HEARING TO RECEIVE TESTIMONY ON
THE POSTURE OF UNITED STATES CENTRAL COMMAND
AND UNITED STATES AFRICA COMMAND

Tuesday, March 15, 2022

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

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:30 a.m. in
Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Jack Reed,
chairman of the committee, presiding.

Committee Members Present: Senators Reed [presiding],
Gillibrand, Blumenthal, Kaine, King, Warren, Peters,
Manchin, Rosen, Kelly, Inhofe, Wicker, Fischer, Cotton,
Rounds, Ernst, Tillis, Sullivan, Cramer, Scott, Blackburn,
Hawley, and Tuberville.
OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JACK REED, U.S. SENATOR FROM RHODE ISLAND

Chairman Reed: I would like to call the hearing to order.

Good morning. The committee meets today to receive testimony from General Kenneth McKenzie, Commander of United States Central Command, and General Stephen Townsend, Commander of United States Africa Command. Thank you both for your service, and I am grateful to the men and women serving under your commands. And I understand this will likely be the last appearance before this committee for both of you, and I thank you for your dedicated, diligent service to the nation and to the men and women you have led over all these years. And thanks also to your families who stood by you and sustained you throughout this distinguished career.

Thank you.

Central Command remains one of our most challenging theaters. Of its many responsibilities, CENTCOM's top priority is "deterring the Iranian regime's destructive and destabilizing activities without undue provocation." This is a complicated and urgent mission. Just this weekend, Iran claimed responsibility for a missile strike near the American consulate in Irbil, Iraq. This strike comes on the heels of escalating malign behavior by Iran and its proxies, who continue to mount drone and missile attacks in the
region, including against military bases in Iraq and Syria, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

On the nuclear front, in the five years since then-President Trump pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, Iran has made key advances. It has decreased "breakout time" to several weeks from a year under the agreement. It has increased uranium enrichment to 60 percent, instead of just under 4 percent allowed under the agreement. Iran has hardened its infrastructure and replaced damaged equipment with more advanced models. And while negotiations to return Iran to the JCPOA are in the final stages, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has introduced new complications.

General McKenzie, given these current dynamics, I would like your thoughts on how to best respond to Iranian malign behavior in the region, including collaborating with allies and partners to counter drone and missile attacks, while preserving space to return to the JCPOA.

Last August marked the end of our 20-year military mission in Afghanistan. Despite transitioning all forces from Afghanistan, the Biden administration has maintained its commitment to ensuring that Afghanistan cannot be used as a base for ISIS-K, al Qaeda, and other terrorist groups to conduct attacks against the United States or its allies. As such, we have assumed an "over the horizon" posture to
counter and degrade such threats. I would ask for an update on our capabilities and whether additional regional agreements have been reached to ensure we have a robust counterterrorism architecture to address the threats from these terrorist groups.

AFRICOM presents a similarly complex area of responsibility. The security situation in East Africa has been on a downward trajectory following the previous administration's decision to withdraw the majority of U.S. military personnel from Somalia in December 2020. Since then, U.S. forces have been conducting periodic engagements to train and advise Somali partners. However, as you note in your testimony, General Townsend, "U.S. and partner efforts to disrupt and degrade the most dangerous violent extremist organizations have not achieved the success we need." The Biden administration is taking a comprehensive look at our strategy in Somalia. I hope you will share your views on the current security situation as well as the status of our engagement with Somali partners.

The security situation in West Africa is also increasingly fragile. Over the past 2 years, extremist operations have expanded across the Sahel, including pushing down into the littoral states in the Gulf of Guinea. Political unrest in Chad has led to the departure of all nonessential U.S. personnel, and high-profile attacks
against civilian and military targets in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have increased. These extremist groups are not currently capable of carrying out attacks outside the region, but several have professed their intent to do so. Given these challenges, General Townsend, I would like to know what can feasibly be accomplished with partner security forces and how sustainable our posture is in such a politically fractured environment.

Finally, both CENTCOM and AFRICOM play important roles in our long-term strategic competition with China and Russia. In the Middle East and Central Asia, Russia continues to leverage hybrid warfare capabilities to expand its own influence and stymie Western security interests. China has also increased its presence in the region, including by deepening economic and security ties with Iran. And, on the African continent, both Russia and China are looking to expand their security and economic investments, and may seek to leverage such access to undermine U.S. influence in critical regions. During today's hearing, I hope you will discuss your efforts to engage with partners and the ways in which the United States can best leverage its competitive advantages to maintain key relationships.

Thank you, again, to our witnesses. I look forward to your testimonies.

As a reminder for my colleagues, there will be a closed
session immediately following this hearing in Room SVC-217.

Now let me welcome back the ranking member, and recognize the ranking member, Senator Inhofe.
STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES INHOFE, U.S. SENATOR FROM OKLAHOMA

Senator Inhofe: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I join you in welcoming our witnesses and thank them for their decades of service, I think particularly with -- I did not get the order of that. But anyway, I appreciate the time that we have worked together and the short time remaining for certainly some of them.

I see three challenges in CENTCOM: Iran's terrorist proxies acting more aggressively, our partners increasingly doubt America's resolve, and Russia and China trying to fill that void.

These challenges are a direct result of, in my opinion, President Biden's misguided policies. He downgraded support to our partners against Iran and its proxies. He reversed President Trump's terrorist designation of the Houthis. He offered Iran massive sanctions relief to rejoin the failed 2015 Iran deal, even as Iran increases its aggression against us.

Iran is the foremost threat in the region. Yet our partners see the Administration's appeasement of Iran and ask themselves, are we on our own? Is America abandoning us?

Last summer's disastrous drawdown from Afghanistan, which culminated with the killing of 13 servicemembers, only...
reinforced these questions.

We also face significant challenges in Africa, including the growing presence and capability of the jihadi groups across the continent. China and Russia are exploiting Africa to destabilize our partners, project their military power, and expand their influence at our expense.

I have always viewed Africa as critical to our national security, which is why I pushed for its creation of AFRICOM. That was back in 2007, and it is right now more of a concern than it was at that time. General Townsend, I will speak more about this issue of Western Sahara during my questions, but I am pleased the Secretary provided guidance to assess alternative locations and hosts for DoD exercises in Africa, including the annual African Lion exercise. This will be crucial to ensuring we grow better relationships in Africa, and help reverse the tide in our strategic competition with China and Russia.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, Senator Inhofe. Let me now recognize General McKenzie for his statement.

General, thank you, sir.
STATEMENT OF GENERAL MCKENZIE, COMMANDER, UNITED STATES CENTRAL COMMAND

General McKenzie: Chairman Reed, Ranking Member
Inhofe, ladies and gentlemen of the committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify for the final time regarding U.S. Central Command's posture in an area of responsibility that encompasses 21 nations and 600 million people, and it is at the strategy nexus of the world's most important corridors of trade.

Much has transpired since I last delivered my annual posture testimony, most notably the conclusion of our military campaign in Afghanistan and Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine.

America's interest in the Central Region and the challenges we confront there have proven remarkably resilient. CENTCOM's mission, to direct and enable military operations and activities with allies and partners to increase regional stability in support of enduring U.S. interests, is essentially unchanged from the day of the command's founding.

The primary threats to that security and stability are also very familiar. CENTCOM was established nearly 40 years ago to counter the malign influence of a revolutionary regime that had seized power in Tehran and to compete with a great power that had, in spite of international
condemnation, invaded the sovereign state of Afghanistan and imposed a puppet regime.

Today Iran is no less of a threat to American interests or to the stability of the region than it was in 1979. To the contrary, the threat posed by Iran is graver than ever. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, moreover, has violently demonstrated its willful regard for international norms, just as we have seen through Russia's actions in Syria and elsewhere, in fact, anywhere it sees an opportunity to diminish confidence in America's leadership. In a more measured fashion, China is also vying for increased influence, at an American expense, in a region it depends upon for over 40 percent of its fossil fuels.

Meanwhile, violent extremist organizations, or VEOs, in the CENTCOM area continue to pose a credible threat to the homeland. In sum, the Central Region remains today a vital and volatile arena for strategic competition and the decisive theater in the campaign against VEOs.

The campaign to defeat the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has entered a new phase. As of 1 January of this year, Iraq has assumed sole responsibility for counter-ISIS combat operations on its own soil. In Syria, CENTCOM and its partners are degrading ISIS's ability to regenerate by improving the security of the facilitates for detained ISIS fighters as well as the displaced person' camps, IDP
camps, where their families reside. More than half of this population comes from other countries, and addressing the threat of ISIS in northeast Syria ultimately will require these countries to reclaim and repatriate whatever citizens of theirs remain in these prisons and camps, ending one of the world's worst humanitarian crises and depriving ISIS of what currently is fertile soil for indoctrination and spreading terror.

In Afghanistan, our campaign against al Qaeda and ISIS-Khorasan has also entered a new phase. We are now conducting this campaign from bases over the horizon. As I have said, this is difficult; it is not impossible.

I should add today that we will be able to do this only so long as CENTCOM has the requisite resources to find, fix, and finish threats to the homeland before those threats develop the capability to conduct external operations. I am talking specifically about ISR assets and strike platforms. CENTCOM has the tools it needs to perform this mission but the margins are thin and risk will increase should resources diminish.

I would like to specifically address our posture in the Middle East. Here Iran continues to pose the greatest threat to U.S. interests and the security of the region as a whole. With proxies and clients, Iran has fomented conflict in an arc tracing from Yemen through the Arabian Peninsula,
across Iraq and Syria into Lebanon, into the very borders of Israel.

Saudi Arabia endures regular attacks from the Houthis, who wield some of the most advanced unmanned aerial systems and cruise missiles in the region, courtesy of the Iranians. Recently the Houthis expanded these attacks to include urban centers and bases with U.S. forces in the United Arab Emirates.

Tehran also enables its aligned militias in Iraq and Syria to carry on a persistent, low-level campaign of indirect fire and unmanned aerial system attacks against U.S. and coalition forces, hoping to drive us from the region. Of late, this campaign has been relatively restrained, but Iran only loosely controls the militias that conduct these attacks, and as recently as 2020, Iran demonstrated its willingness to target U.S. forces directly with its highly capable ballistic missile forces.

Iran's ballistic missile forces constitute an exigent threat to the security of every state in the region, among them our most important and enduring partners. They continue to look to the United States for assurance that, the historic partner of choice in the region, will remain a reliable one.

China and Russia are also watching closely for any sign that America's commitment to the collective security of the
region is wavering, and they are poised to capitalize on whatever opportunities emerge.

In closing, let me thank you again for this opportunity to testify. I would like to thank the soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen, coast guardsmen, and guardians who have served and sacrificed in the CENTCOM AOR. It has been the greatest honor of my life to serve as their commander.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of General McKenzie follows:]
Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, General McKenzie. General Townsend, please.
STATEMENT OF GENERAL STEPHEN TOWNSEND, COMMANDER,
UNITED STATES AFRICA COMMAND

General Townsend: Chairman Reed, Ranking Member
Inhofe, and distinguished members of the committee, good
morning. Thank you for inviting me to appear today, even as
the eyes of the world are focused on Russia's lawless attack
on Ukraine, an unjust war which impacts Africa as well.

For nearly 3 years it has been a great privilege, the
privilege of my career, to represent the dedicated members
of the U.S. Africa Command. Thank you for your steadfast
support for them and for our mission.

I am here this morning with my battle buddy and command
senior enlisted leader, Sergeant Major Richard Thresher, and
my friend, General Frank McKenzie, as we make our final
appearances before you. Our joint testimony highlights
continued and pressing challenges and opportunities faced by
our respective commands and our nation.

Together with our interagency teammates, USAFRICOM
protects and advances U.S. strategic interests, prevents
strategic distraction, and preserves America's options, all
in concert with our allies and partners.

As AFRICOM's fifth commander I have come to learn five
truths about Africa. First, America cannot ignore Africa.
Africa's challenges, opportunities, and security interests
are inseparable from our own. Weak or poor governance,
conflict, and climate change stress the stability of many African nations, which will, in turn, impact U.S. security and prosperity.

