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

U.S. Senate
Committee on Armed Services
Washington, D.C.

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

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

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

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

Welcome.

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

The Senate Armed Services Committee’s top priority is to ensure the effective implementation of the National Defense Strategy, which identifies competition with China and Russia as, quote, the central challenge to the United States’ prosperity and security. Clearly, we do not want to be the world’s policeman, but without any U.S. presence, our strategic competitors will rush to fill the void. We have seen this repeatedly in the Middle East. When we step away from partners, Russia steps in. When our military pulls
back, Russia pulls forward. When we do not enforce our redlines, Russia tries to create its own.

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

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

Senator Reed?
Senator Reed: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. And, General Votel, welcome back, which will likely be your last hearing before the committee. Let me thank you for 39 years of exemplary service to the nation. We owe you and your family an incredible debt of gratitude for the contributions you have made to our national security throughout your career, but especially during your leadership of the Joint Special Operations Command, the Special Operations Command, and now Central Command. So we sincerely thank you, General.

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

Each of these issues are relevant to current discussions about our military presence in Afghanistan and Syria. In addition to a complicated military situation, resolutions to broader stabilization, diplomatic, and
political challenges have been far more difficult to come by.

Bringing our troops home should always be our objective, but it must be done in a deliberate and well-thought-out manner in concert with our partners and allies. In the case of Syrian withdrawal, contradictory statements by the President, his National Security Advisor, and other administration officials have only served to underscore that this decision was anything but thoughtful and deliberate.

If public reports are accurate, the President may be about to make similar quick decisions with respect to Afghanistan.

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

We must also consider our allies and partners that have fought alongside us. As former Secretary Mattis said, “our strength as a nation is inexorably linked to the strength of our unique and comprehensive system of alliances and partnerships.” The allies and partners who joined us after 9/11 and have sacrificed with us in Afghanistan deserve to
be included in conversations with respect to the future of
the conflict.

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

The security and stability of key partners in the
region, most notably, Iraq, Israel, and Jordan, is bolstered
by our continued presence. While our deployed forces do not
have a military mission to counter Iran, I agree with our
military leaders that there is a derivative benefit
associated with their presence and the reassurance it
provides. We should not take these partners for granted.
If we were to withdraw precipitously from the region, we
would risk the reemergence of ISIS, squandering gains made
in Iraq, destabilizing Jordan and increasing the pressure on
King Abdullah, and allowing Iran and its proxies to become
further entrenched, thereby posing a greater threat to
Israel.
No one, myself included, is in favor of endless wars or indefinite deployments of U.S. troops to dangerous parts of the world. Far too often, we view the use of the U.S. military as the solution to every problem. I share the frustration of Americans that we have, thus far, been unable to fully achieve our foreign policy objectives in Afghanistan, Syria, and elsewhere.

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

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

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator Reed: So moved.
Senator Wicker: Second.

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

Senator Reed: So moved, Mr. Chairman.

Senator Wicker: Second.

Chairman Inhofe: All in favor, say aye.

[Chorus of ayes.]

Chairman Inhofe: Opposed, no?

[No response.]

Chairman Inhofe: The ayes have it.

All right. General Votel, you are recognized for your opening statements.
STATEMENT OF GENERAL JOSEPH L. VOTEL, USA, COMMANDER, UNITED STATES CENTRAL COMMAND

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

I am honored to be joined today by the CENTCOM senior enlisted leader, United States Army Command Sergeant Major Bill Thetford. Command Sergeant Major Thetford has been with me my entire tour at CENTCOM and for the 5 years we served together in other commands before that. He is the most experienced soldier in our outfit, and his support and steady leadership helped us navigate very treacherous waters over the years. He is representative of the people we have across this command and, indeed, throughout the armed forces of our nation. Command Sergeant Major Thetford and his wife Allie will retire after 38 years of service later this
spring, and our nation owes them an incredible debt of
gratitude. We could not have been served better.

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

In the final 2 weeks of 2018, CENTCOM supported the UN
Special Envoy in the establishment of a nascent ceasefire in
Yemen, enabled the efforts of the U.S. Special
Representative for Afghanistan, Reconciliation, began
planning for the orderly and professional withdrawal under
pressure of U.S. forces in Syria, while maintaining our coalitions efforts to support the Government of Iraq and the Iraqi Security Forces in addressing the remnants of ISIS in that country. We monitored and mitigated the unprofessional acts of Iranian naval forces in international waters and observed the professional, mature actions of the U.S.-advised Lebanese armed forces as they maintained stability along the border with Israel. Those 2 weeks were not an aberration for the command. They were business as usual, as they have been in CENTCOM nearly every day since its inception in the early 1980s.

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

In Syria and Iraq, the unrelenting work of the 79-member Defeat ISIS coalition, the determination and bravery of our Iraqi Security Force and Syrian Democratic Force partners, and the support of multiple international
government organizations has largely liberated the so-called physical caliphate of ISIS. An area of 34,000 square miles of territory which they once controlled is now reduced to an area less than 20 square miles. The successful partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Iraqi Security Forces was instrumental in these gains against ISIS.

