 careful thought out second order effects, third order
5 effects. And indeed, the issue is not just -- it is such a
6 complicated multinational, multifactor analysis. We have
7 not yet gotten the Government of Afghanistan in the
8 negotiations. They are still on the sidelines. That is
9 correct?

10 General Votel: That is what Ambassador Khalilzad has
11 reported, Senator.

12 Senator Reed: And long term, I think our instincts --
13 and we have been dealing with this for 17 years -- is that
14 unless there is some type of regional buy-in, which would
15 include Pakistan, Iran to a degree, China because of its
16 influence, Russia because of its influence, the Stans
17 because of their influence, the likelihood of something
18 stable is probably minimal. Is that accurate?

19 General Votel: Absolutely. A key part of the strategy
20 has been the regionalization. And I would add, Senator,
21 that Pakistan in my estimation has played a more helpful
22 role, a more constructive role in helping us move forward
23 towards this objective.

24 Senator Reed: Just one quick question. We were able
25 to identify through great staff work by both sides that the

1 Governments of Saudi Arabia and UAE owe the United States
2 \$331 million for refueling. Have you received a definite
3 commitment that they are going to repay that money they owe
4 us?

5 General Votel: Senator, we are working through that.
6 Both those governments have acknowledged the bills that we
7 have provided to them, have indicated to us that they will
8 meet the payment schedule in accordance with the ACSA, and
9 we have teams from CENTCOM, from AFCENT, from DLA that are
10 working to resolve that satisfactorily.

11 Senator Reed: And you have looked at other
12 beneficiaries in your command to ensure that there are not
13 other areas where they are deficient in paying?

14 General Votel: We have, Senator.

15 Senator Reed: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

16 Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Reed.

17 Senator Wicker?

18 Senator Wicker: Mr. Chairman, I want to associate
19 myself not only with your opening statement but with the
20 very fine opening statement of the ranking Democrat on this
21 committee and particularly thank Senator Reed for pointing
22 out the cost of getting it wrong as we withdraw from both
23 Syria and Afghanistan.

24 I want to enter into the record at this point, Mr.
25 Chairman, an op-ed that appeared in the "Washington Post" on

1 January 29 by Ambassador Ryan Crocker, entitled "I Was
2 Ambassador to Afghanistan. This Deal is a Surrender."

3 Chairman Inhofe: Without objection.

4 [The information follows:]

5 [COMMITTEE INSERT]

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1 Senator Wicker: General, thank you for your service.

2 Just to follow up on a couple points that Senator Reed
3 made. With regard to the \$4 billion a year contribution,
4 you are not quite sure that it would still be that amount,
5 but it is close to that amount that we would still be
6 obligated to pay. We would still need to contribute, and we
7 would not have the oversight on the ground that we have now.

8 General Votel: That would be correct if we departed,
9 Senator.

10 Senator Wicker: And I think also Senator Reed pointed
11 out that this agreement with regard to the Taliban in
12 Afghanistan has been made without the participation of the
13 Government of Afghanistan. That is correct. Is it not?

14 General Votel: Senator, the work of Ambassador
15 Khalilzad -- first of all, there have been no agreements
16 that have actually been finalized.

17 Senator Wicker: There has been a framework agreement.

18 General Votel: What I would describe -- his work is
19 creating a framework for continuing discussions moving
20 forward here. Ambassador Khalilzad's efforts are done with
21 the knowledge of the Government of Afghanistan. They are
22 aware that we are doing this, and they have supported our
23 efforts to get this process started. Ultimately, we need to
24 get to a Taliban-Afghanistan discussion. Only they will be
25 able to resolve the key issues involved in the dispute.

1 Senator Wicker: In the op-ed that I have entered into
2 the record, Ambassador Crocker points out the framework was
3 reached without the involvement of the Afghan Government.
4 He goes on to say that the Taliban has said all along that
5 it refuses to negotiate with the government, considering the
6 government the illegitimate puppet of the United States
7 occupation. His opinion is by acceding to this Taliban
8 demand, we have ourselves de-legitimized the government we
9 claim to support.

10 He goes on to say this current process bears an
11 unfortunate resemblance to the Paris Peace Talks during the
12 Vietnam War. Then, as now, it was clear that by going to
13 the table, we were surrendering.

14 Further Ambassador Crocker says the United States could
15 announce that talks will not proceed beyond the framework to
16 matters of substance without the full inclusion of the
17 Afghan Government. Right now, the inclusion of the Afghans
18 is only theoretical. And I think you have touched on that,
19 General.

20 We could also note that unless some other solution is
21 found, the U.S. troops will remain in Afghanistan as long as
22 the current government wants them. The current Government
23 of Afghanistan wants us to continue our presence there. Is
24 that right, General Votel?

25 General Votel: That is my understanding, Senator.

1 Senator Wicker: And then the Ambassador concludes.
2 President Barack Obama proved in Iraq that the United States
3 cannot end a war by withdrawing its forces. The battle
4 space is simply left to our adversaries.

5 I have asked you a question or two about specifics.
6 Have you read this op-ed before? And I have read to you
7 extensively from it. Would you respond to that for the
8 benefit of the committee?

9 General Votel: Senator, I have read Ambassador
10 Crocker's article here -- or his editorial. And I know
11 Ambassador Crocker. I deeply respect him. He is certainly
12 one of our leading experts on the region here and a keen
13 observer of what is happening out there.

14 From my position as the CENTCOM Commander, in my
15 discussions with Ambassador Khalilzad and with General
16 Miller on the ground here, I would characterize where we are
17 in the process as very, very early in the process. As I
18 said, Ambassador Khalilzad has attempted to create a
19 framework by which we can move forward with discussions that
20 would be certainly involving the Government of Afghanistan.
21 We clearly recognize that they have to be part of the
22 solution and must be in the negotiation aspects of this. We
23 cannot do that on their behalf. But I do recognize also
24 that the Government of Afghanistan is being consulted as
25 Ambassador Khalilzad does his work. They are being kept

1 informed of this and are aware of the work that we are doing
2 to move forward on these talks.

3 Senator Wicker: Well, let me just say I appreciate
4 your answer. I hope that turns out to be true.

5 And I just want it to be said that the concerns in this
6 city are bipartisan concerns based on advice and counsel
7 that we receive from people who have been involved in this
8 for a long, long time and who understand how important it is
9 for us to get this right.

10 Thank you, sir.

11 Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Wicker.

12 Senator Reed is presiding for the next 20 minutes or
13 so.

14 Senator Shaheen?

15 Senator Shaheen: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

16 And thank you, General Votel, for your many years of
17 service to this country.

18 I heard former Afghanistan Commander Nicholson being
19 interviewed this morning, and he was asked about the
20 circumstances under which we should withdraw from
21 Afghanistan. And he talked about the fact that it should be
22 conditions-based. It should not be based on an arbitrary
23 timeline or numbers of troops that we want to leave there.

24 So have you and General Miller been given conditions
25 whereby we should withdraw troops from Afghanistan? And if

1 so, what are those conditions?

2 General Votel: Senator, I think some of that
3 discussion is best left for a different forum here. But
4 certainly General Miller and I speak very frequently about
5 the ongoing situation in Afghanistan and the circumstances
6 that we are trying to create to support Ambassador Khalilzad
7 and to move forward with the reconciliation process.

8 Senator Shaheen: I share the concerns that have been
9 raised by Senators Reed and Wicker about what is happening
10 right now in Afghanistan and particularly the framework that
11 is being put in place without the engagement of the Afghan
12 Government.

13 Can you tell me how the framework addresses the rights
14 of women in Afghanistan, given the horrific treatment by the
15 Taliban of women during the years in which they were in
16 control?

17 General Votel: Senator, I think that perhaps is a
18 question best posed for Ambassador Khalilzad at this
19 particular point. I do agree that the progress that has
20 been made in Afghanistan with women and improving their
21 ability to be part of the fabric of life in Afghanistan is
22 an important one that has to be incorporated in this, and I
23 would envision that this would be part of the more detailed
24 discussions that will take place between the Taliban and the
25 Government of Afghanistan. But certainly we acknowledge

1 that, and we see the goodness that that has brought to the
2 country of Afghanistan.

3 Senator Shaheen: And I would point out that we have
4 actually passed legislation in this Congress that says women
5 should be at the negotiating table when conflicts are being
6 resolved around the world. So is it your understanding that
7 that is a basis on which we are looking at negotiations?

8 General Votel: Certainly, again, as Ambassador
9 Khalilzad and our diplomats work with the Government of
10 Afghanistan on that, I would imagine they are emphasizing
11 that legislation.

12 Senator Shaheen: To move to Syria, there is the report
13 of a new DOD Inspector General report relative to ISIS. And
14 the report says that the command organization for ISIS is
15 intact, and its fighters are battle-hardened. That is a
16 quote from the report. And it goes on to say that within a
17 year, U.S. military commanders told the IG that ISIS would
18 be resurgent in Syria.

19 Can you talk about how we can prevent ISIS from
20 becoming resurgent if we have no troops in Syria and if Iran
21 and Russia and Assad are in control in Syria?

22 General Votel: Well, Senator, as I mentioned in my
23 opening comments, that is an aspect of the ongoing planning
24 that we are pursuing right now. The answer to the question
25 is that we do have to keep pressure on this network. It is

1 a resilient network. It does have certain components that
2 are still left in it. Although they are dispersed and
3 disaggregated, they have the capability of coming back
4 together if we do not. And so there are a variety of
5 different things that I would be happy to talk about, some
6 of the things under consideration as we get into the closed
7 session here. I will not speculate publicly here about
8 things that we might do, but there certainly are different
9 ways that we could do this working with partners, working
10 with our own capabilities to continue to keep pressure on
11 this network, which I think is absolutely vital.

12 Senator Shaheen: So you do agree with the Inspector
13 General that ISIS is a scourge that is latent in both Syria
14 and Iraq and it has the potential to resurge if not
15 addressed.

16 General Votel: I do agree.

17 Senator Shaheen: Thank you.

18 As I know you are aware, when we provide or sell U.S.
19 weapons to end users, there are requirements which prohibit
20 the transfer of any of those weapons to third parties
21 without prior authorization from the U.S. Government. In
22 legislation that we passed relative to Yemen, there are
23 requirements for us to certify how the Saudis are using
24 weapons. And so far, we have not gotten authoritative
25 certification of how those weapons are being used. And

1 there is, again, a recent CNN report that suggests that
2 weapons that have been provided to UAE and to Saudi Arabia
3 have wound up in the hands of Houthis, that they have been
4 traded and been used on both sides of that conflict.

5 Can you talk about what DOD is doing to address that?

6 General Votel: Well, Senator, I am aware of the
7 references that you are making to that. We have not
8 authorized Saudi Arabia or the Emirates to retransfer any of
9 this equipment to other parties on the ground in Yemen. And
10 as you are well aware, when we do provide equipment, whether
11 it comes government to government or commercially provided,
12 that the recipients do have to agree to certain stipulations
13 on the use of those. And we do have monitoring and
14 enforcement mechanisms that sometimes go through the
15 Department of State if it is commercially provided, through
16 the Department of Defense if it is government to government
17 provided and requires us to conduct surveys. It requires us
18 to conduct inventories of this type of equipment so we know
19 where it is. So there are processes in place with this.