Second, our competitors clearly see Africa's rich potential. Russia and China both seek to convert soft and hard power investments into political influence, strategic access, and military advantage. China's economic and diplomatic engagements allow it to buttress autocracies and change international norms in a patient effort to claim their second continent. Russia stokes conflict, pursuing a faded aspiration to imperial power. Across the continent, mercenaries from the Kremlin's Wagner Group offer a one-stop-shop for regime protection, resource exploitation, and horrific violence against Africans, just as we see in Ukraine today.

Third, deadly terrorism has metastasized to Africa. Al Qaeda's al Shabbab in East Africa and ISIS and al Qaeda groups in West Africa and elsewhere are among the world's fastest-growing, wealthiest, and deadliest terrorist groups and remain grave and growing threats that aspire to kill Americans, both there and in our homeland.

Fourth, a battle between democracy and authoritarianism is raging across Africa. Despite a recent surge in democratic backsliding, our values, our democracy, and our willingness to work together with African partners creates a
huge demand for U.S. engagement and partnership.

Fifth, in Africa a few troops and a few bucks still goes a long way. Modest and predictable investments yield outsized returns for U.S. and African security interests. As an economy of force and posture-limited theater, AFRICOM employs just 0.3 percent of DoD operating budget and manpower. Modest investments today can yield a continent of partners tomorrow.

We are most effective when we synchronize diplomacy, development, and defense, so we are grateful for your continued leadership and backing to help field our whole-of-government leaders by confirming ambassadors and funding the State Department and USAID, thanks to the authorities and resources you provide, and for your continued interest and support in the capabilities that AFRICOM requires to accomplish our mission. In summary, USAFRICOM remains cheap insurance for America's security.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of General Townsend follows:]
Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, General Townsend.

General McKenzie, do you assess that successfully concluding a nuclear deal with Iran will provide additional stability in the region, particularly with respect to proliferation of nuclear weapons, not just in Iran but in other states, and also give to the United States and to the West essentially almost daily insights into the nuclear posture of Iran?

General McKenzie: Chairman, a primary objective of our policy in the region is for Iran not to possess a nuclear weapon, and I think the best and most effective way to get to that position is through a negotiated agreement, which I fully support. And I think that is probably the best way to actually get to that and be able to talk about other Iranian activities in the region that are equally threatening to states that are non-nuclear in character.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, sir.

General Townsend, what is your operational assessment of removing the majority of U.S. forces out of Somalia to Kenya and Djibouti, and what have been the impacts on our partners?

General Townsend: Chairman, my view is that our periodic engagement, also referred to as commuting to work, has caused new challenges and risks for our troops. My assessment is that it is not effective, it is not efficient,
and it puts our troops at greater risk.

Chairman Reed: And General McKenzie, the MQ-9 strike on 29 August 2021, was a complicated and difficult situation, including civilian casualties. CENTCOM did a report, but that report was reviewed by the Air Force inspector general, General Said, and he indicated that assigning the 15-6 to the same organization that conducted the strike and further assigning it to the individual that conducted the civilian casualty assessment report and did not recommend a 15-6 was less than optimal, real conflicts of interest, or simply perceptions of conflicts of interest were too significant, conducting the 15-6 in 4 to 5 days as directed was too rushed and did not allow sufficient time to comprehensively assess the facts.

Do you concur with that conclusion?

General McKenzie: Chairman, I concur with that conclusion.

Chairman Reed: And what steps are you taking to correct the situation, in terms of standard operating procedures for CENTCOM?

General McKenzie: Chairman, since that time we have enacted ten specific things that affect the way we conduct strike operations, the way we have oversight of strike operations, the way we investigate those strike operations. Rather than go through a list of all of them I will call out
three, very quickly.

Chairman Reed: Yes, sir.

General McKenzie: The first thing we have done is we have re-invigorated and re-institutionalized the idea of a red cell process within each strike cell. The red cell prevents the problem of confirmation bias, which is when operators sometimes, under the pressure of what they believe to be, and probably is, a mortal threat seized on a course of action and do not properly evaluate all of the possibilities, other possibilities. That is one.

At the same time, I have upped the reporting of this so these things are brought to senior leadership much more quickly, so we have an opportunity to have a good view on what is going on inside the entire system. And I particularly acknowledge the issues about who is investigating who. You cannot investigate yourself. Even if you do it right there is still a perception there that we need to take a look at. We are taking that on directly.

So a number of things within Central Command we are changing. I believe, in all these cases, it is the commander at each level who needs to be the responsible officer, and you have got to get your commanders directly involved in that. And I believe we are on the path to doing that.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, sir.
General Townsend, you indicated in your testimony that efforts in AFRICOM, like every major combatant command, have to be whole-of-government. But Africa seems to be even a much more significant case, where without State Department support, AID support, other departments, that your mission is not as effective. Can you elaborate a bit?

General Townsend: Thanks, Chairman. I think it is not only not as effective, I think it is not possible for any one arm of diplomacy development or defense to succeed without the other, especially in Africa. The economic challenges, the political challenges, and the security challenges are so great that we can only make headway together, and that is particularly important because we have such modest investments there, modest resources focused on the continent. So, therefore, we have got to all row together.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much. Gentlemen, thank you for not only your testimony but for your distinguished service. Thank you.

Senator Inhofe, please.

Senator Inhofe: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General Townsend, as I said in my opening statement I want to talk more about the plight of the people of Western Sahara. Many of my colleagues may not be familiar with what they have been going through out there, but it is nothing short of a
tragedy. The fate of the Sahrawi people has been in limbo since Western Sahara was decolonized and the United Nations adopted the resolution calling for a referendum on self-determination in 1966. That was 1966. More than five decades later, no referendum has been held, and their destiny has been subjected to broken promise after broken promise by the Moroccan government.

Some in the Administration believe Morocco is now serious about negotiating a mutually acceptable resolution in Western Sahara after blocking it for all these years, and I could not disagree more. Nothing I have seen from Morocco makes me think that they are serious about the resolution. And that is why I am pleased that the Secretary has directed you to look at alternative locations for DoD exercise in African, like African Lion in the coming years.

I have more that I want to say about Western Sahara but we are pressed for time so I will submit that in writing.

[The information follows:]

[COMMITTEE INSERT]
Senator Inhofe: General Townsend, I want to turn to Somalia. As you know, I opposed the last administration's decision to pull nearly all of our troops out of Somalia and move them to Djibouti and Kenya and pursue an over-the-horizon counterterrorism strategy. It increases risk. It decreases our effectiveness. We are seeing this play out on the ground on Somalia as things get worse and al Shabbab gains strength.

General Townsend, you have called al Shabbab our primary enemy in Somalia. Your quote was "the largest and most kinetically active al Qaeda network in the world."

I have two question, General Townsend. Have you submitted a request to your chain of command to put DoD forces back in Somalia on a full-time basis, and if the answer is yes then when did you submit the request and have you gotten any response yet from that request?

General Townsend: Thanks, Ranking Member. All the characterizations you just related there about Somalia and the threat from al Shabbab are correct. Respectfully, Senator, I have submitted advice to my chain of command, and my chain of command is still considering that advice, and I would like to give them space to make that decision. And I can go into it in a bit more detail in closed session.

Senator Inhofe: All right. Thank you very much.

General McKenzie, I do not really have any further
questions, but I do want to comment that it is hard for me to believe that -- I can see now why we are not smiling and you are smiling. Apparently it is going to be, I think, in 2 more weeks that you will be bailing out of here, and I wish you the best for your retirement. All right? Great.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Inhofe.

Senator Gillibrand, please.

Senator Gillibrand: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General McKenzie, thank you for your testimony. How has Israel's integration into CENTCOM's AOR improved coordination among U.S. regional partners, particularly as it relates to countering Iran and the Middle East and supporting over-the-horizon counterterrorism capabilities?

General McKenzie: Senator, the entry of Israel into the AOR has given us great opportunities, particularly in the area of integrated air and missile defense, which I think is one of the most pressing issues that all of the states in the region confront when they think about Iran.

And so I think of Israel coming into the AOR as sort of the operational effect of the other normalization of Israeli relations across the Gulf and with other states. We have great opportunities here, and I would be prepared to talk a little bit more about it in the closed session.

Senator Gillibrand: As a follow-up, have the Abraham
Accords, which have allowed for economic and military integration between Israel and the Arab State signatories enhanced our ability to counter China's influence in the Middle East through coordinated economic policy or enhanced foreign military sales?

General McKenzie: On the question of China's entry into the theater, obviously I only control a small part of the perspective on that. I would say that in terms of foreign military sales we have an opportunity here to pursue greater integration, again, particularly in the domain of air defense systems, which I think is low-hanging fruit. Everyone is interested in it, particularly since the keyword "defense" is in the design. These are not offensive systems. These are systems designed to protect those nations that are there.

Senator Gillibrand: And this question for General McKenzie and General Townsend. General McKenzie, China has extensive influence in the Middle East and Africa, both through its Belt and Road Initiative and through increasing foreign arms sales. Can you comment on China's economic influence within your command and your concerns that our regional partners increasingly turn to China for military assistance?

Senator McKenzie: Senator, I will begin with their economic penetration into the region. They draw a
significant portion of their hydrocarbons from the region. A lot of it goes through the Strait of Hormuz. We see, as a result of that, they are interested in pursuing close, deep, and economic relationships with nations that adjoin the Strait of Hormuz the Gulf itself so that they can protect that long-term investment. I believe ultimately that will move from economic to a military component. They think in the long term, but I believe that is inevitable, that we are going to see that.

Finally, I believe that we remain a partner of choice for military systems. Our military systems are the best in the world. You get what you pay for. You get what you pay for if you buy a Chinese system.

Senator Gillibrand: Thank you. General Townsend?

General Townsend: Thanks, Senator. There is a handout there. There should be a handout there that depicts the question you are asking, China's investments across the spectrum in Africa, and it is daunting. They are investing primarily in the economic realm, then followed by the diplomatic realm, and then, to a lesser degree, in the military domain. However, their military investments are playing out in Africa. They have their one overseas base there, and they are working hard to develop other overseas bases there.

And I would reiterate what General McKenzie said about,
we remain the partner of choice, and our equipment and our training is second to none. However, it can sometimes take a long time to unfold, and that sometimes forces our African partners to reach for the bird -- go with the bird in hand, which is sometimes China, sometimes Russia.

Senator Gillibrand: General Townsend, how do you view our African partners' opinion of Russia's invasion of Ukraine? Will they distance themselves from Russia, based on its unprecedented action, or how do we hold them accountable if Russia is allowed to remain economically relevant to those markets?

General Townsend: Senator, I think if you saw the vote play out in the UN the other day, it sort of covers the spectrum. So about half of Africa voted to condemn Russia's invasion. The other half either abstained or did not vote. I think there was only one vote from the continent, Eritrea, voted to support Russia. But it was troubling to me that half of the continent either abstained or did not vote, and I think that is because they are trying to see how this is going to play out. Many of them have strong economic ties to Russia and China, and I think they are biding their time.

Senator Gillibrand: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Gillibrand.

Senator Fischer, please.

Senator Fischer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank
you to both of you gentlemen for your service to the people of this country.

During and after the retrograde, President Biden touted over-the-horizon counterterrorism operations as our new strategy to deal with the terrorist threat in Afghanistan. I expressed serious concerns with this approach, including directly to you, General McKenzie, for CENTCOM, during that CENTCOM posture hearing last April, but was repeatedly told by the Administration that challenges associated with this strategy could be overcome.

General McKenzie, have we conducted any over-the-horizon strikes against ISIS-K targets in Afghanistan since August of last year?

General McKenzie: Senator, we have conducted no strikes in Afghanistan.

Senator Fischer: Would you agree that without sustained CT pressure, terrorist groups are more able to focus on planning and preparing for external attacks?

General McKenzie: I would agree with that statement.

Senator Fischer: Do we have any information on terrorist planning in Afghanistan?

General McKenzie: Senator, I have considerable information on that, and I am prepared to brief you in great detail in the closed session that will follow.

Senator Fischer: I look forward to hearing your brief
on that.

General McKenzie, in an interview with the Associated Press in December you stated that we are probably at about 1 or 2 percent of the capabilities we once had to look into Afghanistan. Will you be telling us about that in classified as well?