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

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

Today in Yemen, a fragile ceasefire in the Port of Houdeidah is a promising, albeit challenging-to-implement
step demonstrating the willingness by both sides to negotiate, and which will, hopefully, allow the United Nations to expand efforts to end this humanitarian disaster. Towards this end, CENTCOM supports the international diplomatic efforts and the work of the UN Special Envoy to facilitate the peace process by providing advice and assistance and serving as an interlocutor through our trusted relationships in the region to help ensure transparency, cohesion, and positive momentum. We also remain steadfast in reminding the Saudi-led coalition partners of their obligations under the Law of Armed Conflict and ensuring that the fight in Yemen does not spread across the region sowing more instability and threatening critical infrastructure and U.S. lives and interests.

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

Let me conclude my remarks where I started with our people and their families. In an era of great change when we consistently ask our people to do more with less, the service and sacrifice of these men and women and their families in support of our nation is both humbling and inspirational. For over 17 years of sustained conflict across the CENTCOM area of responsibility, our soldiers,
sailors, airmen, marines, coast guardsmen, and civilians have answered the call with an unwavering commitment and devotion matched only by the families who support them. We could not have accomplished what we do without all of them, and they deserve the very best capabilities and support we can provide from weapons and communication systems to health care and housing. I ask for continued strong support from Congress and from the American people to provide our service men and women everything they need to accomplish their vital missions and lead healthy, fulfilling lives in continued service to our nation.

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

[The prepared statement of General Votel follows:]
Chairman Inhofe: Thank you very much, General Votel. I want to bring up three things that have grown into some controversy, and they should not have, and just very briefly get your opinion on that.

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

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

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

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

General Votel: I do, Chairman.

Chairman Inhofe: And what is being done to prevent ISIS from reemerging at this time?
General Votel: Well, we continue to work with our Iraqi Security Force partners and international coalition here to continue to keep pressure on ISIS, and we continue our efforts by, with, and through our partners in Syria and in some cases for them to keep pressure on ISIS as they continue to present threats to us. We should expect that they will attempt to attack us and continue to regenerate themselves, and we will continue to put pressure on them to prevent that.

Chairman Inhofe: Very good.

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

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

Chairman Inhofe: Yes. I appreciate that.

Then the third one has to do with the IMET program. I have always been very partial to that. Primarily my
activity has been in Africa. It has been so successful not
just in Africa but around the world that we see China and
Russia both, particularly China, trying to beat us to the
punch in the IMET program, recognizing that some of what are
middle officers are getting training in a country that they
are wed forever. We have seen this happen. But the thing
that is disturbing right now is China is starting to do the
same thing. So what do you see as far as the benefits of
IMET? And is China moving in on us?

General Votel: Thank you.

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

To your comments on IMET, I think IMET, International
Military Education Training, funding dollar for dollar is
perhaps one of the best tools that the Department of
Defense, Department of State can wield in building our
partnerships throughout the region. Typically the people
who take advantage of these resources and come to our
schools in the United States often rise to positions of
leadership in their countries. They do not forget the
experience they had in our military schools, and most
importantly, they do not forget the American people. And I
think this is an extraordinarily wise investment for us to
continue to make.
Chairman Inhofe: I sure agree with that. And you are probably aware that in Africa, China has invited at one meeting 50 of the leaders of the 52 nations in Africa to China, wining, dining, and all this trying to move in on that program. It is one we have to all be very sensitive to because they realize the benefits that we have received from that program.

Senator Reed?

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

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

[Laughter.]

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

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

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

General Votel: I do agree, Senator.
Senator Reed: And we are trying as an alternative approach to at least posit the idea that we can conduct air strikes from Iraq and we can have forces in Iraq. Is that the fallback position?

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

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

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

Senator Reed: Turning to Afghanistan, there are two major functions. One is train and equip the Afghan forces and counterterrorism. If we withdraw, presumably the first
elements that will go are the train and equip, and the last
elements would be counterterrorism because we have threats
in the region. Is that a fair summary of sort of the
process?

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

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

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

Senator Reed: Indeed, because I think one of the
things we provide with the presence is to a degree at least
the money is being spent appropriately. I think the
experience we have had elsewhere is if we just send money, it gets to places that we do not want it to go. Again, I think as you are withdrawing, this has to be a very, very careful thought out second order effects, third order effects. And indeed, the issue is not just -- it is such a complicated multinational, multifactor analysis. We have not yet gotten the Government of Afghanistan in the negotiations. They are still on the sidelines. That is correct?

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

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

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

Senator Reed: Just one quick question. We were able to identify through great staff work by both sides that the
Governments of Saudi Arabia and UAE owe the United States $331 million for refueling. Have you received a definite commitment that they are going to repay that money they owe us?

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

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

General Votel: We have, Senator.

Senator Reed: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Reed.

Senator Wicker?:

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

I want to enter into the record at this point, Mr. Chairman, an op-ed that appeared in the “Washington Post” on
January 29 by Ambassador Ryan Crocker, entitled “I Was Ambassador to Afghanistan. This Deal is a Surrender.”

Chairman Inhofe: Without objection.

[The information follows:]

[COMMITTEE INSERT]
Senator Wicker: General, thank you for your service. Just to follow up on a couple points that Senator Reed made. With regard to the $4 billion a year contribution, you are not quite sure that it would still be that amount, but it is close to that amount that we would still be obligated to pay. We would still need to contribute, and we would not have the oversight on the ground that we have now.

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

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

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

Senator Wicker: There has been a framework agreement.