20 I would also highlight that in some of these cases,
21 again, I think we have to look more closely at the
22 allegations in this particular situation to find out what
23 happened. As we have seen in Iraq in the past where we saw
24 our partners overrun, we have seen American equipment
25 provided to them lost in the course of a fight end up in the

1 hands of our adversaries out there. And so I think we will
2 have to examine that better.

3 But to your point of our responsibilities in terms of
4 ensuring proper end use of the materials, we absolutely get
5 that and emphasize that with our partners all the time.

6 Senator Shaheen: Thank you.

7 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

8 Senator Reed [presiding]: On behalf of the chairman,
9 let me recognize Senator Cotton.

10 Senator Cotton: Thank you, General, for appearing to
11 testify one last time. I know it breaks your heart that
12 this will be your last time to testify. Most importantly,
13 thank you for your many years of service and thanks to your
14 whole team for their service as well.

15 We have heard a lot about what might happen in the
16 future against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, but I do
17 not think we have heard yet just a simple answer about how
18 the fight is so going. So can you tell us how the fight is
19 going against the Islamic State right now?

20 General Votel: In Syria, as you know, we are focused
21 on completing the liberation of the physical caliphate.

22 Senator Cotton: Where in Syria are you doing that
23 right now?

24 General Votel: In the southern Euphrates Valley, up
25 against the border with Iraq right now. That fight is

1 progressing as we envisioned it. As I mentioned in my
2 opening comments, it is limited to a relatively small area.
3 It is very dense. It is dense urban terrain. And certainly
4 there is a lot of pressure on ISIS in there. The area is
5 laden with extreme explosive hazards that pose significant
6 threats to our partners on the ground. So they are having
7 to proceed very closely.

8 And I would add, Senator, that there is a civilian
9 component to this. There are families of fighters. There
10 are civilians left in the town. There are refugees that are
11 attempting to depart this area. So what we have seen, as we
12 have kind of closed into this last area here, is our Syrian
13 Democratic Force partners with coalition assistance moving
14 very deliberately, fully recognizing the situation on the
15 ground and making sure they do not exacerbate this any more
16 than it is. But we remain confident that we will finish
17 this aspect of it.

18 When we get done with this, we should expect that we
19 will do what you would remember as back clearance, going
20 back and reclearing areas, removing explosive hazards,
21 instituting local security, and then continuing to keep
22 pressure on the remnants of the network that have gone to
23 ground and are operating in a much more insurgent aspect.

24 In Iraq, that is the case. We do see ISIS operating in
25 a guerilla or an insurgent fashion. They are at a level

1 where, for the most part, the Iraqi Security Forces with the
2 assistance of the coalition are able to address those
3 threats. That will be important to continue to do that in
4 the future.

5 So in Iraq and Syria, that is where we are with the
6 current fight right now, Senator.

7 Senator Cotton: In Syria, I have heard it said that we
8 have taken back about 99 percent of what was once the
9 territorial caliphate. Is that number correct?

10 General Votel: That is right. We are down to about 20
11 square miles that they still control.

12 Senator Cotton: I have also heard estimates of about
13 20,000 to 30,000 Islamic State fighters remain. Do they
14 remain in that 1 percent of territory, or is that only a
15 fraction --

16 General Votel: No. Those fighters are geographically
17 dispersed across Syria, across the open areas of --

18 Senator Cotton: Just some are dug in in the defense in
19 that 1 percent. Others, as you say, are spread out
20 conducting insurgency or guerilla type attacks.

21 General Votel: There are 1,000 to 1,500 fighters that
22 are left down in this small area right now that we are
23 fighting over, but the remainder have dispersed and are
24 disaggregated in a variety of different areas and for the
25 most part have gone to ground.

1 Senator Cotton: In Iraq and very soon, we hope,
2 throughout Syria as well, as you talk about countering that
3 insurgency or the guerilla tactics, the back clearance,
4 could you give the American people a little bit of a sense
5 of what our troops in Iraq are doing? Is it more like the
6 Rangers that you once led, kicking down the doors and
7 shooting bad guys? Are we providing them intelligence,
8 logistic aerial support?

9 General Votel: The technique that we have used in both
10 Iraq and Syria is what we refer to as by, with, and through.
11 And we have relied on our partners, the Iraqi Security Force
12 and the Syrian Democratic Force, to do the fighting. And
13 our job has been to enable them with our fires, with our
14 ISR, with our advice. Sometimes we do employ our fighters
15 in support of them and directly engage the enemy, but our
16 people are not actually, as you suggest, kicking in doors in
17 this case.

18 By, with, and through puts the emphasis on our partners
19 to do this, and then we enable them with our capabilities to
20 do this. And this has been, I think, a very effective
21 approach over the last several years. I think in the end,
22 our partners own what is left behind. We do not. They own
23 it. They own the security. They own the responsibility for
24 this. This has been a different approach for us, but it is
25 one that I think has worked very well for us.

1 Senator Cotton: Thank you.

2 One final question about the implications for the
3 future. Syrian Democratic Forces currently are detaining
4 several hundred ISIS fighters. Is that correct?

5 General Votel: That is correct.

6 Senator Cotton: We will not get into any more details
7 in the open setting here about the exact numbers or
8 locations. But is it safe to assume that some of those are
9 what ISIS leaders would call just cannon fodder, troops to
10 be thrown into the maw, but some are like Khalid Sheikh
11 Mohammed, terrorist masterminds, or Ibrahim al Asiri, master
12 bomb makers, who pose a serious threat to the United States?

13 General Votel: I think that is accurate, Senator.
14 They come from all aspects of ISIS.

15 Senator Cotton: So what is going to happen to those
16 detainees, especially those extremely dangerous detainees,
17 in the future if the United States is not present in Syria?

18 General Votel: Well, Senator, for those that we kind
19 of characterize as foreign terrorist fighters, our focus
20 needs to be on returning them to the countries of origin.
21 And that is the work of our partners in the Department of
22 State, Department of Justice, and others who are working
23 with their counterparts in these countries of origin to make
24 sure they have the evidence, the details, and we can make
25 arrangements. Our responsibility at this time is to make

1 sure that the Syrian Democratic Forces continue to treat
2 detainees in accordance with our values, with the Law of
3 Armed Conflict, and then to facilitate the movement of these
4 fighters back to their countries.

5 Senator Cotton: Thank you, General. I hope we can do
6 that with most of them. I would observe there is a lot of
7 empty bed space at Guantanamo Bay.

8 Senator Reed: Thank you.

9 On behalf of Chairman Inhofe, let me recognize Senator
10 Heinrich.

11 Senator Heinrich: Welcome, General Votel.

12 A moment ago, in describing by, with, and through, you
13 mentioned partners left behind, and I want to ask about one
14 of those partners. As our troops withdraw from Syria, what
15 efforts are being made to ensure the safety and security of
16 our Kurdish allies?

17 General Votel: Well, certainly this is a key aspect of
18 the ongoing planning right now, Senator. Of the many tasks
19 that we have of defeating ISIS and withdrawing our forces,
20 certainly we add to that list the protection of Turkey and
21 making sure that they do not have threats that would emanate
22 from them and, I would say, the added task of making sure
23 that we protect those who have fought with us. And so a key
24 aspect of our ongoing planning efforts right now, both at
25 the diplomatic and military level, is to address that very

1 issue and make sure that those that have fought with us,
2 that have helped us accomplish mission are safeguarded as we
3 depart Syria.

4 Senator Heinrich: I agree with you that that should be
5 a priority. I am asking what are those specific plans.

6 General Votel: Senator, I think it would probably be
7 more appropriate for us to talk about what is under
8 consideration in a closed session right now. But we
9 certainly are looking at a variety of different options.

10 Senator Heinrich: I would be happy to do that.

11 I worry that there is a lot of lip service right now
12 about making good on our promises to the Kurds, and it seems
13 that we are short on plans. I hope that that is not
14 accurate. And I certainly hope that we have a plan for how
15 to deconflict Turkey and the Kurds because I think the
16 consequences could be morally terrible if we do not.

17 Do you believe that currently the efforts in this area
18 are adequate?

19 General Votel: I do right now. I think we have the
20 leadership up and down the chain of command both in the
21 Department of Defense and the Department of State fully
22 aligned in our approach as we work through what is arguably
23 a very complex problem here. But I think we are very well
24 aligned and we are very focused on exactly the challenge
25 that you have outlined, Senator.

1 Senator Heinrich: I look forward to hearing more about
2 that in a closed setting.

3 General Votel, on February 3rd, President Trump
4 announced that we would keep troops in Iraq to, quote, watch
5 over Iran. Has our military focus there shifted from ISIS
6 to Iran?

7 General Votel: It has not, Senator.

8 Senator Heinrich: Glad to hear that.

9 I am concerned with the response in Iraq. As you
10 probably know, Iraqi President Salih responded very quickly
11 saying that the President and the United States did not ask
12 Iraq about this. Are you at all concerned that Iraq will
13 now be skeptical of our motivations for being there, and how
14 will that perception affect our ability to relocate U.S.
15 troops from Syria to Iraq?

16 General Votel: Senator, this is not particularly
17 newfound. I think the Government of Iraq understands the
18 relationship or the view that we have on Iran and
19 understands our concerns with Iran and the variety of
20 destabilizing activities that they conduct around the
21 region. But having said that, our military mission on the
22 ground remains very focused on the reason that the
23 Government of Iraq asked us to come there, and that is
24 focusing on the defeat of ISIS and now preventing the
25 resurgence of that particular organization.

1 Senator Heinrich: Let me pivot just a little bit to
2 Russia. General Votel, as you know, on January 30th, Russia
3 pledged to support Iraq in its fight against ISIS in
4 preparation for the United States' withdrawal from Syria.
5 What is your current perception of Russian influence in
6 Iraq?

7 General Votel: I think right now, Russia has limited
8 influence right now in the country of Iraq.

9 Senator Heinrich: Do we have plans or a strategy for
10 maintaining -- for countering that Russian influence once
11 withdrawal from Syria is complete?

12 General Votel: Well, I do not have any specific
13 military tasks that are related to that, Senator. But what
14 I would highlight is that one of the most effective tools
15 that we have is being good, reliable partners on the ground,
16 and that is what we intend to do and that has always been
17 our approach with the country of Iraq, focused on what they
18 have asked us to do and then being very reliable partners to
19 them.

20 Senator Heinrich: Chairman, I am going to yield the
21 remainder of my time.

22 Senator Reed: Thank you, Senator Heinrich.

23 On behalf of Chairman Inhofe, Senator Scott, please.

24 Senator Scott: Thanks for all your hard work. Thank
25 you for your service.

1 I met the other day with some opposition leaders from
2 Syria, and while they expressed some concern about exactly
3 how the withdrawal would happen, they did ask what the
4 ability would be to do a no-fly zone afterwards which they
5 thought would have a positive impact of keeping Turkey in
6 place. Have you considered that as a doable?

7 General Votel: Again, we are looking at a variety of
8 options that I will be happy to talk about in a closed
9 session right here. I would not characterize what we are
10 looking at right now as a no-fly zone.

11 Senator Scott: Why do you believe Russia has continued
12 to be involved in Syria? What is their strategic advantage
13 for them to be involved? Is it just to cause problems for
14 us, or is there a strategic interest they have?