General McKenzie: The brief I will give you I believe will be exhaustive in all the disciplines of intelligence. What we had, what we have now, what the difference in those are, and you will be able to draw your own very stark and clear conclusions from that.

Senator Fischer: Is your conclusion about the strategy that we have in dealing with the terrorist threat that we are effective or not effective in sustaining that CT pressure on the groups?

General McKenzie: It is going to take a little time for that to play out. I believe that, as you noted earlier, sustained CT pressure is what prevents groups from being able to grow, to train, to think about plotting beyond their immediate survival. For example, up and down the Euphrates River Valley in Iraq and Syria, ISIS is unable to think beyond surviving that night or the next night. In place where they do not have that question of immediate personal survival, then the threat begins to grow. But I would like to talk about that in a closed session if I can, ma'am.
Senator Fischer: Okay. In October, Under Secretary Kahl told this committee that we could see ISIS-K generate the capability to conduct external operations, including against the United States in somewhere between 6 and 12 months, and that was 5 months ago. Today, in your written testimony, you stated that, quote, "The Department of Defense assess ISIS-K could establish an external attack capability against the United States and to our allies in 12 to 18 months, but possibly sooner if the group experiences unanticipated gains in Afghanistan," end quote.

What has caused this intelligence estimate to shift from October, when Secretary Kahl made those comments, to what you are telling us today?

General McKenzie: Again, I will talk a little bit more about this in the closed session. But the period I gave, which is 12 to 18 months for ISIS-K represents our best whole-of-intelligence community thinking on this. And it does change over time, as we see groups gather, as we see groups fall apart. But I will be able to give you a lot more detail on that in the closed session.

Senator Fischer: Okay. Let me shift gears a little bit then with you, and we will continue the CT in closed session.

We look at Iran's proxies throughout CENTCOM AOR and they continue to pose a significant threat to our partners
and also to our own forces in the region. What more do you think can be done to deter Iran from their malign activities?

General McKenzie: We have established a very clear set of redlines with Iran, and I think as a result of that over the last several months their attacks have tapered off, particularly in Iraq, which I believe Iran views as the principal battleground for confronting the United States, and our partners in the region. And we have been able to do that by increasingly effective counter-UAS and other systems to defend ourselves, and at the same time they are finding it increasingly difficult to gain any kind of political traction with the government of Iraq. I think for a long time Iran, frankly, tried to pursue a political solution in Iraq that is not open to them anymore.

Senator Fischer: And do you believe that we have a good working relationship with our partners in the area in providing them defense against missiles and drones?

General McKenzie: I believe that we do. You know, I worked very hard at the military, the military channel, with my peers, the chiefs of defense, in each of these countries. I believe we do have a very good relationship with them.

Senator Fischer: Thank you, sir. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Fischer.
Senator King, please.

Senator King: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First, two observations. One is the important day in U.S. history that this represents -- 202 years ago the state of Maine joined the union, and I just wanted to note that. Secondly, I am sorry that our Ranking Member has gone, because there is no Senator that knows more about African than Senator Inhofe and has committed more time and effort and diplomatic outreach to that continent. And I just wanted to recognize that, as this may be the last posture hearing involving Africa that he is still a member of this committee.

A couple of questions to follow up on Senator Fischer's questions, General McKenzie. What is the status of the ALOC with Pakistan, and do we have any understanding whatsoever with regard to the ALOC for a kinetic strike as opposed to ISR?

General McKenzie: So right now we are flying at the ALOC to conduct our ISR. For further discussions on that, Senator, I would really prefer to go into the closed session, and I will be able to answer your questions very directly in that session.

Senator King: Okay. Can you give us -- and I know we are going to talk about this in closed session, but since our leaving of Afghanistan late last summer, compare ISIS and al Qaeda, because the Taliban is hostile to ISIS, not so
hostile to al Qaeda. Is Taliban maintaining pressure on ISIS?

General McKenzie: The Taliban is attempting to maintain pressure on ISIS. They are finding it difficult to do. ISIS has been able to execute some high-profile attacks, even in Kabul, over the last several months. We are coming out of the winter. Traditionally, this would now begin the fighting season. It is my expectation that ISIS attacks will ramp up in Afghanistan as we go into the summer.

And you are correct. The Taliban is going to go after ISIS. They have done so in the past. But it is going to be tough fight. They did not help themselves -- "they" being the Taliban -- when they released a number of prisoners from Pul-e-Charkhi and Parwan, over 1,000 ISIS fighters that reverted back to the group and significantly empowered the group within Afghanistan. And now they are going to reap the results of that action. So I think that is a problem for the Taliban.

As for al Qaeda, I think they are much less firm on the al Qaeda issue, in terms of opposing them and being able to limit them, although they have done some things publicly that would tend to make you think they at least want to send the signals that they are doing. And I will talk a little bit more about that in the closed session.
Senator King: Thank you. I want to return to the chairman's opening questions about Iran. A deal, by definition, is something where there are things on both sides, advantages and disadvantage. One side gives up something. One side gains something. Let us assume for a moment that there is a renewed JCPOA, which significantly limits Iran's nuclear capability for the foreseeable future, for some period of years. At the same time, sanctions are relieved in some way that enables them to have additional resources, which they could put into their malign activities in the region. Would you view that as a reasonable tradeoff? In other words, realizing you cannot have everything, do you view a nuclear Iran as more dangerous than an Iran with more money in their pockets?

General McKenzie: Well, Senator, as you know, CENTCOM is the land of less-than-perfect solutions, so I am always comfortable with a less-than-perfect solution. It is an overriding national policy objective of the United States for Iran to not have a nuclear weapon and be able to possess a nuclear weapon. So I think that is a very important goal, and you might have to make some tradeoffs to get to that point.

But the military level, my concern is, first of all, that they not have that nuclear weapon, but I am also very concerned about the remarkable growth in number and
efficiency of their ballistic missile force, their UAV program, their long-range drones, and their land attack cruise missile program. All of those concern me.

Senator King: That was going to be my next question. What is our current, if we can do this in an unclassified setting, of the range of Iranian missiles? In other words, can they get to Paris? Can they get to London? Can they get to New York? Or are they simply a regional weapon?

General McKenzie: They have over 3,000 ballistic missiles of various types, some of which can reach Tel Aviv, to give you an idea of range. None of them can reach Europe yet, but over the last 5 to 7 years, Senator, they have invested heavily in their ballistic missile program. Their missiles are significantly greater range and significantly enhanced accuracy. We saw that in the attack on al-Asad in January 2020, where their missiles hit within tens of meters of the targets they were intended to hit.

Senator King: General Townsend, any buyer's remorse, or I should say borrower's remorse in Africa with regard to the relationship of these countries to China? Well, I think borrower's remorse is the right phrase. Second thoughts about these relationships?

General Townsend: Senator, I would say yes, we see that across the continent. So as you are familiar, when China started investing heavily in Africa, this term "debt
"trap diplomacy" was born.

Senator King: I call it "debt colonialism."

General Townsend: That is another way of saying it as well. I think our African partners, by and large, are very well aware of that, and the countries that we see still hewing to China are those that, well, they are not well governed, or they are autocrats. So I think there is a growing awareness of that, and we are seeing that.

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

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator King.

Senator Rounds, please.

Senator Rounds: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Gentlemen, first let me begin by saying thank you to both of you for your service to our country. Let me also thank your families for their participation as well.

General Townsend, while Russia and China are aggressively expanding their physical footprint in Africa, I am concerned with their even more aggressive and nefarious activity in cyberspace. Can you discuss how Russia and China have used cyber to advance their objectives in your AOR and how your team is combatting the threat?

General Townsend: Senator, I will be able to go into more detail in closed session but I can say this about Russia. Russia, and you are familiar with the oligarch Prigozhin, he has troll farms. He invests in troll farms in
Africa, and a number of those were involved in election interference globally, to include our country, and that is continuing. We are seeing that continue. With China, not as much, and I can probably go into more detail in closed session.

Senator Rounds: Thank you, sir. Also, I think Senator Inhofe hit on this but I would like to re-emphasize the challenges in the Sahrawi region and south Sahara regions, where you have challenges where literally you have got 40,000 people that have been displaced out of their homeland, waiting for a UN resolution, or at least some sort of an opportunity for independence, and certainly Morocco is right in the middle of it. And it seems to me that I think what Senator Inhofe has indicated is the fear that in the future if we are not observant to the real problems that have developed there that we are going to have a hotbed there, and it is going to be one that will not go away, and we are going to wonder why we suddenly have extremists developing in that region, recognizing, though, for the last 40 years they have been displaced from their homeland and the rest of the world has done nothing to try to resolve the situation.

I know that it is an area that you are aware of. Do you have any comments on what is going on right now in that region?
General Townsend: Senator, I think primarily this is a diplomatic or political program, less a military one, but for all the things that you just mentioned I agree with and we are watching it.

Senator Rounds: If it is not fixed diplomatically I fear that it will become a problem for the military.

General McKenzie, I really think, along with a lot of us here, that the way that we left Afghanistan on a date certain put our military men and women in a very precarious position, and that it was not the correct way to leave Afghanistan. We believe that it was reckless, haphazard, and it endangered the lives of our service men and women. Our deeds helped to reshape the current worldwide operational environment, where our adversaries have been emboldened to take greater risks in challenging our national security.

We also broke faith with my Afghans who directly supported U.S. forces. These brave Afghans are eligible for special immigrant visas, or SIVs, if they are trapped and have been threatened in Afghanistan. The Washington Post has reported that Qatar Airways has been chartering one to two U.S. government flights from Kabul every week, from August to December. These flights briefly stopped, then resumed after the new year began.

One of the SIV applicants who my office has assisted
for the last 8 months just recently was able to get out of
Kabul, in fact just this week, but he was forced to take a
rather adventurous and long, roundabout way through a third
country in order to get out.

Can you tell me, General, who specifically has been on
these weekly flights and whether they are the Afghans who
risked their lives to help our servicemembers?

General McKenzie: Senator, our responsibility in this
matter is to support the Department of State by providing
lily pads at Camp As Sayliyah in Qatar. When people come
out of Afghanistan, we process them and we make sure that
they are physically fit. We do all the things to move them
on to their final destination. Whether that is the United
States or another country, that is the State Department's
call, not our call. But we are fully committed to assisting
in that. The same thing in UAE, where there is a facility
that is not really run by the United States by rather by our
UAE partners.

As to your question about who is coming out, who is on
the flight that Qatar Airways is running every couple of
weeks, I believe they are largely SIV applicants. But,
Senator, I am actually not in minute-to-minute command of
that information. You know, that is actually run by the
Department of State. We support logistically, but those
decisions fall all within the Department of State.
I will simply close by saying we have the capability to support this effort with systems and procedures in place well into the future.

Senator Rounds: Thank you. And once again, thank you to both of you for your service to our country.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Rounds.

Senator Manchin, please.

Senator Manchin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you both again for your service, and thank you for all the hard work you are doing here.

I just have two questions, really, and whoever, I think probably General McKenzie, I might come to you. First of all, the Afghanistan situation. I was reading this morning an article that said basically the road from Kabul to Kandahar is now safe. Commerce is coming back a little bit and you are seeing different roadside things going on, and this and that. And basically for the peace in the country, do you see that basically to where people are embracing that and believe they have the ability to build any type of an economy whatsoever, or without our assistance? Because I read of the famine and I read of all the different hardships that are going on there also. The only economy they had was ours. That is gone.

General McKenzie: I do not believe it is a
particularly safe place to be. I think you can probably
drive on what we would call the Ring Road --

Senator Manchin: Yeah.

General McKenzie: -- from Kabul down to Kandahar in a
way that you could not do it in the past. But at the same
time we know that the Taliban is actually carrying out, you
know, searches for former Afghan government officials. We
know that women are entering a new and repressive existence
under their rule. So while you may not see the kind of
violence that you saw over the last 10 or 15 years there, I
am not sure it is a place where anyone would want to be, and
I believe the continued press of people that want to leave
Afghanistan is perhaps the best indicator of just what
conditions are like on the ground.

Senator Manchin: Us leaving Afghanistan the way we
did, does it leave us in worse shape as far as our allies?

General McKenzie: I think it is too soon to tell, but
I think our principal goal in Afghanistan was and remains to
ensure that attacks against the United States are not going
to be generated from there, from al Qaeda and from ISIS-K.