General Votel: What I would describe -- his work is creating a framework for continuing discussions moving forward here. Ambassador Khalilzad’s efforts are done with the knowledge of the Government of Afghanistan. They are aware that we are doing this, and they have supported our efforts to get this process started. Ultimately, we need to get to a Taliban-Afghanistan discussion. Only they will be able to resolve the key issues involved in the dispute.
Senator Wicker: In the op-ed that I have entered into the record, Ambassador Crocker points out the framework was reached without the involvement of the Afghan Government. He goes on to say that the Taliban has said all along that it refuses to negotiate with the government, considering the government the illegitimate puppet of the United States occupation. His opinion is by acceding to this Taliban demand, we have ourselves de-legitimized the government we claim to support.

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

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

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

General Votel: That is my understanding, Senator.
Senator Wicker: And then the Ambassador concludes. President Barack Obama proved in Iraq that the United States cannot end a war by withdrawing its forces. The battle space is simply left to our adversaries.

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

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

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

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

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

Thank you, sir.

Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Wicker.

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

Senator Shaheen?

Senator Shaheen: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

So have you and General Miller been given conditions whereby we should withdraw troops from Afghanistan? And if
so, what are those conditions?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

General Votel: Well, Senator, as I mentioned in my
opening comments, that is an aspect of the ongoing planning
that we are pursuing right now. The answer to the question
is that we do have to keep pressure on this network. It is
a resilient network. It does have certain components that are still left in it. Although they are dispersed and disaggregated, they have the capability of coming back together if we do not. And so there are a variety of different things that I would be happy to talk about, some of the things under consideration as we get into the closed session here. I will not speculate publicly here about things that we might do, but there certainly are different ways that we could do this working with partners, working with our own capabilities to continue to keep pressure on this network, which I think is absolutely vital.

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

General Votel: I do agree.

Senator Shaheen: Thank you.

As I know you are aware, when we provide or sell U.S. weapons to end users, there are requirements which prohibit the transfer of any of those weapons to third parties without prior authorization from the U.S. Government. In legislation that we passed relative to Yemen, there are requirements for us to certify how the Saudis are using weapons. And so far, we have not gotten authoritative certification of how those weapons are being used. And
there is, again, a recent CNN report that suggests that weapons that have been provided to UAE and to Saudi Arabia have wound up in the hands of Houthis, that they have been traded and been used on both sides of that conflict.

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

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

I would also highlight that in some of these cases, again, I think we have to look more closely at the allegations in this particular situation to find out what happened. As we have seen in Iraq in the past where we saw our partners overrun, we have seen American equipment provided to them lost in the course of a fight end up in the
hands of our adversaries out there. And so I think we will have to examine that better.

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

Senator Shaheen: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

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

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

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

General Votel: In the southern Euphrates Valley, up against the border with Iraq right now. That fight is
progressing as we envisioned it. As I mentioned in my opening comments, it is limited to a relatively small area. It is very dense. It is dense urban terrain. And certainly there is a lot of pressure on ISIS in there. The area is laden with extreme explosive hazards that pose significant threats to our partners on the ground. So they are having to proceed very closely.

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

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

In Iraq, that is the case. We do see ISIS operating in a guerilla or an insurgent fashion. They are at a level
where, for the most part, the Iraqi Security Forces with the assistance of the coalition are able to address those threats. That will be important to continue to do that in the future.

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

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

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

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

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

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

General Votel: There are 1,000 to 1,500 fighters that are left down in this small area right now that we are fighting over, but the remainder have dispersed and are disaggregated in a variety of different areas and for the most part have gone to ground.
Senator Cotton: In Iraq and very soon, we hope, throughout Syria as well, as you talk about countering that insurgency or the guerilla tactics, the back clearance, could you give the American people a little bit of a sense of what our troops in Iraq are doing? Is it more like the Rangers that you once led, kicking down the doors and shooting bad guys? Are we providing them intelligence, logistic aerial support?

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

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

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

General Votel: That is correct.

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

General Votel: I think that is accurate, Senator.

They come from all aspects of ISIS.

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

General Votel: Well, Senator, for those that we kind of characterize as foreign terrorist fighters, our focus needs to be on returning them to the countries of origin. And that is the work of our partners in the Department of State, Department of Justice, and others who are working with their counterparts in these countries of origin to make sure they have the evidence, the details, and we can make arrangements. Our responsibility at this time is to make
sure that the Syrian Democratic Forces continue to treat
detainees in accordance with our values, with the Law of
Armed Conflict, and then to facilitate the movement of these
fighters back to their countries.

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

Senator Reed: Thank you.

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

Senator Heinrich: Welcome, General Votel.

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

General Votel: Well, certainly this is a key aspect of
the ongoing planning right now, Senator. Of the many tasks
that we have of defeating ISIS and withdrawing our forces,
certainly we add to that list the protection of Turkey and
making sure that they do not have threats that would emanate
from them and, I would say, the added task of making sure
that we protect those who have fought with us. And so a key
aspect of our ongoing planning efforts right now, both at
the diplomatic and military level, is to address that very
issue and make sure that those that have fought with us, 
that have helped us accomplish mission are safeguarded as we 
depart Syria.

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

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

Senator Heinrich: I would be happy to do that.

