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03/17/2022 10:00 AM

House Armed Services Committee hearing on National Security Challenges and U.S. Military Activities in the Greater Middle East and Africa

Participants:

Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash., Chairman

Rep. Jim Langevin, D-R.I.

Rep. Rick Larsen, D-Wash.

Rep. Jim Cooper, D-Tenn.

Rep. Joe Courtney, D-Conn.

Rep. John Garamendi, D-Calif.

Rep. Jackie Speier, D-Calif.

Rep. Donald Norcross, D-N.J.

Rep. Ruben Gallego, D-Ariz.

Rep. Seth Moulton, D-Mass.

Rep. Ro Khanna, D-Calif.

Rep. Salud Carbajal, D-Calif.

Rep. Anthony G. Brown, D-Md.

Rep. Jason Crow, D-Colo.

Rep. Veronica Escobar, D-Texas

Rep. Jared Golden, D-Maine

Rep. Chrissy Houlahan, D-Pa.

Rep. William Keating, D-Mass.

Rep. Andy Kim, D-N.J.

Rep. Elaine Luria, D-Va.

Rep. Mikie Sherrill, D-N.J.

Rep. Elissa Slotkin, D-Mich.

Rep. Filemon Vela, D-Texas

Rep. Joe Morelle, D-N.Y.

Rep. Kai Kahele, D-Hawaii

Rep. Sara Jacobs, D-Calif.

Rep. Stephanie Murphy, D-Fla.

Rep. Jimmy Panetta, D-Calif.

Rep. Marc Veasey, D-Texas

Rep. Marilyn Strickland, D-Wash.

Rep. Steven Horsford, D-Nev.

Rep. Mike D. Rogers, R-Ala., Ranking Member

Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C.

Rep. Michael R. Turner, R-Ohio

Rep. Doug Lamborn, R-Colo

Rep. Rob Wittman, R-Va.

Rep. Vicky Hartzler, R-Mo.

Rep. Austin Scott, R-Ga.

Rep. Mo Brooks, R-Ala.

Rep. Sam Graves, R-Mo.
Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y.
Rep. Scott DesJarlais, R-Tenn.
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Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla.
Rep. Mike Gallagher, R-Wis.
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Rep. Jim Banks, R-Ind.
Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo.
Rep. Michael Waltz, R-Fla.
Rep. Jack Bergman, R-Mich.
Rep. Stephanie Bice, R-Okla.
Rep. Jerry Carl, R-Ala.
Rep. Mike Johnson, R-La.
Rep. Pat Fallon, R-Texas
Rep. Scott Franklin, R-Fla.
Rep. Mark Green, R-Tenn.
Rep. Ronny L. Jackson, R-Texas
Rep. Lisa McClain, R-Mich.
Rep. Blake Moore, R-Utah

Witnesses:

Sasha Baker, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Department of Defense
General Stephen Townsend, USA, Commander, U.S. Africa Command
General Kenneth McKenzie Jr., USMC, Commander, U.S. Central Command

SMITH: Couple programming notes before we get started here. It's a long, complicated day on the committee. We have this hearing. And then at 1 o'clock, we have the Under Secretary for Policy, Mr. Kahl, giving us a briefing on Ukraine classified briefing. And then these fine folks will be back at 2:30 for a classified version of this brief.

So, I have finally decided that I don't actually have to read the statement explaining how our virtual hearing works. I will simply say that this is a hybrid hearing. There'll be some people here in person, there'll be some people appearing virtually. And we'll all be prepared for that.

Our witnesses this morning are Sasha Baker, who's the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Department of Defense; General Steven Townsend who's the Commander of the U.S. Africa Command; and General Kenneth McKenzie, who is the commander for U.S. Central Command.

And both General Townsend and General McKenzie are scheduled to have this be their last appearance before our committee. The events happen, one never knows when we might have to bring you back before then. But at any rate, you are retiring, and both you gentlemen have appeared before this committee many times, served this country incredibly well in a variety of different capacities.

But in the two theaters that you are currently responsible for, you've had a lot to do during your tenure there, and you've done it quite well. And we have appreciated the relationship and we wish you the best. And thank you for your service. And these, as mentioned, are two incredibly important commands. I think on this committee, you know, there's always a challenge we're trying to prioritize.

We've spent a lot of time the last few years talking about how China is the pacing threat, we need to focus on China. Obviously, with Vladimir Putin's brutal and violent decision to violate the fundamental laws of the world and invade Ukraine in the way that he has. A lot of attention has focused there. But the bottom line is while we do need to prioritize, we also need to be aware of - we live in a robust, threatened environment.

We have got to be paying attention to all of it and trying to make sure that we're meeting all of those challenges. First of all, because they are all important, and second of all, because they all tend to be interconnected. Certainly, in the two theaters that we were talking about today, both China and Russia are factors in the great power competition that we find ourselves in. So, we want to make sure that we are addressing those issues.

So, taking them one at a time starting with the Africa Command. China is incredibly active in that region, looking to build partnerships, you know, the goal of ultimately, you know, building bases wherever they can. It is incredibly important that we keep an eye on that and maintain our relationships in Africa and try to deal with that challenge. The same time, the transnational terrorism threat is still very real throughout the continent.

Things have gotten more complicated on the Horn, given the conflict in Ethiopia. I've always felt that the partnerships that we built to deal with the challenges in Somalia and the challenges that are presented by AQ, in the Arabian Peninsula between, you know, between Yemen and Somalia. The partnerships that we built with Kenya and Ethiopia, and Rwanda and Uganda and others in the region have really been a great model for how partnerships can help us meet our national security threats.

So that we don't do it all alone. We have a similar and growing challenge in West Africa, as there are a variety of different transnational terrorist elements there that we need to work with. And in the midst of all that Russia is, you know, aggressively through the Wagner Group, providing, you know, security in that region. That is having a very destabilizing effect. It is not a coincidence that the increased presence of Wagner as a security force has matched up with an increase in the number of coups throughout West Africa.

We've got a lot of challenges in Africa. And look forward to hearing from General Townsend about his take on those challenges and answering our questions on that. Central Command also has a lot of challenges. Certainly, we've seen the drawdown in both Afghanistan and Iraq over the course of the last 10 years that has changed that. But the challenges are very real. And I know General McKenzie knows that one of the central questions that this committee will have is what now in Afghanistan?

There is still a threat there from Al Qaida and from ISIS. What is our plan for dealing with that threat now that we have pulled out of Afghanistan? And in the Middle East, we still have the challenges from ISIS, the instability in Syria, the instability in Yemen. I am particularly interested to hear the latest on what Iran is up to and how we are working with partners in the region to contain that threat.

And also, I'd be curious to hear, you know, as Russia gets, you know, further and further bogged down in Ukraine, what does that mean for their activity in Syria. Whereas we know, they have been very involved going forward. The bottom line is, and my written statement gets into a lot more detail. We could talk about both of these areas of responsibility for a very long time, there was a lot to do, there are a lot of challenges.

They are a huge part of our national security posture going forward. And I look forward to hearing more details from all three of our witnesses on how best we should meet those challenges going forward. With that, Mr. Rogers is out ill this morning and ably filling in as Mr. Wittman is the Ranking Member.

And I will yield to him for his opening statement.

WITTMAN: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I deeply appreciate our witnesses coming to testify before us today. And thanks so much for your service. General Townsend, as was discussed last week, the threats in Africa are multifaceted, and they continue to grow. But spending on AFRICOM comprises only about three tenths of one percent of the entire defense budget. Not related to the magnitude of what I believe is the building threat.

And it's these meager resources that are now spread even thinner because of the challenges we face before us with Russia and China. And that's not just worldwide, that's specifically there on the African continent. Russia has been entering into a disturbing number of arms sales and basing agreements and African nations. China's using the Belt and Road Initiative to extract African natural resources and gain permanent foothold on the continent.

The Chinese have built an overseas military base and a strategically important area of the Horn of Africa. And they're actively scouting other locations, including the Atlantic coast. Make no mistake about their intentions. The growing presence of China and Russia in Africa is a threat to our national security, and it's imperative that we increase investments there, as well as other places around the world. I look forward to hearing from you General Townsend about how we can maximize diplomatic and military efforts to counter Russia and China's growing global ambitions in China.

In CENTCOM, General McKenzie, we're also seeing increased Chinese presence. China's building ports and other infrastructure throughout the region. And it's entered into trade and telecom agreements with allies in the region. But what I find most concerning is that President Xi continues to cozy up to the ayatollah. China's signed valuable trade deals with Iran, bought Iranian oil in defiance of international sanctions, and joined Russia in conducting joint drills with the Iranian navy.