Senator Manchin: And right now you believe that we
have subdued that from happening, or are they building back
up again?

General McKenzie: Sir, I believe it is much harder to
do it now than it was before. It is not impossible to do
it. But I will have a considerable level of detail on that in the closed session.

Senator Manchin: Putin's war on Ukraine with the energy, that is an energy war, Putin's war on Ukraine and what we are going through there and also seeing us now, I have a little bit of a concern with the Administration's position on the energy we produce in our country and we could do a little bit more, working with our Canadian and our Mexican allies. With that being said, the Iran situation that we are talking, I think things have stalled there on the Iran deal again, but also I am concerned about Iran. The last deal that we made with Iran was not made on basically earning your way back into a productive society, from the standpoint we were giving them too many reliefs on their sanctions up front and they never did come through.

With the Iran situation right now and the oil that we have and the sanctions to be removed to get Iran back into the oil business, or bigger, and also in Venezuela, what effect do you think that would have on the Iranian government, for them to have that flow of cash again?

General McKenzie: Senator, I am probably not the best witness to answer that part of the question. I can tell you, from a military stability perspective, which I am confident to talk about, my principal interest in Iran is ensuring that they do not attack us or our partners in the
region, directly or indirectly, to keep Iran deterred from undertaking those kinds of activities. We have had some success doing that over the last couple of years -- not complete success.

Senator Manchin: But there are still, I mean, indications they are still basically one of the largest proliferators of terrorist attacks in that part of the world. Correct?

General McKenzie: That is absolutely correct, Senator. Senator Manchin: And basically with Yemen and all that they are still very much involved there, supplying them.

General McKenzie: Iran is the principal region that the conflict in Yemen cannot be brought to a conclusion, in my judgment.

Senator Manchin: General Townsend, given the situation we have in Africa right now, what are your thoughts about that?

General Townsend: Senator, I did not catch the middle part.

Senator Manchin: Basically the situation that we have in Africa right now, what are your concerns that you have, the most concerns that you do have?

General Townsend: Thank you. Thanks for repeating the question. Well, I think probably number one is ensuring that the U.S. maintains strategic access and influence, and
I think, for me, the primary concerns there are China, and to a little bit lesser degree, Russia. I can go more into detail on that in closed session, but I am concerned about China's basing ambitions in Africa. And then the second thing would be countering threats of violent extremists there, primarily al Qaeda's arm, al Shabbab, in East Africa.

Senator Manchin: Okay. If I can have one further question, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Go ahead.

Senator Manchin: My further question would be this. You know, I remember back that -- I was a young person back in the Cuban Missile Crisis and the concerns we had with nuclear attacks and things, all the tests we ran and everything, we were prepared for, and all the things we had to go through, the exercises. Today we have so many countries with a nuclear arsenal. What is the most dangerous you think that we have, the country that you are most concerned about with nuclear capabilities, that could do harm, not just basically upend the world, approach on the world order, if you will, but basically do damage to the homeland?

General Townsend: Senator, for me, I think I subscribe to what is laid out in our National Defense Strategy, which is China is the longer-term threat, the pacing threat, but today it is Russia.
General McKenzie: Senator, I think you have to respect capability. Russia has that capability. China aspires, perhaps, in the future, to have that capability. But I think the acute threat right now, of course, is Russia, and I agree with General Townsend.

Senator Manchin: Thank you.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Manchin.

Senator Ernst, please.

Senator Ernst: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and gentlemen, thank you very much for being here today and to your command teams as well. And General McKenzie, thank you so much for your commitment and your service during a very difficult time during that transition in the Middle East. We truly appreciate it. We are grateful.

General McKenzie, 2 weeks before the final withdrawal from Afghanistan the on-the-ground commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan at that time stated, in what are now open-source documents, that the U.S. forces had targeted and killed over 100 Taliban members who were moving on the city of Kabul on August 14th. Is that correct?

General McKenzie: Senator, I believe that is correct.

Senator Ernst: Okay. So we know at that time the situation was very tenuous. The Taliban was on the move. And an official DoD after-action report had clarified that the President and other senior DoD officials' statements,
some of which were under oath, and that both on-the-ground commanders and the intelligence community assessed that the government of Afghanistan's capacity to defend the country from being overrun by the Taliban was for 6 to 12 months following the U.S. withdrawal, and those statements were unequivocally false.

Were the assessments of Rear Admiral Peter Vasely and General Scott Miller, who were the last two commanders of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan, and yourself, were they passed on to the Office of the Secretary of Defense? Because I think there was a different assessment that came from you and the on-the-ground commanders. Were those assessments passed on to the Office of Secretary of Defense? Were they passed on to the State Department? Were the passed on to the National Security Council?

General McKenzie: Senator, I am confident that my assessments, the assessments of General Miller, as well as subordinate commanders, which informed my assessment, all those were passed to the Secretary, and, in fact, to the highest levels of government. And I was present at some of those meetings where those recommendations were discussed.

Senator Ernst: Were those assessments given to the President?

General McKenzie: I believe that at the very highest level, everyone saw and knew these assessments.
Senator Ernst: Okay. Were you ever involved in a discussion with the President when dissention was voiced?

General McKenzie: Senator, I will not be able to comment on any discussions I had with the President. But I can tell you this. My position, which I have expressed before, in front of this committee, was that in the fall of 2020, it was a probably a mistake to go below the level of 4,500, and in the spring of 2021, it was a mistake to go below the level of 2,500. If, in fact, we did so, we expected the government of Afghanistan to collapse. That reflected my opinion and also the opinion of General Miller.

We had an opportunity to freely express that opinion, and I am confident I was heard, and that is really all a military commander can ever hope to have the opportunity to do. Those decisions, to stay or go, and what force level you are going to put in Afghanistan are not inherently military decisions. Those are decisions made at the highest level of the United States.

And so I appreciated the opportunity to be a part of that discussion.

Senator Ernst: No, and I appreciate your clarity as well, General McKenzie. Thank you so much. And as well, now that we are out of Afghanistan we do see that China and Russia are becoming more active in Afghanistan, and they are seeking to capitalize on the void that has been left in that
What are some of the tools and capabilities that will be required by the United States to really deter our adversaries that are in Afghanistan right now?

General McKenzie: I think primarily it is how you work with the government of Afghanistan, such as it is, you know, as we have not formally recognized the Taliban as the formal government. But there are levers that we can apply against that entity -- economic levers, diplomatic levers. They seek diplomatic recognition, principally from the United States but also from other nations as well.

And so there are things that we can -- I believe, and it is not a military question, really -- there are things that we can do to shape their behavior, and I believe our diplomats are working very hard to that end right now.

Senator Ernst: Very good. Whole-of-government. And General Townsend, just very briefly, do we see a lot of Russian activity in Africa and the use of contractors, military contractors, other types of contractors, and what are those contractors, and give us your assessment of whether that makes our job more difficult in Africa.

General Townsend: Thanks, Senator. We do see a lot of Russian activity. It is almost all in the form of these private military contractors that you are referring to, namely the Wagner Group and some other smaller ones. They
are a malign influence. They do not follow anybody's rules. They do what they want. They buttress dictators. They do gross violations of human rights. I think it is bad for Africa's security and prosperity in the future.

Senator Ernst: Thank you very much, gentlemen. Again, thanks so much for your service. We truly do appreciate it. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Ernst.

Senator Kaine, please.

Senator Kaine: Thank you Mr. Chair and the committee members, and to Generals McKenzie and Townsend, thank you for your service and for your frequent and always illuminating appearances before the committee.

General Townsend, I want to talk to you about a situation that is not getting a lot of attention in the media these days, and that is the humanitarian crisis and war crimes being committed by many sides in Ethiopia and the Tigray region. The ongoing battle, 20 months now, between the Ethiopian military and the Tigray region forces has created a huge humanitarian crisis, war crimes, famine.

You know, it is important that we focus as much energy as we are focusing on the situation in Ukraine right now, but one of the things that I grieve a little bit is when we focus on one part of the world atrocities and other parts of the world sort of go below the radar screen. And so whether
it in Ethiopia Tigray or whether it is persecution of the
Rohingyas in Burma, or whether it is the ongoing
humanitarian crisis in Yemen, some of these crises grab the
world's attention, grab America's attention, and some of
these crises do not.

And there are many, many reasons for that. I am not
going to speculate on them now. But in a situation like the
ongoing atrocities in Ethiopia, which are internal civil
strife although there are presence of foreign actors
inciting that strife, or supporting signs in that strife,
what can AFRICOM do, what can the United States do to try to
advance a better chapter for people of Ethiopia?

General Townsend: Thanks, Senator. As you stated,
that civil war erupted in late 2020, and so civil war has
played out for over a year there, on top of a humanitarian
crisis there, famine, et cetera. And it started culminating
there at the end of last year, it looked like the capital,
Addis, may fall. The Ethiopian government rallied and they
pushed the Trigrayans back into Tigray, and today it is sort
of quiet. But we think we are maybe in a period in between
conflict erupting again. I hope that is not the case.

I know that there is a lot of diplomacy going on.
There is a U.S. special envoy, there is a UN special envoy,
to work this. I think both sides right now are trying to
reset themselves and gather strength. And this diplomacy
includes our efforts as well. We have been involved in supporting State Department diplomatic efforts in the region. Right now, for AFRICOM, we are watching and assisting, buttressing the State Department.

Senator Kaine: I appreciate that, and I just want to again underline this point. When there are crises and challenges in the world people turn to the United States for help. You know, it is interesting that, again, and it is worthy and important that we be paying the attention we are paying to the Russian illegal war against Ukraine, and yet in Ethiopia there are war crimes occurring, there is genocidal activity occurring. It may not be an invasion of sovereignty by a neighbor there are neighbors and other nations that are inciting violence and supporting violence. And, you know, I hope that we may all strive to be even-handed in the attention that we pay to humanitarian crises all over the world.

With that, Mr. Chair, I yield back.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, Senator Kaine. Let me now recognize Senator Tuberville, please.

Senator Tuberville: Well thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you guys for your service. I know you are looking forward to doing something else possible for the next few years.

General Townsend, as you have mentioned in your
testimony, Russia has continued to encourage chaos in the AFRICOM AOR via the Wagner Group. What has been done to counter their efforts and what do you think need to continue to be done?

General Townsend: So the Russian efforts, as I mentioned earlier, are predominantly done through these private military companies like Wagner, and they are present in Libya, in number, to a lesser extent in Sudan, they essential run the Central African Republic, and they are now in Mali, and gathering strength in Mali, over 1,000 Wagner operators there now.

What we have been doing is shining a spotlight on that with information operations and some public diplomacy and advising our African partners to try to steer clear of these groups. I think that they are not going to help, our African partners, and I think that the government and the people of Mali are going to regret inviting Wagner into their country.

Senator Tuberville: As we speak we have one military base in Africa. In your opinion, do we need two?

General Townsend: In my view I do not believe we do need any other permanent U.S. installations. Our presence and our activities there is not dependent on permanent bases in Africa.

Senator Tuberville: Okay. Thank you.
General McKenzie, recently we have seen several attempts to block weapons sales to Saudis and UAE and Egypt. Those attempts, we all know, could severely weaken our influence in CENTCOM AOR. Even President Biden recognizes that, and has changed his mind on some of these in the last year.

What have the Saudis and the Emiratis and the Egyptians specifically requested that we have not given them?

General McKenzie: Senator, let me just begin by saying we remain the partner of choice for all these countries -- Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE. They value their relationship with us. They find it frustrating that, in the case of UAE, they have expressed an interest in the F-35, the fifth-generation fighter, and we are in a process with them right now to see how that is going to work out. That is one example.

Saudi Arabia is also interested in advanced aircraft, advanced air defense systems, which, generally speaking, we have been able to give Saudi Arabia. In the case of Egypt, I think we have good news in that we are going to provide them with F-15s, which was a long, hard slog. They felt it was too long, that it took too long. And, Senator, that is the basic criticism of our ability to provide weapons to our friends and partners. It takes too long to actually get them. It moves in fits and starts.
And, of course, with our weapons come our values, Senator. And so they are not going to be able to do anything they want with those weapons. They are going to have to be applied in a manner consistent with the law of armed conflict and the law of war. You do not have that caveat if you buy a Russian or Chinese system. On the other hand, the Russian and the Chinese system cannot complete with the ability of an American system.