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

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

General Votel: I do right now. I think we have the 
leadership up and down the chain of command both in the 
Department of Defense and the Department of State fully 
aligned in our approach as we work through what is arguably 
a very complex problem here. But I think we are very well 
aligned and we are very focused on exactly the challenge 
that you have outlined, Senator.
Senator Heinrich: I look forward to hearing more about that in a closed setting.

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

General Votel: It has not, Senator.

Senator Heinrich: Glad to hear that.

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

General Votel: Senator, this is not particularly newfound. I think the Government of Iraq understands the relationship or the view that we have on Iran and understands our concerns with Iran and the variety of destabilizing activities that they conduct around the region. But having said that, our military mission on the ground remains very focused on the reason that the Government of Iraq asked us to come there, and that is focusing on the defeat of ISIS and now preventing the resurgence of that particular organization.
Senator Heinrich: Let me pivot just a little bit to Russia. General Votel, as you know, on January 30th, Russia pledged to support Iraq in its fight against ISIS in preparation for the United States’ withdrawal from Syria. What is your current perception of Russian influence in Iraq?

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

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

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

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

Senator Reed: Thank you, Senator Heinrich.

On behalf of Chairman Inhofe, Senator Scott, please.

Senator Scott: Thanks for all your hard work. Thank you for your service.
I met the other day with some opposition leaders from Syria, and while they expressed some concern about exactly how the withdrawal would happen, they did ask what the ability would be to do a no-fly zone afterwards which they thought would have a positive impact of keeping Turkey in place. Have you considered that as a doable?

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

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

General Votel: Russia does have some long-term interests that they have had in Syria that go back some ways. But certainly part of their motivation is by making sure they have warm water access into the Mediterranean and the access that that provides. They are interested in preserving that. They are interested in preserving a regime that is friendly and supportive to their motives and interests. And I also believe that they share an interest in trying to subvert our influence and interests in the region. And so I do think they see that as an opportunity for them, and I think they are attempting to exploit that.
Senator Scott: After President Trump made the announcement that we would do a withdrawal, have you seen Turkey take different action on the ground? Is there anything they are doing that causes you concern?

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

Senator Scott: Thank you.

I am finished, Senator Reed.

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

[Laughter.]

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

Senator Jones: Thank you, Senator Reed.

And thank you, General, for your service. I echo that and also for all of the team that is behind you. I am well aware that your success is only as good as the success of those that serve with you. And I use that term appropriately as opposed to the chain of command below you. They serve with you. And I appreciate all the folks sitting behind you and all of those that are still over there.
So I want to follow up briefly with kind of a question that Senator Shaheen asked about the CNN report of our military equipment somehow getting into the hands of others, but I want to come at it in a little bit different way. Last year, you stated that due to political considerations, cost, or delivery speed, some of our partners are seeking alternate sources of military equipment from near-peer competitors like Russia and China. When our partners go elsewhere, it reduces our interoperability and challenges our ability to incorporate their contributions into theater efforts.

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

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

General Votel: Senator, thank you.

To some extent, they do continue to exist today. I
certainly recognize that our foreign military sales, foreign military funding process must be a deliberative one. We should make very deliberate decisions about the things that we sell to people, and that has to go through a process.

I am concerned that the process is lengthy and is not as responsive as our partners require on the ground. And so I am very much in support of trying to look at how we make those processes more responsive to the needs that they have on the ground. I think we should always strive for that.

There are a lot of steps that we go through to provide equipment to people. Some of them are within the Department of Defense, some of them within the Department of State, and certainly some over here in Congress. And so to the extent that we can have a more rapid process to answer the requirements of our partners, I think that would be beneficial. In some cases, if we are not going to provide things to them, we should be very honest with them up front and tell them we are not going to. I think it is always better to give them a yes or a no answer than it is to string them along because I think that leads to more frustration for our partners and it does cause them to go do other things.

I also think a key part of this is our work on the ground beforehand with our partners. This is within the military here, is making sure that the things that they are
asking meet the needs of each of their countries in their own defense. And we should try to steer them away from just buying things that they cannot maintain, they cannot sustain, they cannot man long term, and we should be focused on the equipment that they can and equipment that can be integrated with us and other partners in the region to provide a more formidable deterrent effect or a defense, if needed.

Senator Jones: Great. Thank you, sir.

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

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

I would just add that as I look across the region, Iran does continue to present concerns to me. It is the major destabilizing factor in the region. And so while the nuclear weapons program is one aspect of the threat that they presented, their facilitation of ballistic missiles, of unmanned aerial systems, of other lethal materials to their proxies in Yemen, in Syria, in Iraq, other places here, I
think this should give us very, very significant cause. Their continued efforts to exercise control over critical waterways I think should give us continued cause here. So Iran continues to present threats to us across the region, and as we look at implementing the National Defense Strategy -- and I agree with the focus on great power competition -- my best advice back up through my chain of command will be to ensure that we do retain sufficient capabilities and sufficient response capabilities to deal with the threats that remain in the CENTCOM area of responsibility.

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

Senator Reed: Thank you.

On behalf of Chairman Inhofe, Senator Hawley please.

Senator Hawley: Thank you very much.

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

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

So can I just ask you, in your judgment, are we in a position to remove, draw down forces, move forces from your area of operation to Asia or Europe in accord with the
National Defense Strategy’s priorities on great power competition with China and Russia? Are we in a position to do that and also engage, if necessary, Iran should that nation provoke a conflict with us or should they continue to accelerate further their uranium enrichment program?