15 General Votel: Russia does have some long-term
16 interests that they have had in Syria that go back some
17 ways. But certainly part of their motivation is by making
18 sure they have warm water access into the Mediterranean and
19 the access that that provides. They are interested in
20 preserving that. They are interested in preserving a regime
21 that is friendly and supportive to their motives and
22 interests. And I also believe that they share an interest
23 in trying to subvert our influence and interests in the
24 region. And so I do think they see that as an opportunity
25 for them, and I think they are attempting to exploit that.

1 Senator Scott: After President Trump made the
2 announcement that we would do a withdrawal, have you seen
3 Turkey take different action on the ground? Is there
4 anything they are doing that causes you concern?

5 General Votel: Well, Senator, I think we probably can
6 talk a little bit more about that in the closed session.
7 But in general, what I would tell you is we have seen all
8 actors begin to posture themselves for what might come, and
9 we have seen that on all sides.

10 Senator Scott: Thank you.

11 I am finished, Senator Reed.

12 Senator Reed: Thank you, Senator Scott. We are not
13 used to such subtle and penetrating questions. So thank
14 you.

15 [Laughter.]

16 Senator Reed: Senator Jones, on behalf of Senator
17 Inhofe.

18 Senator Jones: Thank you, Senator Reed.

19 And thank you, General, for your service. I echo that
20 and also for all of the team that is behind you. I am well
21 aware that your success is only as good as the success of
22 those that serve with you. And I use that term
23 appropriately as opposed to the chain of command below you.
24 They serve with you. And I appreciate all the folks sitting
25 behind you and all of those that are still over there.

1 So I want to follow up briefly with kind of a question
2 that Senator Shaheen asked about the CNN report of our
3 military equipment somehow getting into the hands of others,
4 but I want to come at it in a little bit different way.

5 Last year, you stated that due to political
6 considerations, cost, or delivery speed, some of our
7 partners are seeking alternate sources of military equipment
8 from near-peer competitors like Russia and China. When our
9 partners go elsewhere, it reduces our interoperability and
10 challenges our ability to incorporate their contributions
11 into theater efforts.

12 I think it is critical that we align our practices with
13 what is necessary to achieve these goals, as you alluded to,
14 and we want our partners to come to us. Particularly I am
15 concerned when they are going to communist China, communist
16 Russia to get that because we are seeing around the world
17 the influence of those countries.

18 So my question is, does this challenge persist today,
19 and if so, could you please talk a little bit more about
20 those challenges or barriers that exist to our partners
21 coming to us for equipment and what steps you believe we
22 need to take in order to keep them coming to us rather than
23 communist Russia and communist China?

24 General Votel: Senator, thank you.

25 To some extent, they do continue to exist today. I

1 certainly recognize that our foreign military sales, foreign
2 military funding process must be a deliberative one. We
3 should make very deliberate decisions about the things that
4 we sell to people, and that has to go through a process.

5 I am concerned that the process is lengthy and is not
6 as responsive as our partners require on the ground. And so
7 I am very much in support of trying to look at how we make
8 those processes more responsive to the needs that they have
9 on the ground. I think we should always strive for that.
10 There are a lot of steps that we go through to provide
11 equipment to people. Some of them are within the Department
12 of Defense, some of them within the Department of State, and
13 certainly some over here in Congress. And so to the extent
14 that we can have a more rapid process to answer the
15 requirements of our partners, I think that would be
16 beneficial. In some cases, if we are not going to provide
17 things to them, we should be very honest with them up front
18 and tell them we are not going to. I think it is always
19 better to give them a yes or a no answer than it is to
20 string them along because I think that leads to more
21 frustration for our partners and it does cause them to go do
22 other things.

23 I also think a key part of this is our work on the
24 ground beforehand with our partners. This is within the
25 military here, is making sure that the things that they are

1 asking meet the needs of each of their countries in their
2 own defense. And we should try to steer them away from just
3 buying things that they cannot maintain, they cannot
4 sustain, they cannot man long term, and we should be focused
5 on the equipment that they can and equipment that can be
6 integrated with us and other partners in the region to
7 provide a more formidable deterrent effect or a defense, if
8 needed.

9 Senator Jones: Great. Thank you, sir.

10 So with regard to the Iran nuclear deal, it looks like
11 we are out. How will U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear
12 deal affect our posture in the CENTCOM area of
13 responsibility?

14 General Votel: Well, I do not know that withdrawal
15 from the Iran deal will specifically impact our posture.
16 Our posture will be more driven by the National Defense
17 Strategy than it will be by a decision to depart from the
18 JCPOA.

19 I would just add that as I look across the region, Iran
20 does continue to present concerns to me. It is the major
21 destabilizing factor in the region. And so while the
22 nuclear weapons program is one aspect of the threat that
23 they presented, their facilitation of ballistic missiles, of
24 unmanned aerial systems, of other lethal materials to their
25 proxies in Yemen, in Syria, in Iraq, other places here, I

1 think this should give us very, very significant cause.
2 Their continued efforts to exercise control over critical
3 waterways I think should give us continued cause here.

4 So Iran continues to present threats to us across the
5 region, and as we look at implementing the National Defense
6 Strategy -- and I agree with the focus on great power
7 competition -- my best advice back up through my chain of
8 command will be to ensure that we do retain sufficient
9 capabilities and sufficient response capabilities to deal
10 with the threats that remain in the CENTCOM area of
11 responsibility.

12 Senator Jones: Great. Well, thank you, sir. Thank
13 you very much.

14 Senator Reed: Thank you.

15 On behalf of Chairman Inhofe, Senator Hawley please.

16 Senator Hawley: Thank you very much.

17 General, thank you for being here. Thank you again for
18 your service.

19 I want to stay on that same topic about the National
20 Defense Strategy and Iran and just explore some of the
21 tensions that the National Defense Strategy creates for your
22 area of operation.

23 So can I just ask you, in your judgment, are we in a
24 position to remove, draw down forces, move forces from your
25 area of operation to Asia or Europe in accord with the

1 National Defense Strategy's priorities on great power
2 competition with China and Russia? Are we in a position to
3 do that and also engage, if necessary, Iran should that
4 nation provoke a conflict with us or should they continue to
5 accelerate further their uranium enrichment program?

6 General Votel: Senator, the National Defense Strategy
7 necessarily puts focus on the United States regaining its
8 competitive advantage against great powers, Russia and China
9 in this particular case. I agree with that, and we are
10 absolutely supportive of that from a CENTCOM standpoint.
11 And we do recognize that that will necessitate some change
12 in our posture in the region. And as we kind of go through
13 the discussions and the planning aspects of that with the
14 Joint Staff, with OSD, and certainly with the services, we
15 will seek to maintain the capabilities that we need to and
16 then ensure that we have the right response capabilities to
17 address threats as they present themselves in this area.

18 Senator Hawley: Let me just ask you a little bit more
19 about that. The National Defense Strategy calls for more
20 efficient ways of operating in the greater Middle East, in
21 your area of operational authority, the idea being again to
22 enable us to maintain the focus on Iran and terrorists there
23 and also to shift attention towards a great power conflict.

24 Can you tell me about your plans to make operations in
25 your area of responsibility more efficient? What does that

1 mean? What does that look like? Can you give us a tangible
2 sense of it?

3 General Votel: Certainly. So certainly one of the
4 areas where we can continue to be more efficient is in how
5 we operate along our seams, our bureaucratic combatant
6 commander seams. With me, I share a boundary with EUCOM to
7 the north. I share one with AFRICOM to the west, and with
8 INDOPACOM to the east. So I think it is extraordinarily
9 important as we look at managing resources that we look at
10 positioning and employing these resources in a way that they
11 can be of the maximum utility to multiple combatant
12 commands. And today we actually do that with some of our
13 resources in the region.

14 You might be aware, for example, that AFRICOM supports
15 us with basing that we require for our activities in the
16 Arabian Peninsula, and the resources that we have there
17 benefit both General Waldhauser in his command and they
18 benefit me. So I think there are some smarter ways of doing
19 this.

20 Certainly the Department's focus on dynamic force
21 employment where we exercise strategic predictability but
22 operational unpredictability I think is a good concept of
23 this where we are able to move resources in a more agile
24 fashion into areas where we see opportunities with this. I
25 think this is another area that we need to continue to focus

1 on.

2 Senator Hawley: In this same vein, we have heard some
3 and I have read some about light attack aircraft and
4 security force assistance brigades. Can you give me your
5 sense about the progress on those initiatives and what else
6 you might propose in that vein?

7 General Votel: So on both of those initiatives, the
8 security force assistance brigades -- you know, my service,
9 the Army, I think did us a significant service by
10 establishing this organization. What this essentially did
11 -- we talked about by, with, and through, but what this
12 really allowed us to do is it gave us a purpose-built
13 organization that was specifically focused on this type of
14 advising and the type of relationship we wanted to have with
15 our indigenous partners on the ground. And over the
16 deployment of the first security force assistance brigade
17 last year in Afghanistan, we saw significant improvement in
18 our ability to do that, a higher level of capability, a much
19 more focused organization, and I think we helped the Army
20 preserve its readiness frankly. We did not take a brigade,
21 break it apart just to pull the leaders out to do advise and
22 assist. We actually had a purpose-built organization that
23 did that. So I think this is a very positive thing.

24 The light attack aircraft. Being able to train our
25 partners in terms of employing those things I think reduces

1 the burden on us, and it provides self-sufficiency for them.
2 And it does it without creating a significant logistical
3 burden. So whether it is A-29's that we see with the
4 Lebanese armed forces or A-29's we see with the Afghan
5 security air force, these I think are good investments. In
6 both cases there, we have seen those resources be directly
7 responsible to their forces on the ground. It is nascent.
8 It is growing. We have to continue to support this, but I
9 think this is exactly the direction we need to go to really
10 enable our partners.

11 Senator Hawley: Last question. You are satisfied,
12 General. I mean, you think that those programs, for
13 example, are on track. You think that we are making good
14 progress in both of those initiatives.

15 General Votel: I do. I think both of those are
16 excellent programs.

17 Senator Hawley: Thank you very much.

18 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

19 Senator Reed: Thank you.

20 On behalf of Chairman Inhofe, Senator Peters, please.

21 Senator Peters: Thank you.

22 Thank you, General Votel. Thank you for your testimony
23 here today and your many years of distinguished service.

24 General, in your written testimony, you described
25 Jordan as, quote, one of our most committed partners in the

1 Middle East and one of the most critical voices of moderate
2 Islam in the region. Your testimony goes on to discuss the
3 role that Jordan plays in hosting over 750,000 refugees from
4 Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere and Jordan's contributions to the
5 fight against ISIS and Jordan's role in hosting Exercise
6 Eagle Lion, which includes nearly 2 dozen countries training
7 in the counterterrorism mission.

8 Today in the Senate, we are debating S. 1,
9 Strengthening America's Security in the Middle East. It
10 includes a United States-Jordan Defense Cooperation
11 Extension Act. The premise of the legislation is that
12 Jordan is playing a critical role in addressing the
13 humanitarian crisis in Syria and the fight against ISIS and,
14 therefore, extends our defense cooperation agreement.

15 Could you describe and talk a little bit more about the
16 contributions that Jordan is making, what are some of the
17 challenges Jordan faces in making these contributions, and
18 why this extension is important?

19 General Votel: Thank you, Senator. And I would just
20 share everything that you just said there about what a great
21 partner they are.