Senator Tuberville: Thank you. General Townsend, in 2021, China unveiled its plan to complete several thorium-powered nuclear reactors in Africa. Thorium, unlike uranium, cannot be used for nuclear weapons but can provide cheap, clean energy that China can export and impose on low-income countries. The most concerning part to me is we realized this years ago but our Department of Energy gave this technology to China.

As you mentioned in your opening statement, there are many reasons and resources within your AOR that are tied to the U.S. transition to clean energy. If China integrates thorium nuclear reactors to the Belt and Road Initiative, would that pose a threat to the United States?

General Townsend: Senator, I do not know enough about the Chinese nuclear reactor program to say that it proposes a threat to the United States. However, I know that Africa is a source of vast deposits of strategic minerals that
America and the world needs for our technology in the 21st century, and China is working hard to corner the market on those resources. I am more worried about that, I think, than Chinese nuclear energy projects in Africa.

Senator Tuberville: Again, thank you both of you for your service.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, Senator Tuberville.

Let me now recognize Senator Warren, please.

Senator Warren: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to both of our witnesses for being here today and for your many years of service to our nation.

The RAND Corporation, a nonpartisan research organization that studies national security issues, recently published a report that found a number of pitfalls in the way that our military prevents, investigates, and responds to reports of civilian harm, including -- and I want to read from the report -- "DoD is not adequately organized, trained, or equipped to fulfill its current responsibilities for addressing civilian harm," end quote.

Now I think that is a pretty damning finding, particularly as this is far from a new issue for the United States. I know that Secretary Austin has asked DoD to develop an action plan, and I agree with him that protection of civilians is both a strategic and a moral imperative.
So I want to learn more about your work to prevent civilian harm in your respective commands. General Townsend, if I can I will start with you on this. AFRICOM provides a quarterly report updating the public on the status of all reports of civilian casualties, and it issued one just late last week. What benefit do you see in regular reporting of civilian casualties to the public?

General Townsend: Senator, I believe that being transparent is probably -- you know, it shows the difference between us and, well, for example, the Russians in Ukraine right now. So I believe that publishing those reports publicly and regularly, on a routine basis, is our best tool for gaining the trust of the American public.

Senator Warren: And I agree with you, and I commend you for doing this. You know, that kind of regular transparency shows that the command is prioritizing and investigating claims of civilian harm, and I would like to see that kind of regular reporting from all of the combatant commanders.

So, General, let me ask you another question about this. Would you agree that there are several reputable, trusted NGOs and independent observers in civil society that produce reliable reporting on civilian harm?

General Townsend: I think I would.

Senator Warren: Good. Has AFRICOM undertaken a formal
process to incorporate feedback from these groups to improve how it tracks and responds to civilian harm?

General Townsend: Yes, Senator. We take their feedback with every report they make.

Senator Warren: Well, that is important, but let me ask you. Do you have a formal process for doing this or do you just kind of integrate it as you go along?

General Townsend: We have a portal that anyone that has access to the internet can report civilian casualties or take exception to our evaluation of those.

Senator Warren: Good. I am glad to hear this. You know, these groups can provide essential information, not only to accurately identify where you need to investigate claims of civilian harm but also to help prevent the killing of civilians in future strikes. RAND's report recommended that DoD engage with outside groups more, and I am glad to see you doing this.

General McKenzie, if I can let me talk with you a minute here. The vast majority of the civilian casualties caused by the U.S. military operations have occurred in CENTCOM's AOR. Not only that but reporting from the New York Times found major instances of civilian harm in Syria that had been covered up. Does CENTCOM have an established process for incorporating feedback from trusted civil society groups to improve the ways that it prevents and
responds to instances of civilian harm?

General McKenzie: Senator, we did, and it was not as robust, as straightforward a program as it should have been, in the wake of the RAND report and other reports. But we have taken ten discrete actions that are designed all to more formalize and provide additional oversight on the possibility of civilian casualties.

Senator Warren: Good. I am very glad to hear that, General, because given their expertise I think we have a lot to learn from these groups, and it can help improve processes. It is long past time that the United States took seriously the impact of the way that hit treats civilian harm, and I am glad that Secretary Austin is addressing this. But meaningful change is going to take buy-in from the two of you, from your successors, and from the rest of the DoD leadership.

I am working on legislation to address these problems, but in the meantime I will be paying close attention to the Department's action plan and to your work implementing it, in the hopes that some of the principles that we have talked about today will be implemented soon.

So thank you very much. Thank you for your work on this.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Warren.
Senator Tillis, please.

Senator Tillis: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Gentlemen, thank you for being here.

General Townsend, the prior administration reduced nearly all of the 700 troops that we had in Somalia. Now you are commuting from Djibouti and Kenya for counterterrorism over-the-horizon operations. How is that working now and what are we going to do to increase effectiveness and reduce risk?

General Townsend: Senator, in my view we are marching in place, at best. We may be backsliding in the security in Somalia, the security situation, and that is for a number of reasons, not just our commuting to work. But it is also political dysfunction in Mogadishu, and it is also inactivity by the AMISOM partners. Those also factor in. I just think that what we are doing is not providing sufficient pressure, and the best we can do is maintain a secure area around the bases that we return to, and we really cannot get at the al Shabbab problem set.

Senator Tillis: General McKenzie, you have had a similar challenge with the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and we have not seen any strikes since our withdrawal last year. I suspect some of that is information gathering, a lot of logistical challenges. But what are we doing there to overcome the massive reduction in our CT efforts in
Afghanistan, and if you could, give me an update on how ISIS and al Qaeda are doing rebuilding their efforts in Afghanistan.

General McKenzie: Senator, let me preface what I am going to say by saying in the closed session that will follow I am prepared to provide an exhaustive laydown of exactly what we are doing in Afghanistan, at a very granular level of detail. So I am prepared to do that.

Senator Tillis: Great.

General McKenzie: I would tell you we have not undertaken any strikes in Afghanistan since the 1st of September. We continue to watch carefully as ISIS grows. They have gone through the winter. They have been able to carry out some high-profile attacks. They still aspire to attack the United States and our partners abroad. And so we are going to watch very carefully what the Taliban is able to do and not able to do in terms of controlling ISIS, because as we all know, Taliban actually will fight ISIS. They have a theological dispute so they are in opposition. Al Qaeda is a little more difficult to understand because of their cultural interweaving with the Taliban. They still have an aspirational desire to attack us. It will be harder for the Taliban, I predict, to ultimately control their actions.

Senator Tillis: With Haqqanis in the Taliban
government, how well are they doing countering the al Qaeda threat in Afghanistan?

General McKenzie: I think they have done some things that are very public in order to limit them. I think it remains to be seen if this is actually going to be translated into action.

Senator Tillis: Yeah. I doubt that it will.

General Townsend, when you look at these maps that you have about the footprint in your area of responsibility for Russia and China, are we kind of -- you used the words "marching in place" with respect to the CT threat? And in answer to the prior question, are we more or less marching in place or are we gaining any ground, particularly over China's, what I see as a massive investment and increasing footprint in Africa?

General Townsend: Senator, you are right. You just said China's massive investment. We do not have to compete with China everywhere. We have to be selective about where we compete with China, and I think we are being successful in that targeted competition.

Senator Tillis: On the PMCs that Russia has, the 4,000 or 5,000, you mentioned that a part of what you are doing is exposing their activities, their malign activities in the area. Give me an example of one or two that are publicly known that the American people should be aware of that
Russia's malign, savage influence not only in Ukraine but down in Africa.

General Townsend: I think some great examples were in spring of 2020, when Russia provided fighters to their mercenaries in Libya, and we were able to conduct an aerial photography ambush and expose to the world the provision of those fighters going to Libya, that wound up in the hands of Wagner.

I think probably the best one, though, to get at the heart of the matter you are talking about there, is as the fighting ended, as the civil war ended in Libya, Wagner began a withdrawal from along the line of contact there, and they left behind anti-tank mines, anti-personnel mines, and booby traps, IEDs, in their wake. And one of the most heinous ones was found in a teddy bear when they withdrew.

Senator Tillis: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, Senator Tillis.

Senator Kelly, please.

Senator Kelly: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and General McKenzie, General Townsend, thank you for being here.

General McKenzie, congratulations on your upcoming retirement on the 1st of April.

General Townsend, I want to follow up a question that Senators Tillis and Tuberville asked specifically about the Wagner Group. I know that you share this committee's
concern about the Russian illegal invasion of Ukraine, and our allies have come together to cut off Putin's support around the world and the influence that he has. And I am really glad we have taken these strong measures necessary, and we need to do more. But we also need to continue to monitor Russian-backed activity around the world, so specifically with regard to the Wagner Group in Africa, I find this increasing presence disturbing, and affects our strategic goals in the area.

So, General, specifically, how do you see the Wagner Group's activity impacting our efforts to, one, suppress violent extremist groups, and two, support a transition to democratic governance in the region?

General Townsend: Well thanks, Senator. I think in a number of ways. First, for example, overflight permissions. So with a continent as vast as Africa we absolutely depend on air movement for everything. And when you see Wagner move in they impose overflight restrictions, either through the government withdrawing permissions for overflight, or, in the case of Libya, Wagner importing sophisticated advanced surface-to-air missile systems to protect their activities there, but also deny the airspace. We can see some of this playing out in Mali, as Wagner first started arriving there, and now overflight permissions are becoming more challenging then.
Then, secondly, usurping partnerships. So as we have seen—and it happened just now in Mali—the Malian government has asked the French forces to depart and instead have invited in this Russian PMC. And I think that is disturbing. It is impacting our partnership with that same government as well, and I think it is not good for Mali's future.

Senator Kelly: And what do you think the strategic goals that they might be advancing for Russian leadership would be? What is the overall goal here?

General Townsend: So for Wagner, they are guns for hire. They are a for-profit organization. And they are going to be extracting natural resources of Africa. We see this in all the countries that they are located in, whether it is oil, gas, gold, diamonds, strategic minerals. That is what they are going to be going after, and that is how they are probably going to earn their remittance.

But what they are doing for the Kremlin, though, is they are usurping those partnerships. They are displacing Western influence, like France, for example, in Mali. And I think they are trying to block us out, and Wagner is trying to make a profit while they do it.

Senator Kelly: And it sounds like they are being somewhat successful. So what do we need to be doing? What kind of changes do we need to make, either alone or with our
partners, to counter this expanding Russian influence in the region?

General Townsend: Senator, despite their recent gains or success in Mali -- and I think that remains to be seen whether they will be successful there or not. I predict they will not be successful in the long run. An example, though, is in Libya, where they have worn out their welcome there, and the even the Libyans who the Russians supported in the civil war now want them to depart. So actually I think that they are probably their own worst enemy.

Senator Kelly: So the Libyan people are now against this, I do not want to call it an occupation, but this force being there and amongst the community. It seems that in Mali they do have support, general support from the public. Do you see that turning at some point?

General Townsend: I do, and they are in the very early stages. They have only been arriving in the last couple of months, and they are preparing to get under operations. So I think they will wear out their welcome. I do believe that.

Senator Kelly: Thank you, General. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Kelly.

Senator Cotton, please.

Senator Cotton: I want to return to what Senator Kelly
and earlier Senator Rounds were speaking about, the Wagner Group. General McKenzie, the Wagner Group is a Russian paramilitary organization run by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close ally of Vladimir Putin?

General McKenzie: Sir, I believe it is, Senator.

Senator Cotton: And I know that they are active in Africa. There have also been reports that they have recently been deployed into Ukraine as well.

I will give this to either one of you. The Wagner Group, is it fair to characterize it as essentially an arm of the Russian state?

General Townsend: That is my view of it.

Senator Cotton: Yeah, that is my view of it too, much more so than, say, any American security company would be linked to the United States government. Correct, General Townsend?

General Townsend: I would agree with that.

Senator Cotton: General McKenzie, this was a year before your time but I bet you remember it, something called the Battle of Khasham in Syria. Do you want to tell us a little bit about what happened in Syria in early 2018?