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

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

Can you tell me about your plans to make operations in your area of responsibility more efficient? What does that
mean? What does that look like? Can you give us a tangible sense of it?

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

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

Certainly the Department’s focus on dynamic force employment where we exercise strategic predictability but operational unpredictability I think is a good concept of this where we are able to move resources in a more agile fashion into areas where we see opportunities with this. I think this is another area that we need to continue to focus
Senator Hawley: In this same vein, we have heard some and I have read some about light attack aircraft and security force assistance brigades. Can you give me your sense about the progress on those initiatives and what else you might propose in that vein?

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

The light attack aircraft. Being able to train our partners in terms of employing those things I think reduces
the burden on us, and it provides self-sufficiency for them. And it does it without creating a significant logistical burden. So whether it is A-29’s that we see with the Lebanese armed forces or A-29’s we see with the Afghan security air force, these I think are good investments. In both cases there, we have seen those resources be directly responsible to their forces on the ground. It is nascent. It is growing. We have to continue to support this, but I think this is exactly the direction we need to go to really enable our partners.

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

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

Senator Hawley: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator Reed: Thank you.

On behalf of Chairman Inhofe, Senator Peters, please.

Senator Peters: Thank you.

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

General, in your written testimony, you described Jordan as, quote, one of our most committed partners in the
Middle East and one of the most critical voices of moderate Islam in the region. Your testimony goes on to discuss the role that Jordan plays in hosting over 750,000 refugees from Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere and Jordan’s contributions to the fight against ISIS and Jordan’s role in hosting Exercise Eagle Lion, which includes nearly 2 dozen countries training in the counterterrorism mission.

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

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

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

Certainly Jordan is not a rich country. So they face economic challenges by virtue of where they are. His Majesty is working through that aspect with his parliament right now and with the international community, and I think
we should continue to be supportive of that.

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

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

Senator Peters: Thank you, General.

Today in this bill, it also includes the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act. It is a bill named after a defector from the Syrian army who shed light on Assad’s atrocities, revealing photographs of torture and significant human rights abuses that I know you are very aware of. The
legislation imposes sanctions on individuals who support Assad’s regime in Syria by providing financial and material or technological support. This includes sanctions on those who provide aircraft or spare aircraft parts for military purposes, sanctions on those who collaborate with mercenaries, military contractors, paramilitary forces operating on behalf of Syria, Russia, or Iran, and sanctions those who help the Government of Syria maintain or expand its production of natural gas and petroleum.

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

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

General Votel: Senator, my belief is history speaks for itself here with the Assad regime, and we should continue to keep the maximum amount of pressure on them to prevent them from appropriating the atrocities that they have in the past on their own people. So I am supportive of all measures in that regard.
Senator Peters: The last question, General. Last week, the committee held a hearing on the threats posed by Russia and China. You have answered some questions related to what we heard, as to how we need to have more efficient use of resources in the Middle East. And what came up was the possibility of a review of the use of aircraft like the B-1 and the F-22 in Afghanistan where those platforms might be better focused on dealing with our near-peer competitors.

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

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

Senator Peters: So you believe Congress should
continue to support that program in your estimation?

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

Senator Peters: Appreciate it. Thank you, General.

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

Senator Rounds?

Senator Rounds: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General, first of all, thank you for your service.

Thank you to your team as well.

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

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

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

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

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

Senator Rounds: In terms of how we separate out the different areas of responsibility -- and I respect the fact that you have specific areas. Most certainly activity
communication with our ally Israel is a part of that responsibility, though. Can you share with regard to how this impacts your ability and does it? Or is it simply a matter of we are aware of it and we will allow other individuals responsible in other areas of responsibility to handle it?

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

     Senator Rounds: Let me go to another area of bureaucracy. Much has been written and said about the need to streamline DOD’s acquisition processes. Can you comment on the process and the amount of time that it takes to fill validated requirements in the CENTCOM area of operations? And do you believe that we must reform the acquisition
process to more quickly fill the urgent and operational needs of our warfighters?

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

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

Senator Rounds: Thank you.
Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Rounds.

Senator King?

Senator King: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

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

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

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

General Votel: I think that is approximately what the intelligence community has estimated that is left behind. I think we would generally share with that. That includes people of a variety of different characters. It includes fighters. It includes supporters. It includes facilitators within that.
Senator King: How about in Syria and Iraq? What number would you put that?

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

Senator King: 20,000 to 30,000.

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

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

General Votel: I think we do not fully know.

Senator King: You do not have a precise number.

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

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

General Votel: Well, certainly, Senator. But our approach here, as I mentioned in my opening comments, is as
we look to withdraw from Syria, we are in a very deliberate planning process for how we will work with the international community, with our partners on the ground with the rest of the coalition to ensure that we can keep pressure on this organization to prevent exactly what you are talking about.

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

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

General Votel: Senator, again, I think this is a key task that we are looking at right now and that is the protection of those who have fought valiantly with us and ensuring that they remain safe as our diplomats and United
Nations and others pursue a political solution here in Syria.

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

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

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

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

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

General Votel: Again, Senator, I think the way I would characterize Ambassador Khalilzad’s efforts is he is at the beginning of process here to put together a framework that will allow the Afghans and Taliban to come together at some particular point to conduct some negotiations. All of this
is being done with the knowledge of the Government of Afghanistan. They understand what he is doing. I cannot speak for the exact process itself since that is Ambassador Khalilzad’s. But I do know that he is in frequent consultation with the Government of Afghanistan to ensure that they are best informed on the approaches that he is taking to continue to get this framework in place.