These actions provide a lifeline to Iran at a very dangerous time. The ayatollah continues to fund and equip terrorists targeting American troops. His cronies are prolonging a civil war and a humanitarian crisis in Syria. And his regime is aggressively pursuing nuclear weapons. We absolutely cannot allow this to happen. I do not believe that re-entering the JCPOA will stop them.

I look forward to hearing more about the administration's plan for ending the ayatollah's quest for a nuclear weapon, and how they intend to deal with the rest of the regime's destabilizing actions. Finally, to both you General McKenzie and General Townsend, you continue to face tremendous challenges snuffing out hard and terrorist in both AORs and I'm very concerned that we are backsliding on the progress we've made in combating terrorism.

In Africa, the repositioning of U.S. and French forces further from terrorist hotspots, is making it much harder for us to successfully conduct counterterrorism operations. In CENTCOM, President Biden's decision to unilaterally and unconditionally withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan has undermined our national security. As anticipated by nearly everyone except the President, the Taliban has overrun the government and Afghanistan is reverting back to being a breeding ground for terrorist.

The President assures us that this so called Over the Horizon strategy will prevent that from happening. But this is completely devoid of reality. In the six months since the withdraw we have not been informed of a single successful Over the Horizon strike. I guess it's possible that Al Qaida and ISIS-K have thrown down their arms and decided to live in peaceful coexistence with the West.

But I fear what's more likely, is that we no longer have a good handle on where the terrorists are, or what they're doing. The truth is, without persistent ISR, reliable partners on the ground, and nearby facilities to launch assets, we lack the capability we need to conduct a successful strike. We know previously human intelligence, signal intelligence in theater close to the adversary is critically important.

Now I look forward to this afternoon's classified discussion on what capabilities we've lost and how we can help restore them. As to our posture shifts in the Indo Pacific we need to ensure other combatant commanders we have the capabilities they need to carry out their missions. We cannot allow for blind spots, especially in your two AORs. Before I wrap up, I'd like to thank both of you for your service, General Townsend, General McKenzie incredible service to our nation.

General McKenzie, I wish you the best in your retirement. Just make sure that you have your number available on speed dial. And again, Mr. Chairman, I thank you. And I yield back.

SMITH: Thank you very much.

Ms. Baker, you're recognized for your opening statement.

BAKER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Congressman Wittman, distinguished members of the committee. Thank you for inviting me to testify and I asked that my written statement be entered into the record. For the past year, the Biden administration has placed a priority on revitalizing and expanding the U.S. Alliance in partnership architecture. In bringing together our partners capabilities with our own, the department is building an integrated deterrence framework that we believe creates advantages for ourselves and dilemmas for our adversaries.

In the Middle East and Africa, the department builds partnership through an approach that draws on all of our tools to include security cooperation, exercises, defense diplomacy, and force posture. The department's priorities in the Middle East are to defend against Iranian backed threats, to counter violent extremist organizations, and to deepen cooperation with our partners.

We are committed to deterring and defending against threats posed by Iran and its proxies. The department continuously evaluates the appropriate mix of forces to defend U.S. personnel and interests if necessary. In Iraq and Syria, the department is committed to the enduring defeat of ISIS, supporting a broad whole of government strategy designed to address the underlying conditions that gave rise to ISIS. In Yemen, our policy objectives are to end the conflict, alleviate humanitarian suffering, and defeat the threat from Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, and ISIS Yemen.

Separately, the Department supports the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the defense of their territory and people from cross border Houthi attacks. The department is committed to deepening cooperation and coordination between the United States, Israel, and partners in the Middle East and Africa. Recent normalization agreements have laid the groundwork for Israel's entrance into the U.S. Central Command.

Which will in turn we believe enhanced cooperation in the security sphere. In Afghanistan, our military service members served honorably for two decades. Although we have withdrawn U.S. forces, the department continues to advance U.S. interests in Afghanistan. This includes monitoring indicators and warnings for counterterrorism threats against U.S. interests and the U.S. homeland. It also includes supporting the Department of State's efforts to facilitate the departure of American citizens lawful permanent residents and our Afghan allies.

As well as efforts to alleviate the humanitarian crisis. We continue to support interagency partners in the care and resettlement of Afghan evacuees in the United States. In Central Asia, we are continuing to develop long term security cooperation programs that are focused on bolstering regional capabilities to help counter a wide range of threats in the region and to the U.S. homeland.

In our relationship with Pakistan, counterterrorism remains a focus as violent extremist organizations seek to target our shared interests and destabilize the region. Pakistan has participated robustly in counter piracy efforts, for example, meant to ensure a free and open maritime transit. In Africa, the department remains focused on countering violent extremist organizations that pose a threat to the U.S. homeland and interests and addressing targeted strategic competition concerns.

To those ends, the department is building partnerships that support conflict resolution, improving defense institutions, and attempting to strengthen democratic norms. DOD is training and exercises promote a respect for the law of armed (ph) conflict at the civilian oversight of the military and for human rights. We employ a holistic approach working with our partners across the U.S. government to include State and USAID.

We're reviewing all of our deployments to ensure that they are right size to balance our near-term challenges with our long-term modernization and readiness requirements. In the Horn of Africa, we remain committed to supporting our Amazon partners. And in the eastern in the Sahel, we're focused on interagency and multilateral efforts to stabilize the region and to improve our counter VEO efforts.

In North Africa we support a common security objective on the continent and in the southern Mediterranean. And in the maritime domain alongside the Department of State, we are working with regional partners to secure the Atlantic for maritime and transnational threats. The department's approach to the Middle East and Africa is informed by threats to a free stable and open international order including those posed by Russia and the PRC.

Russia seeks to reshape security structures exploiting governance vacuums and using private military companies and resource extraction to undermine U.S. interests. Beijing is establishing overseas infrastructure to project and sustain military power while expanding its influence and its access. As the department coordinates with partners who address our shared threats and their security needs.

It will also seek to limit Russian and Chinese influence through sustained engagement, demonstrating the superiority of the United States as a as a partner of choice. With the support of the Congress, the department remains we believe, well positioned to support our allies and partners, to compete with Russia and the PRC, and to deter and defeat our adversaries across the Middle East and North Africa.

In closing, I just like to echo on behalf of the department our thanks to both General McKenzie and General Townsend for their long service to our nation. And with that, I'll conclude and look forward to your questions.

SMITH: Thank you very much. Before turning it to General Townsend, I -- one programming note that I neglected to mention. We are going in reverse order of questioning today. We try to give the freshmen or junior members a chance to go first in some of our hearings. So, we'll be starting with the least senior and working our way up today. Just make sure everyone's aware of that.

General Townsend, you are recognized for your opening statement.

TOWNSEND: Chairman Smith, Congressman Wittman, 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 the Ukraine. An unjust war, which impacts

Africa as well. For nearly three years, it's been the greatest privilege of my career to represent the dedicated members of U.S. Africa Command.

Thank you for your steadfast support for them, and for our mission. I'm here this morning with my battle buddy and command senior enlisted leader Sergeant Major Richard Thresher, and colleagues, Dr. Sasha Baker and General Frank McKenzie. For General McKinsey and I, it's our final appearance 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. interest, prevent strategic distraction, and preserves America's options. All in concert with our allies and partners. As AFRICOM's fifth commander, I've come to learn five truths about Africa. First, America cannot ignore Africa. Africa's challenges, opportunities, and security interest are inseparable from our own. Weak or poor governance, conflict and climate change, stress the stability of many African nations.

Which in turn will impact U.S. security and prosperity. Second, our competitors clearly see Africa's rich potential. China and Russia both seek to convert soft and hard power investments into political influence, strategic access, and military advantage. Both seek to bolster autocrats and change international norms in their favor.

For China, Africa is their second continent. Across Africa, mercenaries from the Kremlin's Wagner Group offer their services for profit, regime protection, resource exploitation, and horrific violence against Africans, just as we see in Ukraine today. Third, deadly terrorism has metastasized to Africa. Al Qaida is Al Shabab in East Africa, and ISIS and Al Qaida 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, our willingness to work with African partners create a huge demand for U.S. engagement, and U.S. partnership.

Fifth, in Africa, a few troops, and a few bucks still go a long way. Modest and predictable resourcing yields outsized returns for U.S. and African security interest. As an economy of force and posture limited theater, AFRICOM employs just point three percent of DOD's 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 resource our interagency partners at the State Department, USAID, and the intel community. Thanks to the authorities and resources you provide, and your continued interest and support in the capabilities that AFRICOM requires to accomplish our mission.

In summary, U.S. AFRICOM remains cheap insurance for America's security. Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

SMITH: Thank you.

General McKenzie.