22 Certainly Jordan is not a rich country. So they face
23 economic challenges by virtue of where they are. His
24 Majesty is working through that aspect with his parliament
25 right now and with the international community, and I think

1 we should continue to be supportive of that.

2 As you have said, given the chance to say no, they say
3 yes every time to everything that we seek.

4 I would share with you, Senator, the last week I was in
5 Jordan. I had an opportunity to visit the border, up along
6 the border between Jordan and Syria, and I had an
7 opportunity to witness the investments that our country has
8 made in their border security initiatives: equipment,
9 training, command and control for this. And what I
10 witnessed there I think would make any Member of Congress
11 or, indeed, any American very proud to see. It was
12 extraordinarily professional. It was very effective. They
13 had very good situational awareness and understanding of
14 what was happening along their border, and everything that
15 they were doing was sustainable. And they have been doing
16 it for several years and with the prospect of continuing to
17 do it in the future. This is the kind of investments that
18 we need to be making in these very good partners right here
19 like Jordan.

20 Senator Peters: Thank you, General.

21 Today in this bill, it also includes the Caesar Syria
22 Civilian Protection Act. It is a bill named after a
23 defector from the Syrian army who shed light on Assad's
24 atrocities, revealing photographs of torture and significant
25 human rights abuses that I know you are very aware of. The

1 legislation imposes sanctions on individuals who support
2 Assad's regime in Syria by providing financial and material
3 or technological support. This includes sanctions on those
4 who provide aircraft or spare aircraft parts for military
5 purposes, sanctions on those who collaborate with
6 mercenaries, military contractors, paramilitary forces
7 operating on behalf of Syria, Russia, or Iran, and sanctions
8 those who help the Government of Syria maintain or expand
9 its production of natural gas and petroleum.

10 Your written testimony describes the Assad regime's use
11 of starvation as a weapon of war by denying humanitarian aid
12 to be delivered where it is critically needed.

13 So my question to you, General, is to what extent do
14 you believe that imposing additional sanctions on the Assad
15 regime, including limiting access to aircraft and aircraft
16 spare parts, will degrade Assad's ability to attack innocent
17 civilians and exert pressure in a positive direction towards
18 improving the horrible humanitarian situation that we have
19 there.

20 General Votel: Senator, my belief is history speaks
21 for itself here with the Assad regime, and we should
22 continue to keep the maximum amount of pressure on them to
23 prevent them from appropriating the atrocities that they
24 have in the past on their own people. So I am supportive of
25 all measures in that regard.

1 Senator Peters: The last question, General. Last
2 week, the committee held a hearing on the threats posed by
3 Russia and China. You have answered some questions related
4 to what we heard, as to how we need to have more efficient
5 use of resources in the Middle East. And what came up was
6 the possibility of a review of the use of aircraft like the
7 B-1 and the F-22 in Afghanistan where those platforms might
8 be better focused on dealing with our near-peer competitors.

9 So my question to you is -- I have worked to extend and
10 support A-10's operating and to make sure that they have the
11 wing replacements so that A-10 aircraft can continue to
12 operate. To what extent is the A-10 necessary for you to
13 conduct your mission in places particularly if we look at
14 moving B-1's and F-22's out of theater?

15 General Votel: Well, Senator, I do not think you are
16 going to find any Army guys or infantrymen that are going to
17 argue against the A-10. It is an incredibly responsive
18 capability that has, I think, served us extraordinarily well
19 in the past. I know it is an old airplane, and so I share
20 some concerns about its sustainability. But certainly it
21 has definitely proven its worth to us, and we will continue
22 to require that type of support, some type of very
23 responsive, close air support capability well into the
24 future.

25 Senator Peters: So you believe Congress should

1 continue to support that program in your estimation?

2 General Votel: I think we should continue to support
3 that program, and then we should be looking at other
4 programs that would provide those capabilities in the
5 future.

6 Senator Peters: Appreciate it. Thank you, General.

7 Chairman Inhofe [presiding]: Thank you, Senator
8 Peters.

9 Senator Rounds?

10 Senator Rounds: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

11 General, first of all, thank you for your service.
12 Thank you to your team as well.

13 The National Defense Strategy makes clear that the
14 Department's focus is preparing to deter and win, if
15 necessary, great power conflict with China and Russia. But
16 we have also got several partners in the region as I think
17 Senator Peters has just mentioned. Jordan is a great ally.
18 So is Israel.

19 Israel has reportedly agreed to allow a Chinese
20 Government-connected firm, Shanghai International Port
21 Group, to run commercial operations at the Israeli Port of
22 Haifa. This port reportedly periodically hosts joint U.S.-
23 Israeli naval drills and visits from American vessels. From
24 a U.S. military perspective, do you have concerns regarding
25 this deal? And if this deal goes forward, might it impact

1 decisions to have the U.S. Navy vessels visit the port?

2 General Votel: Senator, Israel resides outside of the
3 CENTCOM area of responsibility. So with regard to that,
4 General Scaparrotti would probably be the best one to answer
5 that question.

6 But I would share with you, as I look at the region in
7 which I do have military responsibilities, in the Gulf, in
8 and around the straits, particularly the Bab-el-Mandeb and
9 these areas, I am concerned about increasing presence of
10 Chinese maritime activity in the region and their continued
11 outreach to different partners there to secure military
12 access that is likely linked to their economic objectives,
13 their One Belt, One Road aspects that they propagate around
14 the world but, in particular, in the area in which I have
15 military responsibility. So I deeply share your concern.

16 The United States and a number of our partners have
17 long provided maritime security in this area. Frankly, I
18 think China has been a free rider in this and taken
19 advantage of that, and now we see them beginning to develop
20 their own infrastructure in here principally for their own
21 purposes, not for the purposes of broader regional security
22 in the region. And I am concerned about that.

23 Senator Rounds: In terms of how we separate out the
24 different areas of responsibility -- and I respect the fact
25 that you have specific areas. Most certainly activity

1 communication with our ally Israel is a part of that
2 responsibility, though. Can you share with regard to how
3 this impacts your ability and does it? Or is it simply a
4 matter of we are aware of it and we will allow other
5 individuals responsible in other areas of responsibility to
6 handle it?

7 General Votel: Senator, as I remarked earlier, we pay
8 particular attention to our bureaucratic, geographic seams
9 out here. And so General Scaparrotti and myself and our
10 respective staffs are very closely aligned with this. And
11 so with his support, we maintain a close relationship with
12 Israel. As we have recognized, many of their security
13 threats reside within the military area in which I have
14 responsibility. So I think this is another aspect of how we
15 cooperate across our combatant command boundaries here,
16 sharing responsibility. So I absolutely understand what you
17 are saying, and I am very confident that the mechanisms that
18 we have in place are helping us address the concerns that
19 all parties have in the region.

20 Senator Rounds: Let me go to another area of
21 bureaucracy. Much has been written and said about the need
22 to streamline DOD's acquisition processes. Can you comment
23 on the process and the amount of time that it takes to fill
24 validated requirements in the CENTCOM area of operations?
25 And do you believe that we must reform the acquisition

1 process to more quickly fill the urgent and operational
2 needs of our warfighters?

3 General Votel: Senator, I absolutely agree we should
4 continue to do everything that we can to address the needs
5 of the warfighters and try to do it as fast as we can. I am
6 aware of a number of initiatives that are underway to
7 address that, whether it is rapid prototyping or other
8 things that we can do. Our view in CENTCOM, as we confront
9 emerging threats here, is that we have tried to be
10 supportive of the services bringing in capabilities, trying
11 them out, recognizing some of these will fail. They will
12 not succeed the way they are. But in the hands of our
13 soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines on the ground, they
14 will begin to provide very direct feedback that will help
15 these programs move along quicker.

16 So from a CENTCOM standpoint, what we are principally
17 concerned about is making sure that we have a system in
18 place where we can bring things forward. We can rapidly
19 test them. We can get them in the hands of our people.
20 They can provide feedback. And that goes back into the
21 commercial or the industrial base. They make the
22 improvements and then bring us the improved product out
23 there that we can use. That to me is extraordinarily
24 important in an area like CENTCOM.

25 Senator Rounds: Thank you.

1 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

2 Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Rounds.

3 Senator King?

4 Senator King: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

5 General, were you aware of the President's intention to
6 order the withdrawal of our troops from Syria before that
7 was publicly announced?

8 General Votel: I was not aware of the specific
9 announcement. Certainly we are aware that he had expressed
10 a desire and intent in the past to depart Syria.

11 Senator King: So you were not consulted before that
12 decision was announced.

13 General Votel: We were not. I was not consulted.

14 Senator King: You mentioned in your testimony that --
15 you used the word "remnant" with regard to ISIS. Can you
16 give us a better number than remnant? What are we talking
17 about here? Senator Cotton mentioned 20,000 to 30,000
18 fighters scattered in various places around the world. Is
19 that accurate?

20 General Votel: I think that is approximately what the
21 intelligence community has estimated that is left behind. I
22 think we would generally share with that. That includes
23 people of a variety of different characters. It includes
24 fighters. It includes supporters. It includes facilitators
25 within that.

1 Senator King: How about in Syria and Iraq? What
2 number would you put that?

3 General Votel: I think in general from what I have
4 seen, that is about the number that I have seen.

5 Senator King: 20,000 to 30,000.

6 General Votel: Yes, but Senator, this is probably a
7 low to moderate confidence number.

8 Senator King: Is it a low estimate? I am sorry. You
9 threw me with that. Do you think it is a higher number?

10 General Votel: I think we do not fully know.

11 Senator King: You do not have a precise number.

12 General Votel: We do not have it with any specific
13 accuracy. So it is always going to be a range. The number
14 is always going to be a range.

15 Senator King: One of my concerns about the withdrawal
16 with that many ISIS fighters still in the area is that they
17 will just wait us out. The President announces a
18 withdrawal. The saying I have heard is the Americans have
19 the watches, but we have the time. Are they just going to
20 wait and hunker down for a couple years or a couple of
21 months and then resuscitate their efforts? If you were
22 their military commander, would that not be what you would
23 do, say these guys are leaving, we will just bide our time?

24 General Votel: Well, certainly, Senator. But our
25 approach here, as I mentioned in my opening comments, is as

1 we look to withdraw from Syria, we are in a very deliberate
2 planning process for how we will work with the international
3 community, with our partners on the ground with the rest of
4 the coalition to ensure that we can keep pressure on this
5 organization to prevent exactly what you are talking about.

6 Senator King: I think it is very important. And
7 perhaps you can share with the committee in closed session
8 what the strategy is for maintaining that pressure and how
9 success is defined that will allow us to withdraw.

10 Let me move on with regard to, again, the withdrawal.
11 Senator Heinrich mentioned the danger to the Kurds. I
12 sincerely hope that in your exit interview with your
13 successor, which will take place very soon if not already,
14 that you emphasize the importance of protecting the Kurds.
15 If they are slaughtered by the Turks within the reasonable
16 proximity of our leaving, it will be a stain on the honor of
17 this country that will persist not only in terms of honor
18 but also in terms of our ability to attract allies to assist
19 us in future projects of this kind. That is my biggest fear
20 about what is going on now, and I believe the Turks are
21 waiting.