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

Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator King.

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

Senator Sullivan?

Senator Sullivan: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

I wanted to dive in a little bit more. We have had this discussion I think on both sides of this idea as we are refining our force posture in the region, this notion of having a robust counterterrorism force that can still focus on U.S. interests, whether it is the rise of ISIS, whether it is the rise again of Al Qaeda, whether it is the malign
activities of Iran. I think, unfortunately, some of my colleagues like to look a blind eye. And I am going to ask you a couple questions about that.

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

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

Senator Sullivan: That is our overriding national interest.

General Votel: It is. And as we look at all of the activities that we are conducting across the region, I think safeguarding that particular national interest has to be
among the very top things that we are doing. So there are a variety of different approaches that we can take to this. Certainly the by, with, and through approach using partners on the ground, enabling them to keep pressure on them is one way of doing this. In some instances, it may require us to have some or our capabilities forward in different locations to ensure that we can do that.

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

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

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

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

Senator Sullivan: Let me talk about Iran a little bit. You know, my colleague from Maine, who I consider a good friend and deeply respect -- he mentioned the Iran nuclear deal. The Iran nuclear deal essentially gave Iran the freedom to be on the verge of becoming a nuclear nation within 10 years anyway. So we always forget that. That is a short time span in the Middle East. That was the agreement.
You know, General Dempsey, when he was chairman of the Joint Chiefs, testified in front of this committee that when the Iranians were supplying -- the Quds Force and others were supplying sophisticated IEDs to the Iraqi Shia militias, they were responsible for the killing and wounding of over 2,000 American soldiers, airmen, and marines. Do you agree with that assessment?

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

Senator Sullivan: Massive casualties.

General Votel: Massive casualties.

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

General Votel: That is correct, Senator.

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

General Votel: Senator, they have not.

Senator Sullivan: No. It has gotten worse. Is that not true, General?
General Votel: It is my observation that during the time that the agreement was in place, we did not see a modification to their behavior.

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

General Votel: Well --

Senator Sullivan: The Houthis backed by the Iranians?

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

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

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

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

General Votel: Well, Senator, I have responsibility for helping put together the Department’s global campaign,
the military global campaign plan for Iran. And so as I look at that, I look at a variety of different things that we have to do as part of that. We have to assure our partners. We have to challenge Iran in the areas where they are trying to exert their malign influence. We have to be prepared to deter them. We have to be prepared to delay and respond to their activities in the region. So as I look at the planning that we are doing against that, those are the types of things that I am trying to incorporate into a comprehensive plan to address the threat of Iran.

Senator Sullivan: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Sullivan.

Senator Duckworth?

Senator Duckworth: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

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

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

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

General Votel: Thank you. And, Senator, let me just start and talk about the State Partnership program. This is an excellent program. We have four or five States that are partnered with countries across our region, and in almost every case, these are deeply valued programs by our partners in the region and I believe by the States that orchestrate them. We get a lot of benefit out of that, not just in the countries in the region, but again by people from those countries coming back to America to participate in exercises to build the relationships back here. And I think this is
an extraordinary program. It is long-term. It is enduring, and I think it serves us particularly well.

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

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

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

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

I would add one final program that I think is extraordinarily valuable, and it is our combined maritime force where we invite different partners in the region, some from outside of the region to come in and participate as
part of our combined maritime forces operating in the Gulf and in the waters of the region. These are extraordinarily important. And we see countries like Pakistan who step forward, provide significant resources in this, and provide leadership to these organizations. And this allows us to make sure that we share the burden, we leverage the capabilities that everybody brings, and it adds to a much more collective approach to security in the region.

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

Senator Duckworth: Thank you, General.

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

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

General Votel: Certainly we do. I mean, one of the
principal concerns we have is the mining of the straits and the impact that that would have. And so we do regularly exercise mining exercises and counter-mining exercises in the maritime environment here. We have a big exercise planned later this fall with a number of different countries that will come in. But this is certainly something that we are focused on.

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

Across the Arabian Peninsula, we have what we refer to as the Trans-Arabian Network that links a variety of ports and cities and airports not only in the Arabian Gulf but down in the Gulf of Oman and over to the Red Sea. It gives us extreme resiliency in terms of how we can move material, men, forces into the region to respond to capabilities. So we are very much focused on that. And in fact, as we look at implementing the National Defense Strategy, what
that might mean for CENTCOM, our focus on these logistic networks and our ability to have agreements, basing, and other things in here I think even become more important than they already have. And we have tried to prioritize that and we will continue to do that as we move forward.

Senator Duckworth: Thank you. Vitally important, indeed.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Inhofe: Senator Ernst?

Senator Ernst: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

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

One of our most effective resources for building partnerships and capacity, while maintaining the pressure that we have on those violent extremist organizations, is done obviously through our special operators, and you are intimately familiar with that. How do you see the role of our special operators evolving across the CENTCOM AOR with regard to counterterrorism and capacity building, as well as
the role more broadly nested within the National Defense
Strategy? If you can talk a little bit about that role, how
we are developing them.

General Votel: Thank you.