MCKENZIE: Chairman Smith, Representative Wittman, ladies and gentlemen of the committee it's a pleasure to be here today beside the honorable Sasha Baker in General Steve Townsend. And the company of my senior enlisted leader, Fleet Master Chief Jamie Herdel. I want to thank you for allowing me this opportunity to testify for the final time regarding U.S. Central Command posture in an area of responsibility than incompetence.

21 nations 600 million people and lies at the strategic 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 of course, Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine. America's interests 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 commands founding. The primary threats to that security instability are also very familiar even today.

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 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 disregard 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 American expense in a region that 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 one January, of this year, Iraq has assumed sole responsibility for counter ISIS combat operations on its own soil. In Syria, CENTCOM partners are degrading ISIS his ability to regenerate. By improving the security of facilities for detained ISIS fighters, as well as for the displaced persons camps, where their families and others reside.

More than half of this population comes from other countries. And addressing the threat of ISIS in northeast Syria ultimately, will require those 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 Qaida and ISIS Khorasan has also entered a new phase.

We are now conducting this campaign from bases Over the Horizon. As I've said before, this is difficult, but it is not impossible. I should add today that we will be able to do so only so long as CENTCOM has the requisite resources to find, fix, and finished the rest of the homeland. Before those threats develop the capability to conduct external operations.

I'm talking specifically about ISR assets and strike platforms. CENTCOM has the tools it needs to perform this mission, but the margins are thin, and the risk will increase should resources diminish. In the Middle East, Iran continues to pose the greatest threat to U.S. interests and the security of the region as a whole.

Through its proxies and clients Iran has fomented conflict and 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 on the Houthis, who (inaudible) in the most advanced unmanned aerial systems and cruise missiles in the region, all courtesy the Iranians. Recently, the Houthi's expanded these attacks to include urban centers in basis with U.S. forces in the United Arab Emirates.

Tehran also enables its aligned militias in Iraq in Syria to carry out a persistent, low-level campaign of indirect fire and UAS attacks against U.S. and coalition forces. Hoping to drive us from the region. Iran's ballistic missile forces constitute an exigent threat to the security of every state in the region. Among their most important and enduring partners.

They continue to look to the United States for assurance that we, 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'd also 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.

SMITH: Thank you. Just two quick questions. General Townsend, could you walk us through what you think China is doing in Africa? When I met with you, you gave a pretty good brief and some of it we'd have to do in the classified session later.

But what are they doing in Africa? How does it threaten us? And what are we doing to address it?

TOWNSEND: Thanks for the question. Chairman, there's should be some handouts that you're...

SMITH: Yes.

TOWNSEND: ... there that you can refer to. There's the one on China there that depicts what just kind of briefly talked to. They compete with us in Africa. First of all, China has made a decision, a deliberate decision to compete with America and Africa and win that competition. They compete primarily through economic means and diplomatic means. And you can see that there with their Belt and Road Initiative, there compete -- there are investing everywhere across the continent.

We don't actually have to meet that competition in every location head on. We have to pick and choose where we're going to do that. And there are countries where it's important that we do. In the military sphere you heard in the Chairman's opening remarks there that they have their one overseas base in Djibouti. The primary thing that concerns me with China's military competition in Africa is that they are seeking, actively seeking a military base on the Atlantic coast of Africa.

And for a variety of reasons that I will go to in closed session. That would be bad for America security. And we -- as a first priority, we need to prevent, deter a Chinese base in the Atlantic coast of Africa.

SMITH: Thank you, General McKenzie just quick, specific question on Yemen. The humanitarian crisis in Yemen continues to be great, the fight has gone back and forth there. I know, we have our envoys there have tried to get to a peace agreement but have been unable to do that. But in terms of getting food, humanitarian assistance, basic supplies in the Yemen.

We continually hear about, you know, the blockade of Yemen. That Saudi Arabia is like leading this effort blocking the ability to supplies to get in. Is there more that we could do to free up the ability to get supplies, you know, basic, you know, the basic supplies of, you know, food, medical supplies, humanitarian aid, NDM.

And what's really going on in terms of the effort to blockade that by Saudi Arabia or by anybody else?

MCKENZIE: Chairman, you're correct, it is very difficult to get humanitarian aid into Yemen. It's further compounded by the fact that there are distribution problems that the Houthis are associated with, once that aid gets in. I would agree that there is more that we could do with our friends in the region, to allow more humanitarian aid to enter Yemen and I would support that action.

However, I think the larger problem is the distribution of the aid once it enters Yemen, and actually gets out to the people that need it. And the -- you know, the UN Special Representative is working very hard. And but that remains, I think, the most significant problem when it comes to distribution of aid to the many hundreds of thousands of people who are experienced food insecurity in Yemen.

SMITH: Before it gets in the Saudis, in particular are searching ships blocking ships from getting in because they're afraid that arms are being shipped in?

MCKENZIE: Sir, they are, and they have also allowed aid ships to enter. It's not a perfect solution. You know, it is not a perfect solution. And I acknowledge that.

SMITH: Well, that's something I'd like to continue to work with you on. Because as you know, the humanitarian crisis there is extreme.

And with that, I will yield to Mr. Wittman for his questions.

WITTMAN: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. Again, I want to thank our witnesses. I want to follow up on what the chairman talked about. It's concerning to me not just the dynamic that's happening between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. But the support that Iran is providing to Yemen. That to me, allows them to do the things that they're doing that are very, very disruptive in that area. As we know, they've looted UN food convoys.

They've laid over a million mines (ph) and civilian areas, they've recruited thousands of child soldiers and have taken over the closed U.S. Embassy. They're holding at least 11 Former U.S. Embassy staffers hostage. And they've stepped up cross border attacks by drones and missiles against the UAE that have actually targeted and killed civilians in the UAE.

And as the Chairman pointed out, they completely rebuffed efforts by the current administration to enter into any kind of talks to resolve these particular issues. General McKenzie, I want to go to you first and ask, what are your thoughts about what we can do in interrupting the relationship between Iran in the Houthis, which allow them unfortunately, to continue to keep this unsettled state in Yemen?

And that in turn antagonizes, the Saudis and this just continues to escalate. Can you give us your perspective on that?

MCKENZIE: Sir, I can. I'd like to note at the beginning that while the supply of humanitarian aid to Yemen has been imperfect, and not consistent throughout the long history of this crisis. Iran has never imported a single bag of rice or any other foodstuff into Yemen. In fact, the only material they brought into Yemen is stuff designed to kill people.

So, we should just remember that and when we talk about the people here. Sir, I believe there's an opportunity for a negotiated settlement here. I believe that the parties, I believe that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and I believe UAE are open to that solution. I believe that the Houthis have an opportunity should they choose to negotiate.

But under profiting from the Iranian masters, they have instead chosen to double down, they continue their attacks into Saudi Arabia. As you noted, they have ramped up attacks in the UAE and a very disturbing new phase of operations. But I believe, I think there is an opportunity here under the UN -- under the United Nations to get to a truce.

And a truce would be the best of possible worlds, we would be able to begin to open today to get foodstuffs into the data (ph) and distributed under the auspices of someone other than the Houthis. And their ability to interfere with it.

WITTMAN: Could enough pressure be put on Iran and Saudi Arabia to kind of force the Houthis to the table and say, listen, you got to resolve this?

MCKENZIE: I think I don't believe it's in Iran's interest to in the war in Yemen. I think it's a fairly low-cost war for them. As you noted, it embarrassed the Saudi Arabia, it embarrasses UAE. And I think they're not -- they're actually not motivated to do that right now. I think it is certainly in the Houthis best interest to cut a deal.

So, the balls sort of in their court. They have some opportunities. They need to seize those opportunities. Because frankly, sir, I don't think those opportunities are going to be there forever.

WITTMAN: Yes, thanks. Let me ask you briefly, too, about the growing threat from ISIS-K in Afghanistan. As we had heard before, by complete withdrawal of forces there, we knew that the risks were going to increase. Obviously, they have. The concern is is that that risk is going to extend beyond the borders of Afghanistan.

They'll have an opportunity or a capability to pursue attacks outside of Afghanistan. That is incredibly troubling. Also, our ability to do significant CT operations in Afghanistan, the issues of what we used to have, as far as human intelligence, signal intelligence greatly degraded now. The Over the Horizon Capability is just not something that's realistic, in relation to the threat that we face. I wanted to get your best military judgment regarding the adequacy of the current force structure in CENTCOM, following our departure from Afghanistan.

What do we have in place? Is it enough with this Over the Horizon Capability to really keep a handle and keep ISIS-K, from growing to a point where it can perpetrate attacks outside the border there? And what are the risks with our current force structure? What are the risks that are there before us today? And how do you think those risks will continue to grow?