22 General Votel: Senator, again, I think this is a key
23 task that we are looking at right now and that is the
24 protection of those who have fought valiantly with us and
25 ensuring that they remain safe as our diplomats and United

1 Nations and others pursue a political solution here in
2 Syria.

3 Senator King: I certainly hope that is of the highest
4 priority.

5 You mentioned Iran and listed a whole series of malign
6 activities in the region. Which would you prefer? The
7 current malign Iran or a malign Iran with nuclear weapons?

8 General Votel: Certainly I think an Iran with nuclear
9 weapons poses a more enduring and serious threat to us long
10 term. So our approach to them does need to make sure that
11 we deny all paths for them to get to a nuclear weapon.

12 Senator King: Well, unfortunately, we have just
13 abrogated an agreement that did just that, but we can
14 discuss that in another setting.

15 Final question on Afghanistan. I do not understand
16 that we are negotiating unilaterally with the Taliban and
17 not involving the Government of Afghanistan. I do not
18 understand how that is going to get us to a final result of
19 the Government of Afghanistan if we give away things they
20 are not willing to give away.

21 General Votel: Again, Senator, I think the way I would
22 characterize Ambassador Khalilzad's efforts is he is at the
23 beginning of process here to put together a framework that
24 will allow the Afghans and Taliban to come together at some
25 particular point to conduct some negotiations. All of this

1 is being done with the knowledge of the Government of
2 Afghanistan. They understand what he is doing. I cannot
3 speak for the exact process itself since that is Ambassador
4 Khalilzad's. But I do know that he is in frequent
5 consultation with the Government of Afghanistan to ensure
6 that they are best informed on the approaches that he is
7 taking to continue to get this framework in place.

8 Senator King: Good. I hope that is the case. Thank
9 you. I appreciate it. Thank you, General.

10 Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator King.

11 As a reminder, you made several references as to a
12 different setting for some of the answers to your questions.
13 We will be having a closed meeting at 2:15 in the Visitors
14 Center. So you have that opportunity.

15 Senator Sullivan?

16 Senator Sullivan: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

17 And, General, good to see you again. I want to thank
18 you and Sergeant Major for your outstanding service to our
19 nation and very, very much appreciated.

20 I wanted to dive in a little bit more. We have had
21 this discussion I think on both sides of this idea as we are
22 refining our force posture in the region, this notion of
23 having a robust counterterrorism force that can still focus
24 on U.S. interests, whether it is the rise of ISIS, whether
25 it is the rise again of Al Qaeda, whether it is the malign

1 activities of Iran. I think, unfortunately, some of my
2 colleagues like to look a blind eye. And I am going to ask
3 you a couple questions about that.

4 But what is that concept of -- you know, this is
5 something the President has talked about, but your
6 predecessor, a general who I happen to have a lot of respect
7 for, General Abizaid, has talked a lot about this idea of a
8 raid force component, robust CT element in the Middle East
9 that can continue to focus on our key strategic interests.
10 How would that work, and are you thinking through that,
11 whether it is in Iraq, whether it is in other parts of the
12 Middle East? And do we have the capability not only to go
13 after our counterterrorism goals but, say, for example,
14 control the airspace in northern Syria, which a number of us
15 think is important even if we are not on the ground there?

16 General Votel: Senator, I believe that we do, and we
17 are in fact thinking through the different ways that we
18 would continue to address our enduring concern about violent
19 extremist organizations operating in this region who harbor
20 interests in coming against the homeland.

21 Senator Sullivan: That is our overriding national
22 interest.

23 General Votel: It is. And as we look at all of the
24 activities that we are conducting across the region, I think
25 safeguarding that particular national interest has to be

1 among the very top things that we are doing. So there are a
2 variety of different approaches that we can take to this.
3 Certainly the by, with, and through approach using partners
4 on the ground, enabling them to keep pressure on them is one
5 way of doing this. In some instances, it may require us to
6 have some of our capabilities forward in different locations
7 to ensure that we can do that.

8 Senator Sullivan: And are we looking at those options
9 right now to make sure --

10 General Votel: We actually are looking at a variety of
11 different options for how we might address this.

12 Senator Sullivan: And are you confident we can address
13 this, not only given your role as CENTCOM Commander, but
14 your previous role as SOCOM Commander?

15 General Votel: I am supremely confident in both our
16 SOF and conventional forces in the ability to meet the
17 missions that our nation has in this area and in others.

18 Senator Sullivan: Let me talk about Iran a little bit.
19 You know, my colleague from Maine, who I consider a good
20 friend and deeply respect -- he mentioned the Iran nuclear
21 deal. The Iran nuclear deal essentially gave Iran the
22 freedom to be on the verge of becoming a nuclear nation
23 within 10 years anyway. So we always forget that. That is
24 a short time span in the Middle East. That was the
25 agreement.

1 You know, General Dempsey, when he was chairman of the
2 Joint Chiefs, testified in front of this committee that when
3 the Iranians were supplying -- the Quds Force and others
4 were supplying sophisticated IEDs to the Iraqi Shia
5 militias, they were responsible for the killing and wounding
6 of over 2,000 American soldiers, airmen, and marines. Do
7 you agree with that assessment?

8 General Votel: I do agree that Iran facilitated
9 equipment to organizations that caused casualties on
10 Americans.

11 Senator Sullivan: Massive casualties.

12 General Votel: Massive casualties.

13 Senator Sullivan: So it often gets forgotten that
14 Iranians were, in my view, directly responsible for killing
15 and wounding over 2,000 American soldiers and other military
16 members on the ground in Iraq. Is that not correct?

17 General Votel: That is correct, Senator.

18 Senator Sullivan: So the Iran nuclear deal -- one of
19 the big selling points was that it was going to moderate
20 Iranian activities. This was sold by Secretary of State
21 John Kerry and even President Obama. Have they moderated
22 their malign activities in Syria?

23 General Votel: Senator, they have not.

24 Senator Sullivan: No. It has gotten worse. Is that
25 not true, General?

1 General Votel: It is my observation that during the
2 time that the agreement was in place, we did not see a
3 modification to their behavior.

4 Senator Sullivan: How about with regard to Yemen? A
5 lot of my colleagues on both sides of the aisle forget who
6 started the war in Yemen. It was not the Saudis. Was it?

7 General Votel: Well --

8 Senator Sullivan: The Houthis backed by the Iranians?

9 General Votel: The Saudis were concerned about the
10 presence of an Iranian-backed organization along their
11 southern border.

12 Senator Sullivan: And with regard to Israel, they
13 certainly have not moderated their malign activities. Have
14 they? Iran?

15 General Votel: I think if you talk to the Israelis,
16 they certainly would agree with that.

17 Senator Sullivan: Let me ask one final question with
18 regard to -- Secretary Pompeo gave a speech in Cairo that
19 was laying out what I thought was a very well articulated,
20 robust counter-Iran strategy. How are you looking as the
21 CENTCOM Commander to execute this strategy, which I think is
22 one of the most important things we can be doing in the
23 Middle East?

24 General Votel: Well, Senator, I have responsibility
25 for helping put together the Department's global campaign,

1 the military global campaign plan for Iran. And so as I
2 look at that, I look at a variety of different things that
3 we have to do as part of that. We have to assure our
4 partners. We have to challenge Iran in the areas where they
5 are trying to exert their malign influence. We have to be
6 prepared to deter them. We have to be prepared to delay and
7 respond to their activities in the region. So as I look at
8 the planning that we are doing against that, those are the
9 types of things that I am trying to incorporate into a
10 comprehensive plan to address the threat of Iran.

11 Senator Sullivan: Thank you.

12 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

13 Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Sullivan.

14 Senator Duckworth?

15 Senator Duckworth: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

16 And thank you, General, for being here. I also want to
17 recognize that your Command Sergeant Major is here.

18 Sergeant Major Thetford, thank you for all of your years of
19 work as well on behalf of our nation.

20 General, I want to go back to -- there is a theme that
21 you have talked about a lot in terms of relationship
22 building and setting the groundwork with our partners
23 beforehand in the region and the like. You and I touched a
24 little bit on some of the programs that exist that allow us
25 to do that, to build these habitual relationships. I know

1 that the ranking member had talked about IMET programs.

2 I would like to touch on the State Partnership for
3 Peace programs. This is a program where, when I was
4 serving, from the time I was a second lieutenant, I had a
5 partner nation in Illinois' case, Poland, that we trained
6 and worked with. And so I grew up in the military along
7 with my Polish counterpart from being young second
8 lieutenants all the way up through our command time. And
9 that developed a relationship and an understanding of how
10 that worked.

11 Can you speak a little bit about the different types of
12 U.S.-funded military exchange programs that you see
13 implemented in the CENTCOM region? And talk about the
14 values of those programs contributing to our warfighting
15 capabilities.

16 General Votel: Thank you. And, Senator, let me just
17 start and talk about the State Partnership program. This is
18 an excellent program. We have four or five States that are
19 partnered with countries across our region, and in almost
20 every case, these are deeply valued programs by our partners
21 in the region and I believe by the States that orchestrate
22 them. We get a lot of benefit out of that, not just in the
23 countries in the region, but again by people from those
24 countries coming back to America to participate in exercises
25 to build the relationships back here. And I think this is

1 an extraordinary program. It is long-term. It is enduring,
2 and I think it serves us particularly well.

3 You have already talked about the impact of IMET. This
4 is an extraordinarily important program. I will not belabor
5 that.

6 I also think that the program of exercises that we
7 continue to orchestrate across the region are
8 extraordinarily important in terms of building
9 interoperability, in terms of building readiness, and in
10 terms of building reliability in our partners. And as we
11 have kind of continued to move forward, I think this will be
12 again continuing investments that we will want to make.

13 For example, with Egypt, we have restarted the Bright
14 Star exercise, but we have changed it more to deal with the
15 contemporary threats that we are dealing with and that Egypt
16 is dealing with in the terrorism realm as opposed to perhaps
17 the sweeping tank battles of the past. That is not what we
18 are doing.

19 So I think through our exercise programs, we have the
20 ability to make these very specific to the needs of the
21 region and address it.

22 I would add one final program that I think is
23 extraordinarily valuable, and it is our combined maritime
24 force where we invite different partners in the region, some
25 from outside of the region to come in and participate as

1 part of our combined maritime forces operating in the Gulf
2 and in the waters of the region. These are extraordinarily
3 important. And we see countries like Pakistan who step
4 forward, provide significant resources in this, and provide
5 leadership to these organizations. And this allows us to
6 make sure that we share the burden, we leverage the
7 capabilities that everybody brings, and it adds to a much
8 more collective approach to security in the region.

9 So those are just four key programs of probably several
10 others that could be discussed as well.

11 Senator Duckworth: Thank you, General.

12 That last point speaks a little bit to my logistical
13 officer heart. When I look at a map of the CENTCOM region,
14 I cannot help but wonder how your J-4 is able to transport
15 people, equipment, and supplies throughout the theater
16 especially in light of great power competition and the
17 changing environment as it is. It becomes even more salient
18 when I think about the potential for Iranians to close the
19 Strait of Hormuz and restrict movement in the Arabian Gulf.

20 Going back to the exercises you just mentioned, do you
21 regularly exercise against this threat, and how confident
22 are you that our logistical supply chain will not be gravely
23 impacted, should conflict with the Iranians escalate in the
24 region?