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

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

And this will be essential as we move forward. As you
know, our special operations capabilities are limited. They
are in great demand not just in CENTCOM but in other areas.
And that will be brought out as we fully implement the
National Defense Strategy. So reliance on our conventional
forces beginning to do some of these things and to develop
the same methodologies that our special operators have
developed over the course of many years will become very,
very important as we move forward.

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

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

Going forward, it will be important for us to maintain
these relationships. The relationships that we depend on in
this region are not those that can be put together in the
course of a crisis. They have to be developed and they have
to be nurtured over time. As Admiral McRaven often reminded
us when he was the SOCOM Commander, you cannot surge trust
in times of crisis. That has to be done in advance. And so
I think the lifeblood of what we do out here will be the
development of resilient, trustful relationships across our
region.
Senator Ernst: I appreciate that. And I appreciate the comments made by my colleagues as well about the State Partnership programs, the IMET programs, and so on. Those are very, very important in developing that level of trust. Just very briefly, because I am running out of time, General, of course, we do have some other big players in the region. We see Russia, of course, in Syria. We see China’s investments in Pakistan. And where else do you assess that China and Russia are involved in that AOR, and what is the extent of that and what are their intentions from your perspective?

General Votel: Thanks.

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

When you look at China, I think their motivations are principally driven by their economic objectives, again really driven by the One Belt, One Road approach that they are taking to link trade routes back to China. And I think
the thing we have to continue to be watchful of is that their developing relationships with other partners across the region, particularly in the maritime environment, in the countries that are along the waterways in the region, whether they are some of the Gulf states or whether they are some that are on the African continent, but which certainly give them very good access into the CENTCOM waters here. These are the areas I think that we will have to pay attention to in the future.

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

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

General Votel: Thank you, Senator.

Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Ernst.

Senator Blumenthal?

Senator Blumenthal: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

General Votel: Senator, we have presented all those
bills to the Saudi-led coalition. They have them there, in receipt of them. They acknowledge that. And we are working through to ensure that the products that we have given to them are -- they understand what that is and they will be able to respond to us. They have given us every indication that they intend to meet the requirements for reimbursement that we have asked for.

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

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

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

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

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

General Votel: Yes, Senator.

Senator Blumenthal: And you mentioned -- I may have
misheard you -- that there is the possibility of other instances where they or other countries owe us for similar kinds of expenses?

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

Senator Blumenthal: You are reviewing --

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

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

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

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

General Votel: Senator, I think our special operators are extraordinarily capable. You know, in the beginning of our operations in both Iraq and Syria, there was a time when we did not have anybody on the ground, and yet we were able to have a relationship with our partners on the ground in Syria and we were able to do that from remote locations.
And we do that in other places. So they are extraordinarily innovative, and so we will look at all options that we can use here.

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

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

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

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

Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Inhofe: Thanks very much, Senator Blumenthal.

Senator Perdue?

Senator Perdue: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

What I am concerned about is what Pakistan is also
representing to China with regard to what China has done with their BRI across that area. You just mentioned the maritime interest with Gwadar and Hambantota. Hambantota is just south of Colombo in Sri Lanka, and they have already foreclosed on their partner there. It is a proprietary debt situation. They have done the same thing in Gwadar and 31 other places around the coast of Africa. You just mentioned that.

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

General Votel: Thanks, Senator. I think you highlighted a real challenge for us. I think as we look at great power competition, I think we have to recognize -- and I believe we do -- that the threat of Russia or that China poses to us is not limited to a particular geographic area but, in fact, it is global with these partners. So as we look at our plans to compete with these partners to pursue our national interests, we have to look in all areas where
we do this, to include the CENTCOM area of responsibility. There will be things that we can do in CENTCOM that can contribute to a broader campaign to compete with China and Russia. And so I think as we look at this, we have to look for opportunities where we can do that and how we integrate into a broader plan.

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

Senator Perdue: Well, I think after 17 years, we have certainly earned that right, and I hope we will continue to do that relative to getting our allies to help us in that
region. And specifically, you mentioned the parliament there in Iraq.

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

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

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

It does have the derivative value of being along a principal line of access, line of communication that Iran and her proxies would like to exploit. So while that is not
our mission, we do recognize the indirect impact that we
have with that.

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

Senator Perdue: Thank you, sir.

Thank you.

Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Perdue.

Senator Warren?

Senator Warren: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

In late December, the “New York Times” reported that
American military personnel assigned to the coalition’s
headquarters in Saudi Arabia readily had access to a, quote,
database that detailed every air strike, warplane target,
munitions used, and a brief description of the attack. End
So let me just ask you, does this database exist?

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

Senator Warren: And CENTCOM has access to this database?

General Votel: We do have access to it today.

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

So I am asking you questions. I want to ask some questions about the details of the help we give the Saudis because they continue to conduct bombing runs. They continue to perpetuate one of the worst manmade humanitarian disasters in the modern era. During this civil war, more than 85,000 children under the age of 5 have starved to death, and tens of thousands of civilians have been killed.
This military engagement is not authorized. We need to end U.S. support for this war now.

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

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

General Votel: We principally derived that based on discussions and reports from the people that we do have on the ground and what they have seen. We, obviously, take this very seriously, Senator, and our individuals that are in positions where they might see some of this are under the obligation to report this. And I do routinely receive reports, many of them unsubstantiated, not just linked to Yemen but to other areas in which we operate where our people have received a report of abuse and we have a reporting mechanism for that. And so we do take that extraordinarily seriously.
Senator Warren: Okay, but this report says neither observed nor been complicit in any cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

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

Now, does DOD find these independent investigations credible?