MCKENZIE: Sir, in the closed session a little later this afternoon, I'm going to exhaustively drill down into our force posture and all the disciplines of intelligence that we're applying in Afghanistan. And give you very detailed and specific granular answers to those questions. But I prefer to do that in a closed session. I will say that we are very concerned about the potential for ISIS-K growth in Afghanistan.

And we assess that they do retain a desire to attack us in our homeland here in the United States. And absent effective pressure, that threat will only grow and metastasize over time.

WITTMAN: OK. Very good. That's what I'm what I'm getting to is that you continue to see it growing then in the years to come unless something significant is done in the meantime.

MCKENZIE: Sir, and I'll talk about that in great detail a little bit later today.

WITTMAN: Very good. Thank Mr. Chairman. With that. I yield back.

SMITH: Thank you, Mr. Wittman.

In accordance with Chairman's extraordinary procedure today, the Chair recognizes Mr. Panetta, from California.

PANETTA: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate this opportunity. Just wish I would have had a little more insight as to the order. But thank you very much. That being said, Gentlemen, Doctor, thank you very much for being here. Appreciate your time. Appreciate your testimony. I'm going to focus down to West Africa.

Obviously, and more particular in Mali especially. We know that the French came in back in 2013, Operation Barkhane. They had us support unfortunately, now the French are leaving. Unfortunately, now there is a void. I don't have confidence in the 15,000 blue hats that are there on the ground to fill that void. I'm very skeptical of the Malian government to actually contract with the Wagner Group as well to do that.

I know that we provided support in Operation Barkhane. And maybe this is a conversation we can have later this afternoon. But my question to you is one, why are the French leaving to where do you see who do you see filling that void? Three, why did they contract with the Wagner Group if you can go into that a little bit? And then my last question is, does China have a strategy?

You have this nice map here that shows their involvement in Africa. Does China have a strategy to deal with the extreme -- of the violent extremism in Africa?

TOWNSEND: Thanks, Congressman. So first, the French aren't leaving, they are repositioning West Africa. They are leaving, as you point out.

PANETTA: They're going to Niger, correct?

TOWNSEND: That's -- their plan is to go to Niger and Cote d'Ivoire, and maybe a few other places. So, they are repositioning their forces. You asked the question, why are they leaving? So, in our interactions with the French, they had come to the realization that it was time to reset their campaign there and maybe gain new efficiencies.

And so, they had already made a decision, which the French government had announced that they were going to reposition re-posture in West Africa. Then we had successive coups in Mali.

PANETTA: Right.

TOWNSEND: And Mali, as you know, has invited in Wagner. I think they've invited that -- gets your second question. Why did they invited Wagner in? They've invited Wagner in because they believe that Wagner will replace the French and do a better job. I, when I learned of this, I traveled to Mali, and I met with the President there -- the Junta President there.

And I explained that I thought it was a bad idea to invite Wagner in because we've seen them -- I have seen them in Syria, and I've seen them in other places in Africa. And Wagner obeys no rules. They won't follow the direction of the government. They won't partner more effectively. I think they will only bring bad.

PANETTA: Was he listening? Will he listen?

TOWNSEND: He told me that it wasn't Wagner, that they were dealing with the French -- the Russian Ministry of Defense. Except I think President Putin later said there are no Russian military and Mali. There are private military companies there, Wagner.

So, I think that it will -- only bad will come from that. I think there may be some initial gains, we're seeing Wagner deploy and build their base camps. They haven't really started significant operations yet. I think they've already suffered some casualties. I think...

PANETTA: Casualties from violent extremism?

TOWNSEND: Yes. I think that the only bad is going to come from their deployment there. You asked about China. We don't see China having a counter violent extremist role. They are in Mali, though. They're there as part of -- they have a substantial force there as part of MINUSMA the UN mission there.

But we don't see them doing -- we see them doing a little bit of counterterrorism training on the continent, but we do not see them conducting any counter VEO operations.

PANETTA: And a lot of our role then will be from Niger. Is that correct? In regard to any sort of what we do?

TOWNSEND: We currently have forces in Niger. And I'm working with the Department of Defense on a strategy for West Africa that will take into account the French re-posturing, that will take into account the malign actors like Wagner in the region.

PANETTA: And it sounds like you don't necessarily believe the -- this Malayan official who you spoke to, in regard to it was a Russian organized Russian group. It was -- you believe it's the Wagner Group who's in there now.

TOWNSEND: It's the Wagner Group supported by the Ministry of Defense in the Kremlin. The Russian Air Force flew them in.

PANETTA: Thank you once again. Thank you. I yield back.

SMITH: Thank you. Mr. Panetta. I was closely watching the portraits of the past chairman, there was no disturbance of the universe. So nice job.

The Chair now recognizes Mr. Fallon.

FALLON: Thank you, Mr. Chair (ph). I just thought this was a gift that you're giving an Irishman on St. Patrick's Day. So, I appreciate that. Thank you all for your service. And thanks for being here today. General McKenzie, I was a bit dumbfounded about a week and a half ago, I read an article report in The Wall Street Journal that the UAEs Sheikh and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia would not take a call from the President United States.

I found that alarming. I wanted to just to hear what you -- your thoughts on that?

MCKENZIE: Well, relationships at that level would probably be better with -- with Ms. Baker or the Department of State than me. I can tell you that at my level, I have no trouble talking to the Chiefs of Defense of each of those two countries. And I talked to them frequently.

FALLON: OK. Ms. Baker, if you like to comment. Thank you.

BAKER: Congressman, thank you. I can't speak to the specifics of the President's phone calls. What I can tell you is from the defense perspective, as General McKenzie said, we have long and enduring strategic partnerships with both Saudi Arabia and UAE. Those have existed for any number of years. We are fully committed to them.

FALLON: I know that's alarming and shocking that they weren't taking -- I thought they were allies of ours in the region. And not to take a President of the United States phone call, to me didn't -- it spoke volumes about the deteriorating relationship.

MCKENZIE: Again, I can't speak to the President's phone calls, I can tell you that as General McKenzie said, we pick up the phone, and we talk with these folks every day. And we have a very close and enduring partnership from a defense perspective.

FALLON: General McKenzie in Syria. I'd love to -- if you could just touch on the influences that Turkey, Russia and Iran have. It seems to be absolute mess, you know, from everything I've read, and then the maps didn't help too much, either. But I just wanted to get your thoughts on that.

MCKENZIE: Sure. So, in Syria, Iran uses Syria principally as a land bridge, to move advanced conventional weapons into Lebanon to be employed against Israel as a possibility. They're also interested in operating against our forces that are there in Syria. As in Yemen, Iran, generally speaking, has no positive objective in Syria. Rather, their goals are almost wholly negative.

FALLON: It's just disruption?

MCKENZIE: It is disruption, but also, they view it -- again, we shouldn't understate the importance of that corridor that allows them to move weapons to position against what they consider their greatest foe and the nation they've sworn to destroy, Israel. Russia has, obviously has a client state (ph) in Syria, they came in and right after the beginning of the Civil War.

They've been there for quite a while that allows them to do several things about being in there. First of all, it is opportunistic, I don't see a long-term strategy in the Russian action. They've got

an airbase in western Syria. They've got a naval base in the eastern Mediterranean, which they had during the Cold War, I might add.

So, it's not a new thing, necessarily. But it also gives them the opportunity to attempt to posture on the global stage and to throw sand in our gearbox. Again, it's an act of opportunism, that is, you know, that we see is typical of a lot of Russian activity. The Turks have genuine national security concerns.

FALLON: Is it the Kurds mainly? Are they concerned about the Kurds more than anything else?

MCKENZIE: The Turks are, yes. We would, we would argue that there are different elements within the Kurds. And we disagree with Turkey on that. On all the Kurds being devoted to attacking Turkey, but there's a -- but they do have legitimate security concerns.

We also as you know, partner heavily with the Syrian Democratic Forces, and other Syrian Kurdish elements to actually conduct the fight against ISIS. So, there's a genuine dispute there between us and our NATO partners over that. But when all is said and done, we do recognize they have legitimate security concerns.

FALLON: Thank you, General. General Townsend, I was noticing in the foreign aid, we crushed the Chinese 11 billion to about two and a half. But in economic trade, they're almost quadruple ours in Africa. What I wanted to ask you is, who's China chummiest with? Whose relationships are the best as far as the nation states they have in relation to they have in Africa? And what worries you most about that theater?

TOWNSEND: Well, Congressman, thanks. I don't think you guys asked me who China's chummiest with in Africa before. So, I don't think I've contemplated that. They have pretty good relations with a lot of the countries on the continent. Where the relations are strained, is in their earlier -- in economic investments. Where they have lured African countries into what we call debt trap diplomacy.