General McKenzie: I believe it was in February of that year. A large group of Wagner-centered fighters tried to cross the Euphrates River down around Deir ez-Zor. We brought them under fire and killed several hundred of them.
It was a direct attack on us. And I think we defeated them in a pretty shocking manner that was widely reported.

Senator Cotton: Do you remember the numerical superiority that these Wagner mercenaries had against U.S. forces?

General McKenzie: It was probably 10 to 1.

Senator Cotton: Ten to one, they outnumbered U.S. forces.

General McKenzie: Probably.

Senator Cotton: I believed at the time, and probably still do, we had a deconfliction hotline set up with Russian commanders in the region. Right?

General McKenzie: That is correct, Senator.

Senator Cotton: And Secretary Mattis, at the time, testified that we used that deconfliction hotline to ensure, with Russian counterparts, that these were not Russian soldiers. Is that right?

General McKenzie: Sir, I believe that is correct.

Senator Cotton: I think his exact testimony here was that once we confirmed that "Once we confirmed that Russia did not claim these soldiers as their own I ordered that they be destroyed, and they were destroyed."

General McKenzie: Sir, that is correct.

Senator Cotton: What do you think that tells us about the quality of Wagner's mercenaries, whether they are in
Syria, Africa, or now in Ukraine?

General McKenzie: Well, I think it tells you that any mercenary force is going to have a qualitative disadvantage. It also tells you a lot about our capabilities, Senator.

Senator Cotton: Yeah. And also if they are fighting against an extremely determined people that are digging in their heels within their homeland, like the Ukrainian army, that maybe we should not think that they, or even Russian regulars are ten feet tall.

General McKenzie: Sir, I could not agree more.

Senator Cotton: General Townsend, I want to return to something that you mentioned to Senator Tuberville, that Africa has vast strategic minerals, which is correct. It is also the case that they are not exclusive to Africa. You can find these minerals in a lot of places around the world. It is just that we have largely declined to mine them around the world, and now it is predominantly mined in Africa. Is that right?

General Townsend: That is right, Senator.

Senator Cotton: Senator Kelly and I have introduced something called the REEShore Act, with bills to shore up domestic and defense supply chains for these critical minerals. Do you think that China is targeting these minerals in its Belt and Road Initiative in Africa?

General Townsend: I do. There are some minerals, and
I did not provide the chart now but I can have it in closed session. There are some minerals that are if not unique to Africa, they are predominantly found there, and all of our countries, to include us, rely on those imports. And I believe China is maneuvering to secure those.

Senator Cotton: Probably a bad idea to make ourselves dependent on China, ourselves being the civilized world, dependent on China mining these minerals in Africa, wouldn't you say?

General Townsend: I would agree.

Senator Cotton: Okay. General McKenzie, I want to turn to a topic that Senator Reed and Senator King addressed as well, about a nuclear deal with Iran. They both asked you kind of in the abstract if it is better to have a nuclear deal with Iran that prevents them from getting a nuclear weapon, irrespective of their aggression in the region. In the abstract I would agree with that, and I think you did as well. But the deal actually needs to stop them from getting a nuclear weapon or becoming a threshold state to achieve that goal, right?

General McKenzie: Senator, I would agree. Yes, sir.

Senator Cotton: And I would say that just like the 2015 deal did not achieve that objective, certainly the media reports about the directions of the current negotiations would not achieve that objective either.
What kind of message are we sending to both Iran and Russia, who is acting as Iran's lawyer in these negotiations, and to allies like the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, when Iran is, itself, shooting ballistic missile as they did over the weekend, or supplying, as you said, their proxies in Yemen with the missiles and drones to shoot into downtown Dubai or downtown Abu Dhabi or into the Al Dhafra Base, where we have soldiers? What kind of message does that send to Iran and Russia, on the one hand, and our allies?

General McKenzie: Senator, my share of the task is to deter Iran from large-scale attacks, and we have had some success doing that. Our success has not been perfect. But Iran has largely been deterred from launching direct attacks on us over the past couple of years. I would not speak for the future, and I would agree that they are actively fomenting malign activities across the region. Their intent is to do it at a low enough level that it will not, in their view at least, disrupt the negotiating process. Again, it is my judgment that is a dangerous position for them to have.

Senator Cotton: Well that would be the intent, usually, of weaker revisionist powers throughout history, to always operate right below the level of retaliation and to, therefore, gradually accumulate more strategic advantage.
Right?

General McKenzie: Sir, it is an asymmetric approach that is founded in history, as you noted.

Senator Cotton: All right. Thank you.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Cotton.

Senator Cramer, please.

Senator Cramer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you both for being here and for your service.

I want to drill down a little bit on where we just wrapped up, General McKenzie, with Senator Cotton, as he ran out of time. I guess for me there are a couple of things. And, by the way, your characterization of CENTCOM as the land of imperfect solutions describes the United States Senate as well, and we do better to realize that sometimes as a body.

But anyway, that said, there are a couple of things specific to, I think, where Senator Cotton was going and where you were going. One are the timelines themselves. The sunsets create almost an implication of license to accumulate the very thing we are trying to prevent them from getting. There is that, and then there is just now to compel compliance. And maybe you could elaborate a little bit for me a better understanding of the relief of sanctions, again, getting back to Senator King asked the relevant question, in the give and take. So the sanctions
relief that provides money and then the time that the sunsets provide, are we balancing that right? Maybe that is the way to ask the question.

General McKenzie: I would defer to the Department of State and to our negotiators for the details on that. But I would tell you, just from where I sit, my guidance is clearly we do not want Iran to possess a nuclear weapon. And so the best way to get to that solution is for them to agree not to pursue it. They may be closer than we like when we reach that level of agreement. We do not know. That is a matter for the diplomats, not for me.

Senator Cramer: Let me ask this then. In your opinion, do you think that the IRGC belongs on the foreign terrorist organization list, and should that be under consideration in this negotiation?

General McKenzie: Well, from everything that can see from where I sit, the IRGC is a terrorist organization.

Senator Cramer: Well, I would say you have a pretty good seat, pretty good view of that, so thank you for that. I also then want to -- none of these, by the way, were in my original list of things to talk about -- but in your response to, I think it was Senator Tuberville, you talked about the other relationships, the allied relationships. You specifically brought up F-35 sales to UAE, for example, as an example. And you talked about the long slog.
Specifically to the UAE and the F-35s -- and, in fact, let me back up for a second. I just read a report -- I cannot keep track of my weeks -- either earlier this week or last, I think it was last week, reports of leadership at UAE, Saudi leadership not even taking phone calls from U.S. leadership as a result of some of this. Do you think the F-35 sales to UAE should have gone through sooner, and should we be doing it as soon as possible? You know, what are the ramifications if we do not do it in this imperfect solution world we live in?

General McKenzie: Well, I think, in general, any time we undertake weapons sales to a foreign nation you want to do it as soon as practically possible. In an advanced system like the F-35 -- and I am not an expert on the procurement and delivery of that weapon system -- it is going to take some time to get there. It is not a system that you can build rapidly beyond the existing scale of production, so it is going to take some time to be there. But I think our friends sometimes find it frustrating when the timeline slips and goes well into the future.

Senator Cramer: So do you have a basic philosophy of how you have the appropriate guardrails in our system that provides a comfort level for the overseers who have to provide a comfort level for the people we work for and then maintaining those relationships?
General McKenzie: Sir, I can talk more about it in a closed session, but briefly the answer is yes, I am comfortable with those guardrails.

Senator Cramer: All right. Thank you, General McKenzie.

General Townsend, in my last minute just some questions of my favorite topic, and honestly, we all, I think, struggle with the maintenance of legacy systems and making room for modern systems, particularly in the ISR realm. So I am just going to ask you a very open-ended question.

Are you getting the ISR you need? Are you concerned about any gaps in ISR coverage, and do you have any thoughts or, literally and seriously and sincerely, any thoughts for us as we consider the balance of all of that?

General Townsend: Thanks, Senator. No combatant commander has the ISR they wish to have. AFRICOM does the best work we can with the ISR that we are allocated. I could certainly use more ISR.

Your point about the legacy ISR systems and transitioning to more capable systems, I think that is something that our nation is doing and our services are doing for the future. We have to do that because we need platforms that are more capable against the higher-end competitors. However, in theaters like mine, and even General McKenzie's, the legacy ISR systems that we have work
just fine. We do not exquisite, high-end capabilities to do the work we are doing in Africa. But I do understand why our Department needs those for other theaters.

Senator Cramer: I appreciate you both. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Cramer.

Senator Rosen, please.

Senator Rosen: Thank you, Chairman Reed and Ranking Member Inhofe for holding this hearing. I would also like to thank Generals McKenzie and Townsend for testifying today and, of course, for your service to our country. And General McKenzie, as this will be the last time before our committee, thank you for your decades of distinguished service to our nation, for leading the brave men and women of our Armed Forces and navigating the many challenges within Central Command. Thank you.

And General McKenzie, I want to talk a little bit about combatting Iranian aggression. As I have noted in several previous hearings, Iran and Iranian-backed militia groups are increasingly targeting U.S. installations and servicemembers in both Iraq and Syria via drone and rocket attacks. We do not even have to look beyond this weekend, when the IRGC claimed credit for missile attacks on the U.S. Consulate in Irbil. On a regular basis Iran, the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism threatens U.S. and allied
interests in the Middle East and around the world, via both
direct attacks, like the ones we have just witnessed, and
through its support for Hezbollah and the Islamic republic's
other terrorist proxies.

So can you discuss the threat Iranian-aligned militia
groups in the Middle East pose to U.S. troops and our
allies, and how do you believe the U.S. should respond, how
are you addressing the threat, and does CENTCOM have the
necessary authorities to target these militias, other than
the ability to act in self-defense?

General McKenzie: Senator, first of all you are right.
Iran foments a particularly virulent form of anti-
Americanism across the theater. It is a long-term objective
of Iran for the United States to be forced to exit the
region. They see the principal battleground for that as
being Iraq because that is where we are the most
distributed. That is where we are most vulnerable. And for
the last couple of years they have actually tried to pursue
a political solution to that. That has not worked out for
them. The seated government of Iraq is interested in
maintaining a long-term relationship with the United States,
and, in, fact, with NATO.

And what that has done is it has driven Iran and its
proxies, its proxies in particular, to seek kinetic
solutions to push us out. They believe that by causing a
significantly high level of pain we are going to leave, and
that actually, of course, has not proven to be the case.

For one thing, over the past several months, they have
attacked us. They have not been particularly successful
with those attacks, and there are a number of reasons for
that. First of all, commanders on the ground, our
commanders on the ground, have been very aggressive in
protecting their men and women, by actions that we take when
we learn of an impending attack. Second, our anti-drone
systems are beginning to work. It has taken us awhile to
get to this point, but I am gratified to see that capability
coming forward. And finally, their own attacks have not
always been the most artfully conceived and executed.

One point I would make, we do not believe the attack of
this last weekend, the ballistic missiles, was actually
targeted against us. We believe it was going against other
targets, hit near us, and if that would have been the same —
and I can talk more about it in the closed session.

But in order to close out your question, ma'am, I do
have the authorities I need to act in U.S. Central Command
against Iranian proxies, should the threat require me to do
that.

Senator Rosen: Thank you. I want to move on a little
bit to Israel. Now that Israel is within CENTCOM's area of
responsibility it is my sincere hope that this transfer will
potentiate even greater military cooperation between U.S., Israel, and our shared goals, as well as greater cooperation between our Arab and Israeli partners.

So, General McKenzie, building on Senator Gillibrand's question on leveraging the Abraham Accords, are there plans to integrate joint exercises with Israel and Arab states who signed normalization agreements with Israel, and what do you see as the greatest benefits and opportunities to Israeli inclusion in CENTCOM?

General McKenzie: Senator, I would say that bringing CENTCOM into the AOR really operationalizes the Abraham Accord, and it puts a military component to the broad normalization that is already proceeding with Israel and many of its Arab neighbors.

Now in terms of practical things we can do right now, number one is integrated air and missile defense. Everyone in the region is seized by the Iranian threat and they want to be able to defend themselves against that threat, and that threat is primarily in the air. Setting aside the proxies, which we talked about, it is primarily Iran's ballistic missiles, their cruise missiles, and their UASs. So that is a significant issue for nations in the region. Israel is going to be able to assist us in all of those areas.