25 General Votel: Certainly we do. I mean, one of the

1 principal concerns we have is the mining of the straits and
2 the impact that that would have. And so we do regularly
3 exercise mining exercises and counter-mining exercises in
4 the maritime environment here. We have a big exercise
5 planned later this fall with a number of different countries
6 that will come in. But this is certainly something that we
7 are focused on.

8 You are really hitting on the resiliency of our
9 logistics networks in the region, and I do think that our
10 command, our components out there, and our partners have
11 really begun to address this. Certainly you are familiar
12 with the northern distribution network that kind of goes up
13 through the Central Asian states. That has been important
14 for us. We continue to exercise that. It certainly does
15 have some influence from Russia and that. It is a more
16 difficult network to orchestrate, but it is not impossible.
17 And we do continue to move materials across that area.

18 Across the Arabian Peninsula, we have what we refer to
19 as the Trans-Arabian Network that links a variety of ports
20 and cities and airports not only in the Arabian Gulf but
21 down in the Gulf of Oman and over to the Red Sea. It gives
22 us extreme resiliency in terms of how we can move material,
23 men, forces into the region to respond to capabilities.

24 So we are very much focused on that. And in fact, as
25 we look at implementing the National Defense Strategy, what

1 that might mean for CENTCOM, our focus on these logistic
2 networks and our ability to have agreements, basing, and
3 other things in here I think even become more important than
4 they already have. And we have tried to prioritize that and
5 we will continue to do that as we move forward.

6 Senator Duckworth: Thank you. Vitally important,
7 indeed.

8 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

9 Chairman Inhofe: Senator Ernst?

10 Senator Ernst: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

11 And first, Sergeant Major, thank you for your wonderful
12 years of service and commitment to our great United States.
13 We certainly appreciate that.

14 Major Votel -- Major Votel -- many years ago, a number
15 of your colleagues and your soldiers believed that you would
16 become a great leader. And I have to say, General, that
17 they were correct all those years ago. Thank you so much
18 for your wonderful service. I appreciate that.

19 One of our most effective resources for building
20 partnerships and capacity, while maintaining the pressure
21 that we have on those violent extremist organizations, is
22 done obviously through our special operators, and you are
23 intimately familiar with that. How do you see the role of
24 our special operators evolving across the CENTCOM AOR with
25 regard to counterterrorism and capacity building, as well as

1 the role more broadly nested within the National Defense
2 Strategy? If you can talk a little bit about that role, how
3 we are developing them.

4 General Votel: Thank you.

5 So, Senator, as you suggest, the special operations
6 forces will continue to play a key role in the CENTCOM area
7 of responsibility as we confront violent extremism here.
8 They have developed a level of expertise and proficiency in
9 this that is certainly unmatched anywhere else. And so we
10 will depend on that.

11 I would add this, that one of the things I am most
12 proud of as CENTCOM Commander and as a former SOCOM
13 Commander, is how well our special operations forces and our
14 conventional forces are integrated in the areas in which we
15 operate. In many cases, it is almost indistinguishable.
16 There is very little concern with who gets the credit or who
17 is calling the shots here. It is an extraordinarily
18 collaborative environment between all of our forces on the
19 ground.

20 And this will be essential as we move forward. As you
21 know, our special operations capabilities are limited. They
22 are in great demand not just in CENTCOM but in other areas.
23 And that will be brought out as we fully implement the
24 National Defense Strategy. So reliance on our conventional
25 forces beginning to do some of these things and to develop

1 the same methodologies that our special operators have
2 developed over the course of many years will become very,
3 very important as we move forward.

4 Senator Ernst: And, General, as we are drawing down
5 the number of troops that we have, whether it is Syria,
6 Afghanistan, elsewhere, we do continue to maintain train,
7 advise, assist, and at times accompany missions. And do you
8 see that continuing forward as a force multiplier with
9 partners in that region? And what more can we do in that
10 area?

11 General Votel: I do, Senator. I think this idea, by,
12 with and through, and focused on training, advising,
13 assisting, enabling our partners is a proven method for us,
14 and I think it works extraordinarily well in this particular
15 region. So I do see that moving forward.

16 Going forward, it will be important for us to maintain
17 these relationships. The relationships that we depend on in
18 this region are not those that can be put together in the
19 course of a crisis. They have to be developed and they have
20 to be nurtured over time. As Admiral McRaven often reminded
21 us when he was the SOCOM Commander, you cannot surge trust
22 in times of crisis. That has to be done in advance. And so
23 I think the lifeblood of what we do out here will be the
24 development of resilient, trustful relationships across our
25 region.

1 Senator Ernst: I appreciate that. And I appreciate
2 the comments made by my colleagues as well about the State
3 Partnership programs, the IMET programs, and so on. Those
4 are very, very important in developing that level of trust.

5 Just very briefly, because I am running out of time,
6 General, of course, we do have some other big players in the
7 region. We see Russia, of course, in Syria. We see China's
8 investments in Pakistan. And where else do you assess that
9 China and Russia are involved in that AOR, and what is the
10 extent of that and what are their intentions from your
11 perspective?

12 General Votel: Thanks.

13 Well, starting with Russia, certainly Russia has
14 extraordinary interests in the Central Asian states, these
15 being former Soviet republics. They maintain a long-term
16 relationship there. And so this will always continue to be
17 something that we will have to contend with in this
18 particular region. We have seen in the past Russia working
19 with countries like Egypt and others to potentially fill in
20 voids there. So we have to be mindful of those
21 relationships as well.

22 When you look at China, I think their motivations are
23 principally driven by their economic objectives, again
24 really driven by the One Belt, One Road approach that they
25 are taking to link trade routes back to China. And I think

1 the thing we have to continue to be watchful of us their
2 developing relationships with other partners across the
3 region, particularly in the maritime environment, in the
4 countries that are along the waterways in the region,
5 whether they are some of the Gulf states or whether they are
6 some that are on the African continent, but which certainly
7 give them very good access into the CENTCOM waters here.
8 These are the areas I think that we will have to pay
9 attention to in the future.

10 Senator Ernst: Absolutely. They have a long game, and
11 we do need to pay attention.

12 My time has expired, but General, my best to you and
13 your beautiful family. Thank you so very much.

14 General Votel: Thank you, Senator.

15 Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Ernst.

16 Senator Blumenthal?

17 Senator Blumenthal: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

18 I join my colleagues in thanking you for your service
19 and thanks for your very forthright and helpful answers
20 today.

21 I want to come back to a line of questioning that
22 Senator Reed began about the \$331 million that we are owed
23 by the Saudis for aerial refueling. Have we made a demand
24 to the Saudis that they pay that money?

25 General Votel: Senator, we have presented all those

1 bills to the Saudi-led coalition. They have them there, in
2 receipt of them. They acknowledge that. And we are working
3 through to ensure that the products that we have given to
4 them are -- they understand what that is and they will be
5 able to respond to us. They have given us every indication
6 that they intend to meet the requirements for reimbursement
7 that we have asked for.

8 Senator Blumenthal: There is no question in your mind,
9 is there, that that \$331 million is owed to our country?

10 General Votel: That is reimbursement for fuel that we
11 have provided for them, and it is reimbursement for the
12 flight hours associated with the aircraft that provided that
13 fuel.

14 Senator Blumenthal: When will they make that payment
15 of reimbursement?

16 General Votel: We expect that, in terms of the flying
17 hours -- bills have been presented to both Saudi Arabia and
18 to the Emirates -- for flying hours we will see responses as
19 early as March and then likely for the fuel, by the May time
20 frame. The ACSA requires that they provide reimbursement
21 within 90 days of notification.

22 Senator Blumenthal: These are U.S. taxpayer dollars
23 that they owe us, to put it most simply. Correct?

24 General Votel: Yes, Senator.

25 Senator Blumenthal: And you mentioned -- I may have

1 misheard you -- that there is the possibility of other
2 instances where they or other countries owe us for similar
3 kinds of expenses?

4 General Votel: I do not think we have identified any
5 other than that. I think the question was have we looked
6 more broadly across the region to ensure that we do not have
7 this problem with others, and we are in the process of doing
8 that, Senator.

9 Senator Blumenthal: You are reviewing --

10 General Votel: Exactly to make sure that we have not
11 had an oversight on this.

12 Senator Blumenthal: And have you found any indications
13 that there have been other failures to repay?

14 General Votel: I have not been notified of any thus
15 far, Senator.

16 Senator Blumenthal: I would like to ask you about the
17 special operators, and Senator Ernst asked you a number of
18 questions. Can they operate as effectively from bases in
19 Iraq as they can from where they are located now?

20 General Votel: Senator, I think our special operators
21 are extraordinarily capable. You know, in the beginning of
22 our operations in both Iraq and Syria, there was a time when
23 we did not have anybody on the ground, and yet we were able
24 to have a relationship with our partners on the ground in
25 Syria and we were able to do that from remote locations.

1 And we do that in other places. So they are extraordinarily
2 innovative, and so we will look at all options that we can
3 use here.

4 Senator Blumenthal: I guess my question, just to
5 rephrase it, was not whether they can operate at all, but
6 whether they can operate as effectively if they are based
7 remotely. Are they not more effective if they are, in
8 effect, in the combat area where they are supposed to
9 operate?

10 General Votel: Well, Senator, I would agree with you
11 that it is always best to be with your partner and to be
12 sharing everything that they are experiencing. So I think
13 that is optimum. But certainly I think we have demonstrated
14 in a variety of different areas here that through a remote
15 location, we can achieve the objectives that we are focused
16 on.

17 Senator Blumenthal: Well, knowing how skilled and
18 effective our special operators are, I have no doubt that
19 they can operate from very remote locations. But I take it
20 you would agree with me that the optimum situation, from the
21 standpoint of military impact, would be to have them
22 actually on the ground where they are supposed to do their
23 work.

24 General Votel: Yes, Senator, I would agree. I think
25 it is always best to be with your partners.

1 Senator Blumenthal: Thank you.

2 Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman.

3 Chairman Inhofe: Thanks very much, Senator Blumenthal.

4 Senator Perdue?

5 Senator Perdue: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

6 General, thank you for your career and dedication and
7 sacrifices. Sergeant Major, thank you for 38 years. Do not
8 ever think it was ever taken for granted. It will never be
9 forgotten. God bless you.

10 General, in your AOR, you have all five threats, if you
11 assume and believe that North Korea and Iran have a
12 particularly good relationship, in across at least three
13 domains, probably four domains. So the question I have is
14 relative to what China and Russia are doing longer term,
15 particularly as we think about our future in Afghanistan,
16 what China has done in the China-Pakistan economic corridor
17 is basically handcuffing Pakistan. As you said earlier,
18 Pakistan is a major player in determining the long-term
19 future of Afghanistan. I would argue that India, as well as
20 the Stans and other players in the region, are because of
21 the Pashtun problem. But this debt problem is up to -- I
22 think it is \$23 billion now. It could go to \$62 billion,
23 and there are \$90 billion committed there in that effort.
24 That is huge in terms of Pakistan.

25 What I am concerned about is what Pakistan is also

1 representing to China with regard to what China has done
2 with their BRI across that area. You just mentioned the
3 maritime interest with Gwadar and Hambantota. Hambantota is
4 just south of Colombo in Sri Lanka, and they have already
5 foreclosed on their partner there. It is a proprietary debt
6 situation. They have done the same thing in Gwadar and 31
7 other places around the coast of Africa. You just mentioned
8 that.