And there are a number of those countries where large percentage of foreign debt is held by China. And China has extended leases on critical infrastructure like ports and airports. The thing I think I'm most worried about is this military base and the on the Atlantic coast and where they have the most traction for that today is an Equatorial Guinea.

FALLON: Yes.

TOWNSEND: They've laid markers down, up and down the coastline. But the place where they've actually made progress toward this is Equatorial Guinea. And we have had a recent interagency delegation travel there to discuss that with the government there.

FALLON: It concerns me because it's like almost an end around to the Monroe Doctrine. In some ways to have a Chinese base on the Atlantic.

SMITH: Thank you. Time -- gentleman's time has expired.

FALLON: Thank you, Chair.

SMITH: The Chair now recognizes Congresswoman Luria.

LURIA: Well, thank you. And, General McKenzie, I'd like to start with a quote that you made. You said the proximate causes for the establishment of CENTCOM nearly 40 years ago, was Iran. And today, Iran is no less of a threat to American interest or the stability of the region than it was in 1979. To the contrary, the threat posed by Iran is graver than ever.

So, I'd like to ask you from a perspective of CENTCOM, how is the United States and how has United States and our allies prepared to respond to this threat from Iran?

MCKENZIE: So, the actual operational expression of the Iranian threat is in the vast improvements in their ballistic missile, their land attack cruise missile, and their small unmanned aerial vehicle platforms. Which over the last five to seven years have dramatically increased both in number and in accuracy, and ability to fly in relatively undetected ways. All of that directly threatens the immediate partners.

LURIA: So, the five to seven years, what year did we enter into the JCPOA? It's about that time frame?

MCKENZIE: About that time frame. But...

LURIA: So, I just wanted to shift and maybe we can have a more thorough conversation on the first part of the question. But so, if the United States returns to the JCPOA, what impact do you foresee that on having on Iran's regional activities? What impact on the flow of additional resources to the Houthis to Hezbollah, Hamas, and their actions in the region against the United States, Israel and our allies?

MCKENZIE: So, I will note, the principal foreign policy objective we have visa v Iran is for them not to possess a nuclear weapon. So JCPOA would presumably...

LURIA: Right.

MCKENZIE: ... give that assurance.

LURIA: The current agreement and has allowed them to have additional resources to fund these proxy organization.

MCKENZIE: So, I believe that what they do with their ballistic missiles, their proxies and other things are not necessarily coupled directly to the to the JCPOA. But I will acknowledge that there could be second order effects of that. I do not know what the terms of the pending JCPOA will be. I just don't have that information.

LURIA: So perhaps I'll turn to Ms. Baker. And I really don't think it's a disputed fact by the fact that we've eased pressure. We've lifted sanctions. Iran has more resources, and those resources are flowing to these proxy groups and terrorist organizations throughout the region. So, if a nuclear deal is reached with Iran, I think that it's likely that Tehran will use a significant part of those associated sanctions reliefs to attack Israel and support these terrorist proxies.

Are we open to supplying Israel with additional security assistance and other support in light of this potential situation?

BAKER: Congresswoman, our commitment to Israel's security is ironclad. We consult with them on a near daily basis.

LURIA: Are they at the table in the negotiations for the JCPOA right now?

BAKER: Congressman, the department, of course, does not have the lead on those negotiations. But my understanding is the Israelis are not at the table. We do consult with them regularly. And we are in regular conversations about how we can better bolster their security in the region.

LURIA: So, if we consult with him regularly have they expressed concerns over the pending re-entry into the Iran deal?

BAKER: You know, I think this is a subject of active conversation. And I don't know that there's a unified opinion on that. That being said, we are committed to their security, we are committed to giving them the equipment, the capabilities that they need the QME (ph) that we've committed to.

LURIA: OK. So, I'll shift back to General McKenzie. And I wanted to ask, why hasn't there been a more forceful U.S. response to Iran's aggression against our allies and our troops in the region? For example, we just saw this strike this weekend, towards Erbil, in the vicinity of U.S. consulate and Iran directly took responsibility for that strike.

MCKENZIE: Ma'am, I'd like to talk about that in a closed session, if I could. And I'll be prepared to go into great detail. I will tell you that I think our response has been measured balanced. You know, we -- after the strike on UAE by the Houthis, we deployed a fifth-generation fighter squadron to Al Dhafra Air Force Base.

I sent a ballistic missile capable destroyer to UAEs waters. And we've done a variety of other things to enhance their protection. So sometimes it's you know, it doesn't require an immediate kinetic response in order to show a measured response that assures our partners and allies.

LURIA: So, has our current policy of not having a 1.0 continuous carrier presence in the Gulf. Have you seen any change in Iran's activities due to that? And do you think a carrier in the Gulf is essential for a deterrent? And lastly, balancing that versus the need for that asset within the Seventh Fleet AOR for PACOM?

MCKENZIE: So, as I as I think about deterring Iran, I don't think in terms of individual platforms. I think in terms of the holistic capability of the joint force, land-based air, carrier-based air, and so one's up, one's down. We have other uses for those carriers. They can't be everywhere. But you know, we do innovative things, we bring Bomber Task Forces in from the United States. There are a variety of things

I can display to ensure the Iranians know that we have the capability to defend ourselves and to punish them if they continue their malign activities.

LURIA: Right. So, in your assessment, these shore-based squadrons are providing essentially you as the combatant commander, the same equivalent capability as a deterrent?

MCKENZIE: Yes, and other capabilities as well beyond that.

LURIA: Thank you. I yield back.

SMITH: Thank you.

Ms. McClain is recognized for five minutes.

MCCLAIN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just want to -- perhaps I didn't hear that correctly. So, I'll apologize in advance. Did I hear you say that Israel doesn't have an opinion or a position on the JCPOA?

BAKER: No, ma'am. I believe that they have expressed concerns.

MCCLAIN: And they want us to go back in or not go back in? What is their opinion?

BAKER: Congresswoman, you know, I think it's a complex situation. I'm not sure that there is a unified point of view.

MCCLAIN: That's interesting, because when I was in Israel, it was clearly unified. So, I'm just...

BAKER: We've heard we've heard Israel's concerns about the JCPOA. We -- loud and clear, I want to...

MCCLAIN: OK.

BAKER: ... acknowledge that.

MCCLAIN: I just want to make sure I understood that because I didn't catch that.

BAKER: What we've committed to in response is to the ongoing conversation we have about ensuring Israel's QME, its security. That was the case before the JCPOA. It's the case during when we were in the JCPOA. And it will continue...

MCCLAIN: But to be clear, they do have a response. They do have an opinion. They do have a position. And we are clearly aware of what that position is?

BAKER: Congressman, that's my understanding. Yes.

MCCLAIN: Thank you. Thank you. I just wanted to clear that up. Thank you all for being here. General McKenzie, the DoD Inspector General in a recent report stated that Iran and Iran aligned militias continue to have strong ties to some elements of Iraq's traditional security forces.

Especially pointing out that Iraq's Federal Police under the Ministry of Interior, does -- my question is this. Does the department or any agency of the U.S. government continue to provide assistance for Iraq's Federal Police and Ministry of the Interior? Do we provide funds to that?

MCKENZIE: Congresswoman, I'll have to answer take that one for the record. I'll come back with a precise answer to that question.

MCCLAIN: OK. Thank you. My next question is just this weekend Iran directly launched missiles in the vicinity of our consulate, right? I Erbil, Kurdistan. I'm just -- I'm trying to understand this and come to grips with this. Is -- how can we justify using taxpayer dollars to go to a police force that supports that? Or dollars to support that?

MCKENZIE: I would -- I'll go into more detail in the closed session. But I can tell you that they were not targeting us with those strikes.

MCCLAIN: I think I want to believe you. I think the American people want to believe you. I'm just not much for coincidences. It's scary when you're on the outside looking. And so, I look forward to the briefing to make us feel a little bit better about that.

MCKENZIE: Certainly.

MCCLAIN: And then, my second question is, are you familiar, obviously with the Badr (ph) Corps?

MCKENZIE: I am.

MCCLAIN: OK. My question is, do you believe that that organization is best described as a terrorist organization?

MCKENZIE: It has -- let me come back to you on that. If you want to -- I'll have to. Let me put it better. I prefer to answer that in a closed session if I can. And I'll be prepared to do that.

MCCLAIN: With that I yield back.

SMITH: Ms. Slotkin is recognized for five minutes.

SLOTKIN: Thanks. Thanks for you all being here. And having served I think, with all three of you, in different capacities, really appreciate your service. And all the work that you've done for the country over many, many years. I just want to continue the conversation on Iran and General McKenzie. You know, I was reading through your testimony.