Additionally, in specific answer to your question, we
have been and will continue to expand Israel's participation and exercises across the region. That is an invaluable tool for getting partners to know each other and laying plans for the future.

Senator Rosen: Thank you. And Mr. Chairman, I have questions for the record for General Townsend about Chinese technology in Africa, and I will submit them for the record.

Thank you both.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Rosen.

Senator Blackburn, please.

Senator Blackburn: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to each of you for being with us today.

General McKenzie, I want to go back to this Iran deal, because the threat assessment, the annual threat assessment noted that they anticipated that Iran would continue to threaten U.S. interests, U.S. individuals. I have read public reports of them threatening you. I know that this Iran deal would unlock billions of dollars for Iran, and I am very concerned about what they would do with that money. They have already recently, and in the recent past, the past decade, $16 billion is what we know of that they have transferred to these terrorist groups.

So the IRGC, you mentioned, as Senator Rosen just talked about the attack this week, but Iran goes in to fill these power vacuums. We have seen, and we have talked a
good bit about AFRICOM and Wagner and the way they are filling that, and General Kurilla, when he was with us for his confirmation hearing, touched on the risk that sanctions relief to Iran would make to us and to our interests because of this money transfer.

Do you agree with General Kurilla as we are talking about a new JCPOA or a new Iran deal and unleashing all of this money to them? Are you concerned about that and how that would be used by these proxy groups and the way they would benefit from that?

General McKenzie: Senator, our primary policy objective with Iran is to prevent them from having a nuclear weapon.

Senator Blackburn: And we realize that and appreciate that.

General McKenzie: And so I am not an expert on the negotiations that are currently going on, so I am not able to give you --

Senator Blackburn: Is your expectation they would be more lethal, that they would move forward with developing --

General McKenzie: I would say that there is a risk that they could use that money in ways that we would not want them to use that money. I can certainly say that is a risk. But I think that we would have to balance that if we got a good agreement that prevented them from obtaining a
nuclear weapon.

Senator Blackburn: Okay. All right. So I know that
the JCPOA, under the terms for that they could buy weapons
from Russia and China as of October 2020, and they would be
able to buy advanced weaponry and ballistic missiles from
Russia next year. So what is your concern about their
ability to purchase arms from Russia or China? Would they
be able to purchase even more lethal weapons, if they get
that sanctions release, and what would that do with the
capabilities for the Houthis or for any of these other
terrorist organizations?

General McKenzie: Senator, over the last 4 or 5 years,
under a very significant sanctions regime, Iran has made
remarkable advances in their ballistic missiles. I believe
if open to bringing in advanced weapons from other states,
such as you have named, it would increase the risk in the
theater considerably.

Senator Blackburn: Have we provided everything to the
Israeli government that they have requested in order to
respond to an Iranian nuclear buildup?

General McKenzie: Senator, at my level, at the Chief
of Defense level, we are in complete agreement about the way
ahead and about what we are giving them. I cannot talk
about the whole-of-government, but I can talk about it in my
--
Senator Blackburn: Well, I was pleased to see the realignment of Israel from EUCOM to CENTCOM. I felt like that was the right move, and I was happy to see CENTCOM's combined naval exercise involving Israel, the UAE, Bahrain. That was last November. So how are you actively working with partner nations to integrate the IDF into the regional security architecture?

General McKenzie: I think the low-hanging fruit is an integrated air and missile defense. All of these nations see the threat from Iran -- the ballistic missile threat, the cruise missile threat, the unmanned aerial system threat -- and they want to be able to defend themselves. And I think that is where we can make great headway involving Israel but also other nations in the region, and I will be able to talk a little bit more about that in the closed session.

Senator Blackburn: In the closed session. Thank you all. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Blackburn.

Senator Peters, please.

Senator Peters: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Gentlemen, first let me congratulate both of you on your upcoming retirements, and thank you for your collective 82 years of experience between the two of you. That is truly remarkable and outstanding service to our country, and
certainly our nation owes both of you a debt of gratitude for your sacrifice and commitment, so thank you so much.

In the last few months, the United States has announced the rerouting of $67 million of security assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces to support members of the military as Lebanon grapples with some very severe financial challenges. Notably, the aid package will include some livelihood support payments, and these will go directly to troops to help them weather the extreme economic conditions that the country is facing right now.

So General McKenzie, my question for you, sir, is can you discuss why supporting the Lebanese Armed Forces is a national security interest for the United States, and more broadly, what the U.S. can do to support Lebanon during this time of severe crisis there?

General McKenzie: Senator, I support the $67 million and I support it more broadly as well. It is our view that the LAF, the Lebanese Armed Forces, are the sole representative of the state of Lebanon in terms of defending itself. As you know, there are competitor entities in Lebanon -- LH, Lebanese Hezbollah, as an example -- that exercise a malign influence, not only inside Lebanon but indeed regionally from a Lebanon base. Our best hope to keep the lid on Lebanon is to continue to support the LAF as the representative of the state of Lebanon.
And I will just say briefly, the financial situation in Lebanon is dire. I am not an economist but I can recognize it probably is the worst I have ever seen it, and this money is going to be critical to maintaining cohesion inside the LAF. And they have performed very well in the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion. It was the LAF that did a lot of great work there.

So I think it is in all of our interests for the LAF to be supported, and supported appropriately, and that would include allowing its soldiers to feed their families.

Senator Peters: General McKenzie, my next question is for you as well. According to UNICEF, at least 47 children have been killed or maimed in Yemen just in January and February of this year. In total, at least 10,000 minors have been killed or injured since the Saudi-led coalition began their bombing in 2015. And this is in the context of a conflict in which the UN estimates nearly 377,000 people have died since the conflict began. And now the World Food Programme is warning that 13 million Yemenis are facing starvation.

My question for you, General, is very forward. What leverage does the United States have to bring all the parties to the table, to end this conflict, and what are we doing to make it happen?

General McKenzie: Senator, so it is my assessment --
and again, I only see a part of the problem; we have a negotiator who works this at a higher level — I believe that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is willing to come to an agreement with events in Yemen. I believe that is attainable from their end. I think it is the Houthis who are intent on continuing to prosecute this fight, and I believe they are prodded directly by their Iranian masters. And that is the reason that the situation exists now, where they are firing almost daily weapons into Saudi Arabia, and of course as recently as several weeks ago began to fire ballistic missiles into UAE. In both cases they were and are prodded to do it, again, by their sponsors, Iran, who has no interest, actually, in this war coming to an end, no interest in solving the humanitarian dispute. And I do not dispute the tragedy, the tremendous tragedy of children being maimed by these weapons. I understand that completely.

But there is a path forward. Some of the parties are willing to take that path. Unfortunately, not all of the parties are willing to take that path.

Senator Peters: Well, I appreciate your efforts in working to try to get to that path. Thank you for that.

General Townsend, in the spring of 2020, some of Michigan's National Guardsmen engaged with military partners in Liberia. As part of AFRICOM's Command Advice,
Investigations, and Coordination Initiative. I would like to hear your assessment of how effective this initiative has been in promoting effective military legal frameworks within a variety of our African partners.

General Townsend: Well, Senator, much like our values and our democracy we also try to pass on our views of the rule of law whenever we engage with our African partners. So that program that you are talking about is part of that effort. Every training that we do has discussion about the rule of law and the law of armed conflict. That program, you can debate how effective it is, but I think we have to actually try. Every time we engage with our African partners it is important that we talk about our values and the rule of law and civilian control of the military, et cetera. So I think it is an important program.

Senator Peters: Thank you, General. Again, congratulations to both of you on your retirement. Well deserved. Thank you for your service to our country.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Peters.

Senator Hawley, please.

Senator Hawley: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thanks to both of you for being here.

General McKenzie, if I could start with you. You directed U.S. Army Central to investigate the events
surrounding the Abbey Gate bombing on August 26, 2021. Is that correct?

General McKenzie: Senator, that is correct.

Senator Hawley: And they issued, in fact, a report.

Is that correct?

General McKenzie: Senator, they did.

Senator Hawley: Totaling about, I think, 2,000 pages.

You said, in a letter to the Secretary, "I have reviewed the investigation completed at my direction by U.S. Army Central and concur with and endorse the findings," end quote. Is that correct?

General McKenzie: That is correct.

Senator Hawley: And do you stand by that, General?

General McKenzie: I do.

Senator Hawley: Let's talk about some of the findings, if we could. This committee has been told repeatedly, was told repeatedly that the collapse of the Afghan Security Forces on such a rapid timetable could not be predicted.

For example, General Milley testified to this committee, and I am going to quote him now, quote, "There was nothing I or anyone else saw," end quote, that suggested the rapid collapse of Afghan Security Forces on the timetable that they did collapse.

The CENTCOM report that you ordered, I think to put it gently, cast some doubt on that. For example, it says
General Miller -- that is the commander on the ground, of course, as you know, General -- General Miller was extremely worried from May 2nd onward about the rapid collapse of the Security Forces, especially as he was seeing key districts fall. Of course, General Miller also has testified to this committee that he warned you, General Milley, and Secretary Austin as early as March or April about the rapid collapse of the Security Forces. The report also says, quote, "Rear Admiral Vasely provided assessments weeks prior to the fall of the Afghan government that the trajectory of Afghanistan was in a downward spiral and likely not recoverable," end quote.

General, can you confirm for us, based on the findings in the report, that the Administration was, in fact, warned that Afghan Security Forces and the government could collapse rapidly after we left, and by "we" I mean our military forces who evacuated fully in July?

General McKenzie: Senator, I will answer that but first I would like to very briefly talk about the Abbey Gate investigation. That was a narrowly scoped investigation to determine what happened at Abbey Gate. The quotations you are drawing from testimony inside it were not part of the formal final findings of the investigation. That does not mean they are accurate or inaccurate. They are just simply not --
Senator Hawley: They are in the report, though,
General. Correct?

General McKenzie: There are 14,000 pages in the report, involving a lot of testimony from a lot of people, and I am sure they are in the report. However, they are not the reason the report was created and they were not in the formal final findings of the report, which was focused on the nature of the attack at Abbey Gate.

Now having said that, as early as -- and I have testified here earlier today and in the past, as early as the fall of 2020, my recommendation was -- not my recommendation but my view was that if you go below 4,500 in Afghanistan that would be a mistake, put us on a slope that we would not be able to recover from. And then also, in the spring of 2021, General Miller and I both agreed that 2,500 was a number that we could maintain in Afghanistan. That is not ultimately the number that was selected. But we had the opportunity of full and free airing of our views, which I think is all any commander can ask. Another decision was made, which is the way the process is supposed to work.

Senator Hawley: Fair enough. Fair enough. You did, in fact, it sounds like to me, and the report certainly indicates that the Administration was warned and that you were ignored.

This investigation contains other remarkable testimony
about the State Department and the White House's
disengagement. Let me just go through a little bit of that.
Multiple sources said, for the record, for the testimony to
the State Department, he refused even to talk about a
civilian evacuation until it was too late, that they delayed
efforts to start evacuating Americans. For example,
Brigadier General Sullivan told investigators, and I am
going to quote him now, quote, "Trying to get the embassy to
discuss non-combatant evacuation operations was like pulling
teeth until early August." He goes on to say, "The embassy
didn't fully participate in evacuation planning until a week
prior to the fall of Kabul." And other Marine said that as
a result of the State Department's intransigence, quote, "We
essentially planned the evacuation in about 5 days," end
quote.

General, is it fair to say the State Department's
delays undermined the broader evacuation effort?

General McKenzie: I think the Department of State
always tries to find a solution to remain engaged in a
country. It is alien to their nature to cut and run. They
prefer to not do that. I would tell you that we were
involved in a lot of discussions back and forth with the
State Department, beginning in the spring of that year, and
even earlier, in fact, as we looked at possible
contingencies for departure.
Senator Hawley: So, yeah, you said you were engaged in discussions with the State Department. What the report shows is that the State Department refused, and frankly the White House refused to engage until the very last minute. For example, this is the testimony again of Rear Admiral Vasely. On the morning of August 14th, he says, "The ambassador there in Kabul finally got a call from National Security Advisor Sullivan and Secretary Blinken who told him, the ambassador, we needed to move. We had heard the night before that they were looking at a 2-week plan to get 250 U.S. personnel to HKIA and get them out by 31 August. I"--Vasely--"told him he didn't have 2 weeks, that he only had 24 to 48 hours." Vasely goes on, "I would like to know where this level of urgency to get these people in before August 15th was before because it didn't exist until it became a crisis."