9 The question is, how are we as a military -- I
10 understand this is a diplomatic issue as well. How are you
11 in the military dealing with China's effort to develop this
12 string of pearls, particularly in the perspective that
13 Russia with Vladiky and Tartus, with China in Djibouti, in
14 this area as we consider our future in both Iraq, Syria, and
15 Afghanistan? How are we addressing that China and Russia
16 threat relative to their permanent strategy in that area as
17 it relates to our NDS?

18 General Votel: Thanks, Senator. I think you
19 highlighted a real challenge for us. I think as we look at
20 great power competition, I think we have to recognize -- and
21 I believe we do -- that the threat of Russia or that China
22 poses to us is not limited to a particular geographic area
23 but, in fact, it is global with these partners. So as we
24 look at our plans to compete with these partners to pursue
25 our national interests, we have to look in all areas where

1 we do this, to include the CENTCOM area of responsibility.
2 There will be things that we can do in CENTCOM that can
3 contribute to a broader campaign to compete with China and
4 Russia. And so I think as we look at this, we have to look
5 for opportunities where we can do that and how we integrate
6 into a broader plan.

7 More specifically though, what I would tell you -- I
8 think one of the most important things -- and I mentioned
9 this a little bit earlier -- for us to do is to continue to
10 be seen by our partners in the region as a valued partner.
11 You know, as I look at the recent Iraqi elections, I have
12 noted the presence of U.S. and coalition forces on the
13 ground was not an election issue there. And I think that is
14 because of the manner in which we presented ourselves. It
15 was the manner in which we conducted our activities there.
16 And so I think preserving our relationships and continuing
17 to be seen as reliable partners is perhaps one of the best
18 defenses that we have against the influence of great power
19 actors, particularly in the CENTCOM region. And to the
20 extent that we can continue to do that in the future, I
21 think that will continue to be a key factor in CENTCOM as we
22 move forward.

23 Senator Perdue: Well, I think after 17 years, we have
24 certainly earned that right, and I hope we will continue to
25 do that relative to getting our allies to help us in that

1 region. And specifically, you mentioned the parliament
2 there in Iraq.

3 I have a question about a specific garrison, the al-
4 Tanf Garrison in southern Syria. We have had a request from
5 Prime Minister Netanyahu to consider keeping a permanent
6 presence there because of where it is strategically located
7 on the supply route between Iran and Hezbollah. There is a
8 34-mile exclusion area there. What are the rules of
9 engagement that we currently have with our garrison there,
10 and is this currently being considered as a longer-term
11 installation?

12 General Votel: Well, this is a key part of the ongoing
13 planning that we have going here. So I will not comment
14 publicly about what we might do there. But we certainly
15 understand the impact of that.

16 Our reason for being at al-Tanf is principally driven
17 by our Defeat ISIS mission. That is what brought us there.
18 That is what kept us there. We continue to confront it. It
19 is located in an area where we do see routine traffic from
20 ISIS as they move from the middle of the Euphrates Valley to
21 the western part of the country. So it is a very good
22 operational location from that standpoint.

23 It does have the derivative value of being along a
24 principal line of access, line of communication that Iran
25 and her proxies would like to exploit. So while that is not

1 our mission, we do recognize the indirect impact that we
2 have with that.

3 And so as we move forward, Senator, the disposition of
4 al-Tanf will certainly be something that we will consider
5 very, very carefully as we look at our overall withdrawal
6 plans from Syria.

7 Senator Perdue: Thank you, sir.

8 Thank you.

9 Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Perdue.

10 Senator Warren?

11 Senator Warren: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

12 And thank you, General Votel, for being here. I
13 appreciated the chance to meet with you last week.

14 As you know, I have serious concerns about our support
15 to the Saudi-led coalition and its military campaign in
16 Yemen. And at a hearing like this last year, I asked you if
17 the U.S. Government knew where the coalition jets went and
18 what targets they bombed after receiving fuel from U.S.
19 tankers. And you said that CENTCOM does not track that
20 information.

21 In late December, the "New York Times" reported that
22 American military personnel assigned to the coalition's
23 headquarters in Saudi Arabia readily had access to a, quote,
24 database that detailed every air strike, warplane target,
25 munitions used, and a brief description of the attack. End

1 quote.

2 So let me just ask you, does this database exist?

3 General Votel: Today we do have a database that does
4 have that information, and we have the ability to see that.

5 Senator Warren: And CENTCOM has access to this
6 database?

7 General Votel: We do have access to it today.

8 Senator Warren: Okay. You know, this is troubling
9 information because it suggests that we could determine
10 retroactively if coalition warplanes that bombed civilians
11 did so with American assistance. You know, there is clear
12 evidence that we enable and support the Saudi-led coalition
13 in Yemen. Until recently, we refueled their jets. We
14 provide military advice and intelligence support. We
15 continue to sell them American-made bombs, bombs that public
16 reports indicate kill Yemeni civilians. We provide their
17 air force with sustainment and logistics support for their
18 American-made fighters.

19 So I am asking you questions. I want to ask some
20 questions about the details of the help we give the Saudis
21 because they continue to conduct bombing runs. They
22 continue to perpetuate one of the worst manmade humanitarian
23 disasters in the modern era. During this civil war, more
24 than 85,000 children under the age of 5 have starved to
25 death, and tens of thousands of civilians have been killed.

1 This military engagement is not authorized. We need to end
2 U.S. support for this war now.

3 So let me ask you about detainee abuse. Section 1274
4 of the fiscal year 2019 NDAA required the Secretary of
5 Defense to review whether members of the armed forces or
6 coalition partners of the U.S. abused or witnessed abuse of
7 detainees during operations in Yemen. DOD submitted this
8 report to Congress last month and in the unclassified
9 summary concluded that, quote, DOD has determined that DOD
10 personnel have neither observed nor been complicit in any
11 cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment of detainees in
12 Yemen. End quote.

13 Can you just say a brief word -- I just have a little
14 bit of time -- about how DOD reached this conclusion?

15 General Votel: We principally derived that based on
16 discussions and reports from the people that we do have on
17 the ground and what they have seen. We, obviously, take
18 this very seriously, Senator, and our individuals that are
19 in positions where they might see some of this are under the
20 obligation to report this. And I do routinely receive
21 reports, many of them unsubstantiated, not just linked to
22 Yemen but to other areas in which we operate where our
23 people have received a report of abuse and we have a
24 reporting mechanism for that. And so we do take that
25 extraordinarily seriously.

1 Senator Warren: Okay, but this report says neither
2 observed nor been complicit in any cruel, inhuman, or
3 degrading treatment.

4 The Associated Press, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty
5 International, and the United Nations all conducted their
6 own investigations and came to a very different conclusion.
7 They determined that our Emirati partners oversaw a network
8 of detention centers that regularly engaged in torture and
9 other abuse.

10 Now, does DOD find these independent investigations
11 credible?

12 General Votel: Well, we certainly take all of these
13 independent investigations seriously, Senator. But I think
14 what I am saying to you is that we have no observations of
15 our own from our people that have actually seen this.

16 Senator Warren: Fair enough. Then let me ask it this
17 way. Has DOD reached any conclusions about whether or not
18 our Emirati partners are engaging in detainee abuse when DOD
19 personnel are not present?

20 General Votel: I have not reached any kind of
21 conclusion that they are conducting these activities.
22 Certainly in our interaction with all of our partners, in
23 this conflict and across the region, we continue to
24 emphasize the obligations under the Law of Armed Conflict
25 and the proper detention and treatment of detainees across

1 the board.

2 Senator Warren: Well, I appreciate your walking me
3 through your assessment of these independent reports, but I
4 remain very concerned about abuses in the region. Turning a
5 blind eye is not acceptable, and I am going to keep asking
6 questions on this. Thank you.

7 General Votel: Senator, I am in receipt of your
8 letter, and we will provide a response to you. Thank you.

9 Senator Warren: Thank you.

10 Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Warren.

11 Senator Blackburn?

12 Senator Blackburn: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

13 And thank you, General, for your time and to your team
14 who is with you. We appreciate your service and your time.

15 I do have some questions I want to ask you this
16 afternoon when we are in closed session dealing with the NDS
17 and the competition with Russia and China and maintaining
18 the right balance in the Middle East, but also being aware
19 of the competition that is there. I think you are so right.
20 As you have said in your comments, this is something we
21 cannot lose sight of.

22 Let me go to Syria. I will tell you that I think the
23 administration really has sent some mixed messages about the
24 terms of U.S. withdrawal from Syria and whether there is
25 protection for the Syrian Kurds, whether there is the total

1 defeat of ISIS or the establishment of a safe zone with
2 Turkey, and what is a prerequisite.

3 Senator Duckworth and I just recently sent a letter
4 pertaining to the Kurds because Nashville has the largest
5 Kurdish population in the U.S. And it is for this reason,
6 in addition to their partnership in the global coalition to
7 defeat ISIS, that protection of the Kurds is very important
8 to me and to a lot of Tennesseans. And I believe that any
9 withdrawal from Syria must be conditions-based, and clearly
10 there has to be a plan to protect the Kurds. And any plan
11 to protect the Kurds must clearly outline our expectations
12 of Turkey.

13 So I would like to just hear from you. The withdrawal
14 from Syria -- is it calendar-based? Is it conditions-based?
15 If it is conditions-based, what are those conditions going
16 to be there on the ground? And what has been communicated
17 to the Turks, and what has been communicated to the Kurds?

18 General Votel: Thank you, Senator. And I look forward
19 to talking a little bit more about this with you in the
20 closed session.

21 But I would just say I do not consider this to be
22 either time-based or conditions-based. The fact is the
23 President made a decision and we are going to execute his
24 orders here to withdraw forces from Syria. And as we do
25 that, we are going to do that in a very deliberate manner.

1 We are going to do that in conjunction with our campaign
2 plan, and we are going to consider things like protection of
3 our partners, the Kurds. We are going to consider the
4 concerns that Turkey has along their border. And we are
5 going to consider how we keep pressure on ISIS. And all of
6 that is taking place right now. So I am not under pressure
7 to be out by a specific date, and I have not had any
8 specific conditions put upon me. I look at this as an
9 additional task within the confines of the current campaign
10 plan that we are operating, and that is how we are
11 approaching it.

12 Senator Blackburn: In the January 16th attack, we lost
13 a chief warrant officer, Jonathan Farmer, who was a Fort
14 Campbell soldier. I will tell you in Montgomery County,
15 Tennessee and Clarksville, Fort Campbell, it was noted with
16 great sorrow by so many that are there at the post.

17 And one of the questions that comes up from Tennesseans
18 who are involved in defense of our nation is did we
19 underestimate the power and the threat of ISIS in Syria.

20 General Votel: Senator, I do not think we do. I think
21 those of us who have had the opportunity to be involved in
22 this for a long time develop a respect for our enemies. We
23 do not agree with the things that they are doing, but we
24 certainly have to respect the capabilities that they bring.
25 And we have always recognized that ISIS is a savvy

1 organization and they will look for ways to harm us, to hurt
2 us in the conduct of our normal operations or certainly in
3 the conduct of operations that we have coming up as we get
4 ready to depart Syria. So I do not think we underestimate
5 their capabilities to exact a toll against us.