And there's a lot of discussion about Iran's nefarious activities in the Middle East and their ballistic missile program. Can you give us as much as possible just for the American public to understand the stakes of their nuclear program? How close they are to turning fissile material into nuclear, you know, weapons grade material?

And your assessment of the threat where it falls, Visa V the other threats coming from Iran.

MCKENZIE: Thank you. It's good to see you again. Ma'am, I would note, first of all, I think the Iranians are close. I don't think that they made a decision to go forward. I think they actually -- my assessment is they want the sanctions relief that's already been discussed here. And so, I think the best solution would be to get an agreement, where they're not going to pursue a nuclear weapon.

So, I'll say that as a number one. What really concerns me more, much more on a day-to-day basis are their ballistic missiles, their cruise missiles, and their land attack cruise missiles. Which they have invested in heavily at great cost to their population over the past several years. Those capabilities directly threaten their neighbors today.

And we saw an example of that in the attack on Iraq over the weekend, their ability to fire very accurate missiles into a neighboring country. Something they've done before including the attack on Al Asad Air Base in January of 2020. Those capabilities concern me and I believe they concern our neighbors and friends in the region as well.

And that's actually the -- one of the opportunities I'll talk a little bit more in the closed session about. Is -- we have an opportunity to work on integrated air and missile defense. That's the great opportunity in U.S. Central Command right now. Because that will address a cogent, imminent threat to all of our neighbors in the region and it's a tremendous opportunity. What that doesn't do is address the proxies. And they're very -- their proxy forces are very active.

You know, principally we look at Iraq and in Syria, but they're obviously active in Yemen. And in other places, both in and out of the region. And that's another significant element that we work with our partners against.

MCCLAIN: Yes. I mean, it's certainly as someone who used to work on Iraq and work in Iraq, they're -- Iran's terrorist activities were an everyday, you know, fact of life frankly, if you were over there. And I, but I guess the question I have is, you know, from the Chairman on down the best military advice on a deal that would focus just on the nuclear parts of the Iranian threat.

You know, we're going to be asked in some form or fashion to weigh in on this. There's, I think, a lot of briefing and a lot of work that's still going to go on to bring people up to speed. But as I

understand it, the deal like the last deal doesn't include the ballistic missile program and the terrorism. What was the best military advice from the Chairman on closing such a deal?

MCKENZIE: I would defer to the Chairman on that deal on that military advice. I would note, the last deal did not include those ancillary elements that you talked about.

MCCLAIN: Right.

MCKENZIE: And that's concerning.

MCCLAIN: But your best military advice at your level, since this is your AOR. You support a deal that would just be focused on the nuclear parts of the...

MCKENZIE: I support around not having a nuclear weapon. And I would support the most effective way to get there. That will not solve all our problems.

MCCLAIN: Yes.

MCKENZIE: But that would solve one problem. There are other areas that we need to work in. And I know that we've expressed interest in broadening the agreement. And my understanding is Iran has resisted that. But I think we do need to get to a broader agreement. But our number one priority is for them not to have a nuclear weapon.

MCCLAIN: I appreciate that. I yield back.

SMITH: Thank you.

Ms. Bice is recognized for five minutes.

BICE: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the witnesses being here this morning. General McKenzie, has there been an impact to your AOR since the Russian invasion of Ukraine? And if so can you describe the movement of the fighters potentially, from Syria or elsewhere from AOR into Ukraine.

MCKENZIE: So, we watch the Russians closely across the region, they have not done much force balancing as a result of the Ukraine operation. I can talk a little bit more about that in closed session, not much, really nonsignificant. We have not seen a flow of fighters.

And I can give you some precise numbers in the closed session. But we just haven't seen much of that yet out of Syria. I know. There's a lot of discussion of that. We just -- it's just not evident to us. And we look at that pretty closely. That could change, but that's sort of what we see right now.

BICE: I want to take a step back when we were discussing in previous (inaudible) of questioning the Taliban and what's happened to Afghanistan. During the NDAA markup, I offered an amendment which required the DOD to report to Congress the security impacts of the release of

the prisoners from Bagram Airbase. Can you share some of the security impacts that you've seen from CENTCOM AOR as a result of the prisoners' releases?

MCKENZIE: Sure, what the release of the prisoners from Bagram, Parwan and Pul-e-Charkhi. Which the Taliban overran on about the 13th to the 15th of August. First of all, injected about 1,000 ISIS fighters back into the battlespace of Afghanistan. And that rejuvenated ISIS-K and was in -- I believe the Taliban are going to grow to regret that or regret the decision to release those prisoners.

It also released thousands of Taliban fighters and others who've returned to the Taliban. But I think that their action short sighted actually has had a profoundly negative effect on conditions inside Afghanistan. I believe ultimately, unless we're able to keep effective CT pressure on ISIS in particular.

You know, they will have the opportunity to grow and seek to strike us here in the homeland.

BICE: And you mentioned that earlier. Last question, it is widely known that large swathes of the TELECOM infrastructure throughout the continent of Africa are run on Chinese produced hardware including Huawei and ZTE.

I've long been concerned with network security threats that -- from compromised Chinese produced hardware. Have -- can you talk about your level of concern with these types of threats from AFRICOM AOR?

TOWNSEND: Yes. So part of that extensive Chinese investment on the African continent is telecommunications. As you just mentioned, Huawei is endemic across the continent. They're building smart city, safe cities, which are going to make, you know, connect everything in those cities. And it will report back to Beijing. Usually, it reports back to Beijing before reports to the host nation's capital. So this is that's a fairly significant threat that I don't think we truly understand the implications of in, and we won't till sometime in the future.

BICE: Do you think our allies are aware of that?

TOWNSEND: Yes, I believe that they are. But at the same time, they're wanting to pull their countries into the modern world. And so, China's offering very lucrative technologies that they probably wouldn't be able to access otherwise. And so, I think they're going into mostly with eyes open.

BICE: Do you think there's any effective response that the U.S. could have to this type of coercion, if you will?

TOWNSEND: I think probably, and I'll defer to Ms. Baker, but I think probably having economic alternate -- economical alternative rights and competitive alternatives in the economic side in the free market is probably the best alternative.

BICE: I love the word free market, General. Are we too far down the path, though, with the amount of equipment that's been installed in Africa to really impact in a positive way the continent?

TOWNSEND: No, I don't believe that we are.

BICE: OK.

TOWNSEND: In the countries in the safe cities that are already being established. Yes. But elsewhere, I don't believe that we are the speaker.

BICE: Ms. Baker?

BAKER: Congresswoman, if I could just add to that. I, you know, I think our strategy as it relates to the telecommunications infrastructure, and the China challenge is twofold. The first is, as General Townsend said, is, we are trying to make sure that partners and allies in the region, not only in AFRICOM, but globally, have the information that we see about the threat that this poses to their infrastructure and the potential vulnerabilities that it will, you know, introduce into their system. So that's part one is sort of an educational aspect.

We're also in this is not a Department of Defense lead, but as an administration looking at technological solutions, that would allow some of these countries to get after that telecommunications capability that they're so desperate to get. But in a way that safer.

SMITH: Thank you. Gentlewoman's time has expired. Ms. Murphy is recognized for five minutes.

MURPHY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. You know, one of the areas that I've had some concerns about is Iran, both direct and through proxies influence in Syria and Lebanon. And in fact, I was able to secure provision in the fiscal year of 2020 Intelligence Authorization Act to ask the DNI to, you know, report to us a bit about those efforts by Iran and what and how those efforts might impact U.S. interests and our allies, including Israel.

I was wondering if you all could provide me with a bit of an update on Iran's efforts to expand its influence in Syria in Lebanon.

MCKENZIE: Yes, ma'am, I'll begin. I'll begin with Lebanon. As I spoke a little bit earlier, Iran sees Lebanon as the terminus of the -- of a land bridge to the Mediterranean, that gives them a perch in which they can launch attacks on Israel. So their interest in Lebanon is wholly, wholly transactional, and is limited to that. Now they exercise influence in Lebanon, the Lebanese Hezbollah, LH, a shadow organization that we recognize it's penetrated many aspects of Lebanese society, but then again, doesn't actually do much for the Lebanese.

Now our response to that is at my level at the middle, the middle level, despite many other things we're doing for the Government of Lebanon writ large is we work very hard to sustain the Lebanese Armed Forces as the single military representative of the properly constituted

Government of Lebanon. It is not a perfect relationship. But I believe in the long term, our best solution and the strategy that we follow is to assist that armed force. I'd have I speak to the chief of defense of Lebanon frequently, and I believe that they remain our best opportunity to balance the other nefarious actors that are in Lebanon.