I could go on and on here, General. There are thousands of pages here. And I want to thank you for ordering this investigation. I think that was the right thing to do. I wish this committee would show some interest in it. My staff and I have been through all of it that is publicly available. It is astounding, frankly.

So thank you for ordering it. Thank you for what you were able to uncover. I again call on this committee to have hearings on this report, which is now in the public
domain, much of it, and that, frankly, contains shocking
information about this Administration's total failure to
plan for the collapse of the Afghan Security Forces, despite
being warned about it for months upon months, and to
withdraw American civilians in time before the tragedy at
Abbey Gate, which led to the death of 13 servicemembers.

I have got more questions for you for the record.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator King: Mr. Chairman, as a member of the
Intelligence Committee I can assure the Senator that there
were not months and months of warning of imminent collapse.
that is categorically untrue, and I wish the Senator would
get off of this hobby horse.

Senator Hawley: May I --

Chairman Reed: Gentlemen --

Senator Hawley: -- open session --

Chairman Reed: Gentlemen, I will now recognize --

Senator Hawley: But Mr. Chairman, the Senator just
invoked me. Has the Senator read the 2,000-plus pages --

Chairman Reed: Senator Hawley --

Senator Hawley: Would you like --

Chairman Reed: -- your time has expired.

Senator Hawley: Do you have any interest in it?

Chairman Reed: Senator Hawley, your time has expired.

Senator Hawley: Do you doubt what I am quoting? Do
you think that I am misquoting this evidence? Before the Senator impugns my integrity in an open session I would like him to at least give me the courtesy of reading the material that I am quoting and engage with it.

Senator King: I would be glad to do so.

Chairman Reed: Senator Sullivan, please.

Senator Sullivan: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and gentlemen, I want to also reiterate what many have said here. Thank you for your service, exceptional service to our nation. I know facing retirement probably one of the things you are most happy about is you probably do not have to testify in front of this committee again, but we really appreciate all you have done for our nation.

I wanted to follow up on the important questions Senator Warren had asked about civilian casualties. Nobody wants civilian casualties, of course. One question that was not asked, though, that I think is important, we do not target civilians, ever, our military, do we, General McKenzie? General Townsend?

General McKenzie: Senator, we do not target civilians.

Senator Sullivan: General Townsend, in your experience?

General Townsend: You are absolutely right, not like what we see in Ukraine right now.

Senator Sullivan: Right. But other countries do.
Correct?

General McKenzie: I can only observe what you are seeing in Ukraine.


General McKenzie: Many other places.

Senator Sullivan: ISIS. Al Qaeda. So we do not do that. It is just important to recognize and say that for the record, and I know that has been your experience in your command.

You know, I was in, like a lot of Senators, as part of a bipartisan delegation to the Munich Security Conference. I went on to do consultation with allies in NATO and the EU in London, and it was mostly about Ukraine, some Asia-Pacific issues. I was actually quite surprised how literally, in every meeting, our allies raised with me the Afghanistan withdrawal and how it undermined U.S. credibility and trust, particularly as it related to NATO allies that were also in the country.

General, what do you recommend is our best way to regain that credibility? I did not raise it. It was raised in literally every meeting with me, and it was quite an important experience that I had, that hey, this is still having an impact. What would you say is the best way to re-establish that kind of credibility and trust with our allies, particularly NATO allies?
General McKenzie: Senator, I think there is still a thirst for U.S. leadership. There is certainly a thirst for it in my region, where I interact with chiefs of defense daily and have visited literally every one several times since we left Afghanistan. They are taken aback by it. They still believe that the United States remains their partner of choice and, in fact, their preferred choice.

Now NATO is a little bit out of my wheelhouse, but I would tell you that I think the things that we are doing with NATO right now are things that absolutely restores some of that.

Senator Sullivan: Good.

General McKenzie: I think from what I see, from my perch on the sideline, it is CENTCOM looking into what European Command is doing and NATO is doing, and this Administration is doing, I think they are doing all the right things to re-establish that.


I noticed that in your CENTCOM priorities, deter Iran is listed at the top. Is that your number one priority?

General McKenzie: Sir that is my number one priority.

Senator Sullivan: And let me talk about -- I am sure you are familiar with this, the Quds Force, General Soleimani, starting in about 2004, 2005, supplied very sophisticated IEDs to the Iraqi Shia militias in Iraq.
2,000 American soldiers wounded in action, over 600 killed in action because of those EFPs. For years we did not do much to hold Soleimani, the Quds Force accountable for this very devastating killing of our best and brightest. I was in a hearing when the chairman then, General Dunford, mentioned that Soleimani, in particular, may have learned the wrong lesson back then, that he could attack Americans with impunity and not pay a price.

Do you agree with that? I know you were very familiar with that. And this is prior to, of course, him being killed.

General McKenzie: Well I think he is an objection lesson that you cannot attack Americans with impunity.

Senator Sullivan: So you think that -- were we able to re-establish some of the deterrence that General Dunford had talked about by killing him, when he was looking to kill more Americans?

General McKenzie: I think that contributed to deterrence being re-established, and I think that was a factor in their calculation. The Iranians have never doubted our capability. Occasionally they doubt our will.

Senator Sullivan: And you think that has been re-established now?

General McKenzie: Yes, but I think as with all things with Iran, it is an extraordinarily complex subject, and I
think there is deterrence but it is what I would call contested deterrence. They still seek to push us out by hurting us, and they will continue to do so.

Senator Sullivan: Let me ask one final question. You were quoted in a New Yorker article in December of 2020, titled "The Looming Threat of a Nuclear Crisis with Iran," where you were quoted as saying that "a more immediate threat than the nuclear program is Iran's missiles."

Two very quick questions. Did the Iranians target the consulate with this most recent missile attack in northern Iraq, and would re-entering the JCPOA positively or negatively impact Iranian ballistic missile capability, which you, I think, have rightly called out back in December as a much more immediate threat from them? So two questions on that. Were they targeting us?

General McKenzie: They were not. They were not targeting us.

Senator Sullivan: So we are sure of that.

General McKenzie: I am sure of that.

Senator Sullivan: Okay. And the second question.

General McKenzie: The second question is, I think that is a hard question. I think, you know, what you would like to do, if you execute a JCPOA you would want to go to limiting other elements of the Iranian portfolio, and that would be a bridge to get to where you are maybe talking
about ballistic --

Senator Sullivan: Like the missiles.

General McKenzie: -- missiles. You are talking about proxy activities. So that would give you an opportunity to try to work that diplomatically.

Senator Sullivan: But should that be part of the agreement?

General McKenzie: Senator, I do not believe that the current -- it is under the current profile that we are looking at right now. I am saying if you were successful in negotiating an agreement it might lead you to an opportunity for further successful negotiations on other issues.

Senator Sullivan: No, but I am just asking -- sorry, Mr. Chairman -- in your personal opinion, do you think that threat, which you said is actually more immediate than the nuclear threat, should that be part of any agreement that we are trying to do with them right now, in your personal opinion? I know you are not negotiating it.

General McKenzie: I do not believe it is feasible to come to an agreement that incorporates both elements right now. I do not believe it is feasible in the world we live in, with the state of our negotiations with Iran, it is feasible to get to both of those things at the same time right now.

Senator Sullivan: Thank you. Thank you again,
gentlemen.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, Senator Sullivan.

Senator Scott, please.

Senator Scott: I want to thank both of you for your service and I wish you the best of luck in your retirement. I hope you move to Florida. You will enjoy the weather and the taxes.

General McKenzie, I am hearing that Middle Eastern fighters are right now joining the Russians and attacking the Ukraine. Do you have any knowledge that this is true?

General McKenzie: We believe that out of Syria there are perhaps small, small, very small groups of people that may be trying to make their way to Ukraine, but I have got nothing beyond that, and I can talk a little more about that in the closed session. Very small. Right now it is a very small trickle.

Senator Scott: Okay. General McKenzie, the State Department says there are about 182 citizens left in Afghanistan to evacuate. Do you know if that is accurate, and is there anything CENTCOM is doing to help them?

General McKenzie: The number I am tracking is about 153 U.S. citizens and about 2,100 long-term permanent residents that are there. Some people want to come out. Some people do not want to come out. It is my understanding that if someone wants to leave and they are a U.S. citizen
they are going to be able to leave. And we have regularly
scheduled flights that actually fly. CENTCOM is prepared to
repatriate them when they come to what we call a lily pad in
the theater, whether that is in Qatar or in UAE, where they
can be medically assessed and moved on, you know, back to
the United States if they are an American citizen. And we
are fully prepared to support the lead agency in this, who
is the Department of State.

Senator Scott: Thank you. What has Central Command
been doing to punish ISIS-K for the killing of our military
personnel at Abbey Gate, and right now do you think ISIS-K
is getting stronger under the Taliban or weaker?

General McKenzie: We are concerned about the
developmental trajectory of ISIS-K in Afghanistan. And in
the closed session I can talk a little bit more about what
we are looking at, when we look into Afghanistan, and in
particular at the ISIS elements that were associated with
that attack.

Senator Scott: All right. Moving on to the Iran deal,
it appears, and you talked to Senator Blackburn a little bit
about this, that about $90 billion in sanctions relief might
be awarded to the Iranian government, when then they will be
able to use to foment more terrorism. So if that happens,
what resources would CENTCOM have, and our allies have, to
put up to be able to fight these proxies?
General McKenzie: Senator, I have got to be honest with you. I am not an economist. I am not familiar with the economic impacts of that deal. I would say this. From where I sit, the number one objective that I have been given is we do not want Iran to have a nuclear weapon. And it would seem to me that approaching that through a diplomatic solution would be the best way to get to that end.

I recognize there are second-order effects that might proceed from that, in terms of sanctions relief, and I acknowledge that.

Senator Scott: You spoke a little bit earlier about more cooperation with Israel. Are there things that we need to be doing in the NDAA that would help make sure we continue to expand our opportunities with Israel?

General McKenzie: Sir, I think right now we are in a pretty good place in terms of cooperation with Israeli as the latest member of Central Command area of responsibility. I think I have all the authorities and permissions I need to move forward on that.

Senator Scott: General Townsend, when you look at these maps you see Communist China has quite a few goals in Africa. One is to continue to develop military bases. So if they are continuing to be able to develop more military basis, including the one in Equatorial Guinea, what threats will that pose to the United States?
General Townsend: Senator, I can be more specific in closed session, and I look forward to that. But suffice it to say they are not on the Atlantic coast of Africa. That is going to put them several thousand miles closer to the U.S. homeland if they get a base on the Atlantic coast of Africa.

Senator Scott: So this is a general question for both of you. You know, we have watched the Ukraine situation and we have been able to do sanctions against Russia, which it sure seems like that could have a positive impact and hopefully reduce their ability to fund the war effort. How important do you think it is when we have an adversary, whether it is Russia or China or Iran, that we do everything we can to make sure they do not have the resources to continue to develop, and we should do everything we can to make sure that our citizens are not dependent on them for any resources, such as, in China's case, pharmaceuticals, things like that. Do you think this is important, it makes your job easier if we are not dependent on other countries?

General McKenzie: Senator, it makes my job a lot easier if we have a whole-of-government approach to the problems that we confront. You know, the Department of Treasury, all the economic power of the United States, all the diplomatic power of the United States is wielded in concert, and preferably as a substitute for the military
element of power. That is by far the most effective way to obtain our goals.

General Townsend: I cannot say it better than that.

Senator Scott: And do you think our military power should be the last thing we use?

General McKenzie: Yes. As a general principle we have far more effective tools to address these problems. The military element of power should be in support of all other elements of U.S. national power.

General Townsend: I agree.

Senator Scott: Thank you.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Scott. At this point I will adjourn the open hearing. The closed session will reconvene at 12 noon in SVC-217. Again, thank you, gentlemen, for your testimony, and we will see you shortly.

[Whereupon, at 11:43 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]