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

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

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

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

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

Senator Warren: Thank you.

Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Warren.

Senator Blackburn?

Senator Blackburn: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

Let me go to Syria. I will tell you that I think the administration really has sent some mixed messages about the terms of U.S. withdrawal from Syria and whether there is protection for the Syrian Kurds, whether there is the total
defeat of ISIS or the establishment of a safe zone with Turkey, and what is a prerequisite. 

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

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

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

But I would just say I do not consider this to be either time-based or conditions-based. The fact is the President made a decision and we are going to execute his orders here to withdraw forces from Syria. And as we do that, we are going to do that in a very deliberate manner.
We are going to do that in conjunction with our campaign plan, and we are going to consider things like protection of our partners, the Kurds. We are going to consider the concerns that Turkey has along their border. And we are going to consider how we keep pressure on ISIS. And all of that is taking place right now. So I am not under pressure to be out by a specific date, and I have not had any specific conditions put upon me. I look at this as an additional task within the confines of the current campaign plan that we are operating, and that is how we are approaching it.

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

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

General Votel: Senator, I do not think we do. I think those of us who have had the opportunity to be involved in this for a long time develop a respect for our enemies. We do not agree with the things that they are doing, but we certainly have to respect the capabilities that they bring. And we have always recognized that ISIS is a savvy
organization and they will look for ways to harm us, to hurt us in the conduct of our normal operations or certainly in the conduct of operations that we have coming up as we get ready to depart Syria. So I do not think we underestimate their capabilities to exact a toll against us.

Senator Blackburn: I appreciate that.

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

Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Blackburn.

Senator Kaine?

Senator Kaine: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

[Laughter.]

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

I want to ask you about an interview that President Trump gave on Face the Nation on February 3rd, a couple of comments that he made dealing with Iran. He indicated one of the reasons I want to keep it -- “it” referring to an airbase in Iran -- is because I want to be looking a little bit -- I am sorry -- an airbase in Iraq -- is because I want to be looking a little bit at Iran because Iran is a real
He was asked a question by Margaret Brennan. He said, no, because I want to be able to watch Iran.

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

General Votel: That is exactly my understanding,

Senator.

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

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

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

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

Senator Kaine: And we were invited in in the summer of 2014 to help them defeat ISIS. Correct?
General Votel: That is right, Senator.

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

Chairman Inhofe: Without objection.

[The information follows:]

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

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

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

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

I worry -- and I am not asking you this question -- that the President hears testimony like that and equates it with officials saying Iran is like a kindergarten, which I find completely illogical.
Third, President Trump said this. When I came in as President of the United States, my first year, I went to the Pentagon 2 weeks after I came in, a short time after, because I wanted to know what is going on with Iran. We were in so many locations in the Middle East in huge difficulty. Every single one of them was caused by the number one terrorist nation in the world, which is Iran. We did not go into Afghanistan with U.S. military forces in 2001 because of Iran. Did we, General Votel?

General Votel: No, Senator, we did not.

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

General Votel: We did not, Senator.

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

General Votel: We did not, Senator.

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

And so when the President says this, we are in the Middle East because of Iran, it causes me great concern. Together with other statements made by this President, other members of the administration, I worry that the President is
thinking about military action against Iran is something that would be a good idea.

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

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Kaine.

Senator McSally?

Senator McSally: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

A very extensive testimony on a lot of issues. As someone, like many of you and those with you today, who has been to your region many times, six deployments in my time in uniform, it is a very complex region, as you have talked about. And I appreciate in your testimony with the National Defense Strategy kind of bringing us back home as to why are we there and what are our vital national interests in the region because our longer-term threats per the NDS are more of the great state competition and potential conflict.
But many of us — many of you — we have spent our entire military careers deploying to the Middle East. Like this is all we know. Right? This is all we know, is dealing with Desert Storm and Northern Watch and Southern Watch and then OEF and OIF. We have invested so much into this, as you know, a lot of blood and treasure, a lot of sacrifice.

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

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

So that is a generational fight against terrorism. It started before us. It is going to continue on. We have got
to make sure there is no safe havens in all of these 
countries. You squeeze them in one place, they will go to 
another place. We will find them in other regions, as you 
know. And then we want to make sure there is not a hostile 
power, which is Iran right now.

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

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

General Votel: Senator, thank you very much.

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

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

Senator McSally: Great. Thanks.

And then on to Iran, again this is the largest state sponsor of terror. This is the one that has malign activity in the region, great destabilization, killing of American troops. So what is the focus there as we are kind of,
again, keeping our eye on the ball of this region and the National Defense Strategy? Because this is the biggest threat. And you talked a lot about working with partnerships, but what else can we do and what else are you doing in order to counter that threat?

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

Senator McSally: Exactly. Thanks.

I am out of time. I want to say I am grateful for Senator Peters’ statements about the A-10 warthog as well. I do not think we should be using fifth generation fighters
to chase around jihadists on Mopeds. We got to make sure
that we have the right tools for that mission while we are
using our next generation to deal with the larger threats
that are out there. So I found a new wingman here for
fighting for the A-10.

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

Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator.

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

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