If we turn to Syria, again, Iran's interest in Syria, wholly transactional, wholly negative, it is the sort of middle part of a land bridge that allows him to get into Israel. It also serves as a staging place for potential attacks against Israel, and allows him also to, to stage for operations inside Iraq, which is a long-term focus of Syrian foreign policy and military strategy.

MURPHY: Great, thank you. And then just shifting a little bit, you know, the Wall Street Journal reported yesterday that Saudi Arabia is considering accepting the Chinese yuan as payment for oil exports, which currently only accepts U.S. dollars. You know, this is following up on news that Saudi Arabia had invited the Chinese president to visit the kingdom on an official trip. You know, I think when I think about the prospect of growing Saudi-Chinese relationship, it's a little concerning, especially given the historical partnership between the United States in the kingdom.

What's your assessment of current Saudi-Chinese relations and the impact that it could have on the United States relationship, as well as our influence in the region?

MCKENZIE: Ma'am, I can only talk really in my line at the mill to mill (ph) level, but I will note that we I have a good relationship with the Saudi chief of defense, we talk frequently. It is my belief that we remain the preferred partner of choice for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. They want our equipment, and they want more than our equipment, which is demonstrably the best available. They want the training, the education, the -- and all the things that come with a partnership with America.

As for outreach to the Chinese and what they might do with oil sales, they're probably not my line to answer, I'll defer to Ms. Baker on that.

BAKER: Yeah, I mean, I agree completely with everything that General McKenzie has said the only thing I would add, perhaps by way of context, it's clear to us I think that strategic competition has come to the Middle East, and perhaps has been there for quite some time. And so, we do see China and Russia, but particularly China, looking for economic and other inroads with some of our partners and allies.

As General McKenzie said, from a defense perspective, we believe that those relationships are strong, that we remain the partner of choice, and that there are things that we bring to the table, and that we're offering to partners and allies in the region, that frankly, China and others can't match.

MURPHY: Thank you, and I yield back.

SMITH: Mr. Waltz is recognized for five minutes.

WALTZ: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General McKenzie, thank you again, for your service, this great nation and simplify (ph).

I just have a pretty straightforward question for you on Afghanistan, just given how the withdrawal, not the 20 years, not the mistakes that we've made. But given how this withdrawal with conductive which I most would say was it was a bit of a debacle. Any regrets?

MCKENZIE: I think the end game for Afghanistan that played out in the summer 2021, those events didn't begin in the spring of 2021 of the summer 2021, you got to look all the way back for that. Certainly I regret that we no longer have the ability to be as effective as we would like to be on the ground and Afghanistan and the CT mission. We're doing that over the horizon. As I've said, it's much harder to do that over the horizon. And I'll talk in great detail about that in the closed session. So I certainly regret that we no longer have that opportunity.

WALTZ: I've spoken with a number of the 13 Gold Star families who are now without their loved ones because of an ISIS fighter suicide bomber that was released from Bagram prison just weeks before. I just received notes from Afghan women who served in the military alongside us that are being hunted down right now, with the database that we left behind with the payroll database. No regrets there? Nothing we could have done differently in terms of how we exited.

MCKENZIE: I think you go back to the basic strategic decision that we were leaving, and everything else flows from that basic strategic decision that we're going to leave and we're going to leave completely, and everything flows from that.

WALTZ: And was that the right decision in your view?

MCKENZIE: I have -- had my opinion has been and I've stated publicly that we should have retained a small presence in Afghanistan. I argued for 4,500 in the fall of 2020. And as we went into the spring of 2021, it was my opinion and remains my opinion today, that about 2,500 would have given us adequate forces on the ground to retain an advising capability.

WALTZ: I appreciate that. And I appreciate you reminding these Committees have that, because I think we are going to come to regret this decision. And I think it's going to be felt in the homeland. And it's going to be felt by future American soldiers that have to go fight their way back in to deal with it.

Ms. Baker along those lines, the FY '22 NDAA required an over the horizon strategy within 60 days of passage that was about a month ago. You're a month late. Where's that strategy?

BAKER: Congressman, I don't know the exact progress of that strategy. I'd be happy to look into it and get you an answer.

WALTZ: You don't know the progress of an over the horizon strategy required by law, the President of the United States has cited over the horizon strategy, Secretary Austin, your boss here, the last time he was here, said we can do over the horizon, we can keep America safe. I'm

in my district, saying the administration says we can do this even though as a special operator, I know better. What's the status?

General McKenzie, have you chopped on it and send it up to OSD?

MCKENZIE: So that strategy is working right now. I have -- we have had the opportunity to work on that strategy. And we actually have a practical strategy that's in effect right now. Again, something I'll be happy to talk about in the closed session.

BAKER: And, Congressman, if I could just clarify, we do have a strategy for over the horizon. What I was referring to is the specific report. I don't I don't know what the status of that report is, but I will get you an answer.

WALTZ: OK. Do you -- what local out? Let's take a step back. We just had a successful strike against the leader of the leader of ISIS, the successor in Syria. And as I've stayed in this Committee before, but I think it's worth repeating. We had local allies that helped with that. Correct. The Kurds. We have bases in the region in Jordan, Turkey, Israel, and northern Iraq. Right.

MCKENZIE: Sir, I would still characterize that strike. And as you know, I'm the officer ...

WALTZ: But did ...

MCKENZIE: ... who did it.

WALTZ: Do you characterize that as over the horizon?

MCKENZIE: That is over the horizon.

WALTZ: OK.

MCKENZIE: That is -- I would characterize (inaudible) ...

WALTZ: And let's look at the map again, do we have any bases in any neighboring country in Afghanistan?

MCKENZIE: No, the differences as you know, the distances are far greater going into Afghanistan? Conceptually, it's the same thing. The distances are greater, the risk will be higher, and you're well aware of that sir.

WALTZ: Right. Are we still reliant on Pakistan for over flight of our ISR assets?

MCKENZIE: There's no other way to get into Afghanistan for me right now.

WALTZ: Pakistan has historically supported the Taliban. Correct?

MCKENZIE: They have also supported us, the airline communication is, is a direct reflection of Pakistan (inaudible) ...

WALTZ: But it's a bit like asking the arsonist for access for the fire department to put out the fires should the homeland be threatened again. We are reliant just to be clear, we are relying on Pakistan for that over flight. Otherwise, we got to fight our way in.

MCKENZIE: We are reliant on Pakistan. But as you know, we always reserve the right to defend ourselves anywhere in the world.

WALTZ: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield.

SMITH: Thank you. Mr. Crow is recognized for five minutes.

CROW: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you to all of you for your service to the country for coming in, and particularly General Townsend and General McKenzie. In your last appearance here before the Committee, I applaud you for your long and honorable service to the country.

General McKenzie, I understand very deeply that decisions are made here in Washington and strategic decisions are made, the military has to carry it out. And I'm going to thank you for your service and candor, before this Committee and the American people on Afghanistan and related issues. And General Townsend, as much as I want to start with you as a fellow Ranger, I'm actually going to start and direct my comments to Ms. Baker.

Ms. Baker, what is the timeline for the national defense strategy? When can we expect to have that released by the administration?

BAKER: Congressman, I can't provide you with a specific date, I can tell you that it is in final coordination. And we are hopeful to get it over to you all and out to the public, very soon.

CROW: OK. Is that -- has that been held up because of the recent events in Ukraine?

BAKER: Congressman, I think it's only appropriate for us to take a look at what's happened in Ukraine and make sure that we're reflecting that in this strategy. I will say that the NDS as it's been developed over the course of the last year, we believe is very resilient to current events. And in fact continues to sort of the bones of it are going to remain unchanged.

CROW: I can certainly appreciate that. And appreciate that you are taking into account some of the current events as well that have changed the landscape a bit.

Focusing in on Africa. You know, we have this notion, this proclivity to kind of look at China's 10 feet tall sometimes. And certainly they're making big investments. And it would be a mistake for us to underestimate them. But they're also making a lot of mistakes, right? And the use of Chinese labor, predatory economics, there's a lot of disenchantment that's growing within Africa, in some places. So they certainly have their weak points. And we have our strengths. One of our

strengths is the fact that we have a larger value proposition we can bring to the table economic humanitarian. You know, our moral authority, a lot of things.

How would you classify very briefly, what is the elevator pitch for what is us is strategy in Africa? What -- how would you explain our strategic posture in Africa and our goals?

BAKER: Congressman, and I invite General Townsend to add to this. I think we have three goals in Africa right now. One is counter VEO and we do that by within through our partners. The second is to that to that same point, we are working to strengthen those partnerships and strengthen ...