6 Senator Blackburn: I appreciate that.

7 I have got a couple of questions on Yemen. I will save
8 those for the afternoon. I yield back my time.

9 Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Blackburn.

10 Senator Kaine?

11 Senator Kaine: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

12 Mr. Chair, am I to interpret after 6 years on the
13 committee anything negative from the fact that I have been
14 moved to a chair without my own microphone?

15 [Laughter.]

16 Senator Kaine: General Votel, thank you for your great
17 service. You are a wonderful public servant, and we are
18 going to miss you on the committee.

19 I want to ask you about an interview that President
20 Trump gave on Face the Nation on February 3rd, a couple of
21 comments that he made dealing with Iran. He indicated one
22 of the reasons I want to keep it -- "it" referring to an
23 airbase in Iran -- is because I want to be looking a little
24 bit -- I am sorry -- an airbase in Iraq -- is because I want
25 to be looking a little bit at Iran because Iran is a real

1 problem. He was asked a question by Margaret Brennan. He
2 said, no, because I want to be able to watch Iran.

3 So I am on the Armed Services and the Foreign Relations
4 Committee, and I have not had a briefing either in open or
5 classified in either committee during my time in the Senate
6 suggesting that we are currently in Iraq primarily to watch
7 Iran. My understanding is that we are in Iraq right now to
8 help Iraq defeat ISIS. Is that your understanding as well?

9 General Votel: That is exactly my understanding,
10 Senator.

11 Senator Kaine: And as far as you know, there is not a
12 change in the definition of the mission, at least as far as
13 the Pentagon is concerned?

14 General Votel: I have no additional tasks that have
15 been given to me with regard to that.

16 Senator Kaine: If the U.S. were to change its
17 definition of the mission in Iraq to be a mission about
18 watching Iran, would it not be pretty important to have Iraq
19 agree that that would be the focus of the mission if we were
20 to be having troops in their country to carry out such a
21 mission?

22 General Votel: Senator, we are in Iraq at the
23 invitation of the government. So, yes, I agree.

24 Senator Kaine: And we were invited in in the summer of
25 2014 to help them defeat ISIS. Correct?

1 General Votel: That is right, Senator.

2 Senator Kaine: Mr. Chair, I would like to put into the
3 record an article from the "New York Times" this morning,
4 "Trump's Plan for U.S. Forces in Iraq Met with Unified
5 Rejection in Baghdad." General Votel mentioned that one of
6 the great things about the recent elections in Iraq was U.S.
7 presence was not a political issue, but the recent
8 statements of the President, quote, the problem for Mr.
9 Trump was that the unity was a collective rejection of his
10 proposal and added momentum to propose legislation that
11 could hamper American troops' ability to operate in Iraq. I
12 would like to put this in the record.

13 Chairman Inhofe: Without objection.

14 [The information follows:]

15 [COMMITTEE INSERT]

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1 Senator Kaine: Second, General Votel, President Trump
2 said as follows: I am going to trust the intelligence that
3 I am putting there, but I will say this. My intelligence
4 people, if they said, in fact, Iran is a wonderful
5 kindergarten, I disagree with them 100 percent.

6 Are you aware of a single U.S. intelligence official of
7 any position who has told President Trump that Iran is a
8 kindergarten?

9 General Votel: No, Senator, I am not aware of that.

10 Senator Kaine: Nor am I. I have been, again, on this
11 committee and the Foreign Relations. Over the last years,
12 we have heard open and classified testimony again and again
13 and again about dangers that Iran poses. We have not heard
14 a single intelligence official say Iran is a kindergarten.
15 We have had General Dunford and Secretary Mattis before us
16 saying that the Iran nuclear deal was in America's national
17 interests and that Iran was complying with the deal. The
18 House heard testimony in open session last week from a
19 variety of intelligence officials saying that Iran was still
20 complying with the nuclear deal that the United States
21 unilaterally withdrew from.

22 I worry -- and I am not asking you this question --
23 that the President hears testimony like that and equates it
24 with officials saying Iran is like a kindergarten, which I
25 find completely illogical.

1 Third, President Trump said this. When I came in as
2 President of the United States, my first year, I went to the
3 Pentagon 2 weeks after I came in, a short time after,
4 because I wanted to know what is going on with Iran. We
5 were in so many locations in the Middle East in huge
6 difficulty. Every single one of them was caused by the
7 number one terrorist nation in the world, which is Iran.

8 We did not go into Afghanistan with U.S. military
9 forces in 2001 because of Iran. Did we, General Votel?

10 General Votel: No, Senator, we did not.

11 Senator Kaine: We did not go into in Iraq in March of
12 2002 because of Iran. Did we, General Votel?

13 General Votel: We did not, Senator.

14 Senator Kaine: We did not go into Iraq in August of
15 2014 because of Iran. Did we, General Votel?

16 General Votel: We did not, Senator.

17 Senator Kaine: So in terms of where our troops are
18 positioned in the Middle East overwhelming now, there are
19 some in Syria also fighting ISIS, not Iran. The places
20 where U.S. troops are in your AOR -- we are not there
21 because of Iran.

22 And so when the President says this, we are in the
23 Middle East because of Iran, it causes me great concern.
24 Together with other statements made by this President, other
25 members of the administration, I worry that the President is

1 thinking about military action against Iran is something
2 that would be a good idea.

3 Let me just put this on the record. In the current
4 state of affairs, I think it would be a horrible idea. I
5 think it would be a horrible idea. In classified, I am
6 going to ask you a few questions about, A, what planning has
7 been done and what could potentially be a legal rationale
8 for such a thing. But to think that we are in the Middle
9 East because of Iran when in these three areas we are
10 clearly not there because of Iran causes me grave concern.

11 Thank you, Mr. Chair.

12 Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Kaine.

13 Senator McSally?

14 Senator McSally: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

15 Good to see you, General Votel. Thanks to you for your
16 service and your sacrifice over the years.

17 A very extensive testimony on a lot of issues. As
18 someone, like many of you and those with you today, who has
19 been to your region many times, six deployments in my time
20 in uniform, it is a very complex region, as you have talked
21 about. And I appreciate in your testimony with the National
22 Defense Strategy kind of bringing us back home as to why are
23 we there and what are our vital national interests in the
24 region because our longer-term threats per the NDS are more
25 of the great state competition and potential conflict.

1 But many of us -- many of you -- we have spent our
2 entire military careers deploying to the Middle East. Like
3 this is all we know. Right? This is all we know, is
4 dealing with Desert Storm and Northern Watch and Southern
5 Watch and then OEF and OIF. We have invested so much into
6 this, as you know, a lot of blood and treasure, a lot of
7 sacrifice.

8 And it is part of our nature I think to just give us a
9 little more time, just give us a little more resources and
10 we can fix the situation. And I am particularly thinking
11 about Afghanistan. It is just our nature -- right -- that
12 we want to just -- we are almost there. We are almost going
13 to have this where we want it to be.

14 But I think it is very important -- and I appreciate
15 that the administration and as you testified today -- we
16 kind of come back to what are we doing there. What are our
17 vital national interests in the Middle East? There has been
18 tremendous drain on our military over the last 30 years in
19 that region, and we got to get back to the core of we have
20 to make sure there is no safe haven for jihadists and
21 terrorists that are going to kill Americans, and we have got
22 to make sure that there is not a hostile power in the
23 region. That is in your testimony. Right?

24 So that is a generational fight against terrorism. It
25 started before us. It is going to continue on. We have got

1 to make sure there is no safe havens in all of these
2 countries. You squeeze them in one place, they will go to
3 another place. We will find them in other regions, as you
4 know. And then we want to make sure there is not a hostile
5 power, which is Iran right now.

6 So I just want to bring it kind of back home. And I
7 think it is hard for us, those who serve, because we are
8 like what are we doing there. We want to make sure -- we
9 got to build more schools. I think there have been a lot of
10 mistakes over the years. We got to build more schools in
11 America. We do not necessarily need to bring some of these
12 countries to be thriving 21st century democracies. We may
13 hope that happens for them, but that is not our vital
14 national interest. It is to keep America safe.

15 So as we are thinking of that and as you have testified
16 about that, when you look at Afghanistan and when you look
17 at still the safe haven they have in Pakistan -- last time I
18 was there, 3 years ago, there were 12 different terrorist
19 organizations there. Our military's hands were tied. They
20 were not able to go after a lot of the terrorist
21 organizations. How can we now, moving forward with
22 everything you have talked about today, in accordance with
23 the National Defense Strategy, make sure that we achieve
24 that mission in Afghanistan? And what does that look like
25 to keep America safe and focusing on our drawdown there

1 while we still make sure that we keep America safe and it is
2 not a safe haven for terrorism?

3 General Votel: Senator, thank you very much.

4 I think when I look at what winning or what prevailing
5 in Afghanistan looks like, it looks like two things to me.
6 It looks like a negotiated settlement, and it looks like
7 safeguarding our national interests. And I think as you
8 have very clearly said here, we have to stay focused on
9 those particular things. All our efforts at this point need
10 to be focused on those particular objectives and passed to
11 those objectives. And I think that is certainly my approach
12 on this, and I believe it is the approach of General Miller,
13 our commander on the ground as well, as we try to support
14 this.

15 And so I think the strategy that we have in place is
16 the right one focused on this. We have got to stay focused
17 on that. And I think we will meet our requirements if we
18 can get a negotiated settlement that addresses the
19 instability of that region, and we can continue to safeguard
20 our national interests.

21 Senator McSally: Great. Thanks.

22 And then on to Iran, again this is the largest state
23 sponsor of terror. This is the one that has malign activity
24 in the region, great destabilization, killing of American
25 troops. So what is the focus there as we are kind of,

1 again, keeping our eye on the ball of this region and the
2 National Defense Strategy? Because this is the biggest
3 threat. And you talked a lot about working with
4 partnerships, but what else can we do and what else are you
5 doing in order to counter that threat?

6 General Votel: Certainly I think one of the most
7 important things we do is continue to build partnerships and
8 begin to build interoperability across the region. You
9 know, whether we look at integrated air and missile defense
10 to ensure that we can address the increasing ballistic
11 missile capability that is coming out of Iran, that is an
12 important aspect that we do or whether we address maritime
13 security issues that allow not just the United States but
14 the countries of the region to better patrol their own
15 waters and prevent the movement of illicit goods and weapons
16 and other things through there, I think these are the types
17 of things that we can do. They are very attainable to us as
18 we move forward to not only optimize the capabilities that
19 we remain in place, but more importantly make sure that our
20 partners are bearing the burden and taking responsibility
21 for their own security as well.

22 Senator McSally: Exactly. Thanks.

23 I am out of time. I want to say I am grateful for
24 Senator Peters' statements about the A-10 warthog as well.
25 I do not think we should be using fifth generation fighters

1 to chase around jihadists on Mopeds. We got to make sure
2 that we have the right tools for that mission while we are
3 using our next generation to deal with the larger threats
4 that are out there. So I found a new wingman here for
5 fighting for the A-10.

6 Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate it. I yield back.

7 Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator.

8 We will recess the meeting till we get back together at
9 2:15. That is going to be in the Visitors Center, Room 217.
10 Thank you very much for a long meeting and for your answers.
11 So we will reconvene at 2:15 in the Visitors Center, and we
12 will recess this meeting. Thank you very much.

13 [Whereupon, at 11:42 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

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