CROW: But those are -- I don't mean to interrupt, those are things to do. Those are tasks, enablers. What is our overarching goal? Well -- how do we want to be known in Africa? And how would you classify our engagement?

BAKER: Congressman, I mean, I certainly think that our goal in Africa is to be the continents strategic partner of choice.

CROW: OK. So with that in mind, from your perch of DOD and U.S. government often has silos right, you know, State Department has their silo in their lane, DOD, USAID. If our value proposition is to coordinate all of that and bring that all to bear in a way that our force multiplies each of those elements, how can we better do that, and what are the impediments to achieving that right now?

BAKER: Congressman, I think we're always working to break down those silos, as you well know from your timing in uniform. I will say, I think in general Townsend, again, can jump in here, but it works better in the AFRICOM AOR. The integration of our defense, diplomacy and development efforts. The fact that that General Townsend has folks from USAID and states sitting right beside him and in his head headquarters.

So, I think we've made a lot of progress in AFRICOM. And frankly, there are things we can learn from Africa and apply to other COCOMs.

TOWNSEND: So I think she's got our strategic goal exactly right. We want to be the strategic partner of choice that translates into U.S. sustained U.S. access and influence on the continent. And that will come in handy in a million ways that we can't even foresee today. Regarding the integration of, you know, the breaking down of the silos, we try really hard to do that every day in AFRICOM. Dr. Baker's mentioned the fact that we have 3D command built that way purpose built that way from the start. One of my most senior leaders is a senior State Department ambassador, I've got a senior development advisor from USAID, we look at everything through that 3D lens every day to be the strategic partner choice and maintain us access and influence.

CROW: Thank you. I appreciate everyone's hard work. I yield back.

SMITH: Thank you. Just programming note, as I mentioned, at 1 o'clock, we will -- we will have a classified briefing upstairs on Ukraine. So we'll be closed. And we'll be concluding this at

12:45 to give the Committee everyone time to sort of move up and get settled. So we'll wrap this open hearing up at 12:45. Then, of course, we will be seeing all of these folks again at 2:30 for a classified portion of it.

Mr. Bergman is recognized for five minutes.

BERGMAN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General McKenzie, General Townsend, thank you for your decades of leadership. It takes leadership to do what we need to do.

Ms. Baker, General McKenzie, may lay out a scenario for you, under the 2015 JCPOA. Russia removed all excess low enriched uranium and nuclear materials from Iran. That a similar requirement exists in a new deal. And if Iran subsequently believes the agreement has been violated, or that it has not received the promised sanctions relief, will Russia -- could Russia be in a position to return enriched uranium to Iran? In essence, would that potentially put Vladimir Putin in the position of being the de facto judge of compliance with a new agreement?

BAKER: Congressman, as you know, there is no agreement yet. And there ...

BERGMAN: Again, it was a scenario.

BAKER: Understood. We don't know whether Russia will play that role in a future agreement. Certainly in whatever agreement is reached, if an agreement is reached, we would seek to pressure tested against any kind of interference of that kind from the Russians to this point. We have not seen any indication though that they intend to act in that way.

BERGMAN: OK. General McKenzie in an unclasp way, given the ongoing need to deploy U.S. air defenses to Europe, how do you assess our -- the United States' ability to deploy and/or sustain similar systems in the Middle East as a stopgap to help defend our Gulf allies or at least until they are much better able to defend themselves.

MCKENZIE: Sir, over the last few years, we have worked closely with our Gulf allies to expand their ability to defend themselves. And in fact, some of those countries have very, very significant air defense inventories. Saudi Arabia has over 20 Patriot batteries. UAE has a number of Patriot batteries as well. And as you know, UAE actually possesses THAAD, the (inaudible) - the high-altitude system, which was demonstrated-- tested successfully just last month.

So, we work, the way that we actually accommodate the basic fact of life that we don't have enough U.S. patriots to service all of our needs globally, is through an enhanced cooperation with our allies, we're still there. We still have patriots in the theater, we still work with them. But what you do is you try to think about the way nations can cooperate with each other. And I'll talk a little bit more about that in the closed session. But there is a path forward.

And really, you know, the countries in the region are the ones that are directly threatened by the Iranian threat. They are focused, I believe, in a way they have never been focused before, by the imminence of that threat. The fact that they the quality and number of the Iranian missiles and

LACMs and land attack cruise missiles, and UAVs is very concerning to them. So there's a real convergence of interest on the part of our partners now.

BERGMAN: OK. And basically, I think the -- my next question is going to be best answered in the closed classified session about the engagement with our partners, you kind of alluded to that in the preparation and the training and the cooperation to confront and deter a nuclear Iran, should that possibility become a potential reality.

So with that, Mr. Chairman, I'll yield back and save my questions for the classified session.

SMITH: Thank you. Mr. Carbajal is recognized for five minutes.

CARBAJAL: Thank you, Mr. Chair. And General Townsend and General McKenzie, thank you for your many years of service to our country. I say that with great gratitude for the American people, we're lucky to have had you in your posts. And thank you, Secretary Baker, for your service now.

General McKenzie, I applaud the department's commitment to improve its policy in order to better protect civilians, especially with Secretary Austin's new memorandum entitled Improving Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response. As we have seen several times just in this year alone, the U.S. tragically can get it wrong sometimes. With this new memorandum from the Secretary, including standing up a civilian protection center for excellence in issuing a forthcoming civilian harm mitigation and response action plan, how do you believe this directive will impact the AORs operations going forward?

MCKENZIE: Sir, thank you for the question. I'd like to begin by saying nobody wearing this uniform ever wants to kill an innocent civilian. Nobody ever wants to do that. There's nothing that is more completely antithetical from the way we operate. We have made mistakes, and we have killed innocent civilians. And we, we acknowledge that and we're going to do everything we can to get better and narrow that -- and narrow that gap between our ideals and our actions.

I will tell you, you know, with Secretary Austin, it is much more than that a memorandum. It is the energy he has brought to the problem. I have a -- I have several officers that are full time committed to a study that's going on right now that will form the basis for future actions. But in the meantime, you know, we're not waiting on that study. As a result of the RAND study and other studies that have come out, we have undertaken a set of things in the short term to improve our own processes within central command, as General Townsend has within Africa Command.

So, we don't want to minimize this problem. We recognize that it is, in fact a significant and a critical problem that cuts right to the very heart of what we want to do as representatives of the United States.

CARBAJAL: Thank you. General Townsend, African nations are increasingly influential on the United Nations and other international forums. Currently three of 15 United Nations Security Council seats are held by African nations, with the Kenyan UN Ambassador giving an extremely powerful speech at the UNSC meeting regarding Ukraine. Unfortunately, there is a lot of public

misunderstanding about the AOR. You have been commander of AFRICOM for over two and a half years now.

What are some of the misconceptions you hear from both American officials and the American public about the AOR? And how can we approach the AOR in a more productive and effective manner?

TOWNSEND: Thanks, Congressman. I think some of the main misconceptions are probably that, first of all, Africa doesn't really matter to us that we don't have to worry about Africa. And maybe America has been able to largely ignore Africa in the past, but that's not the future. And that's why I said in my opening statement, America cannot ignore Africa. So that's probably the number one risk perception. Then I think they don't understand that we have a lot of interest in a lot of partners there every day. We have a great relationship with much of Africa. We are the partner of choice for much of Africa and just educating the American public on that.

You mentioned the vote in Ukraine. And you're right. The Kenyan Ambassador did give a powerful speech and he voted to condemn what the Russians were doing there. But I'm a little dismayed about much of the rest of the content about half of the continent voted to condemn Russia. The other half either abstained or did not vote. And that concerns me a bit.

Only one country, though, did vote in support of Russia, Eritrea, but the other one half of the content didn't really cast a vote. And that concerns me a bit. But many of the countries that we are the strongest partners with did join us and the world and condemning Russia. So, I think the future for this country, security is in Africa, and we have to lean into it.

CARBAJAL: Thank you. General Townsend and Secretary Baker. Around the world violent extremism has been a very difficult problem to address, in particular in the AFRICOM AOR. From a report on recent trends in militant Islamic group activity in Africa. The past few years, it appears there has been an alarming increase in violent events by these groups, including Al Shabab and Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb area.

What is the biggest impediment to being able to better address these threats? Do you think the U.S. needs to amend our strategy in the AOR?

BAKER: Congressman, I'll start and then of course turn to General Townsend. You know, I think the challenge that we face in the AFRICOM AOR and part of what's driving the growth in VEOs is challenges of underlying governance and underlying security. And so, a lot of our effort in the AOR is dedicated towards institutional capacity building now ...

SMITH: Apologize, gentleman's time has expired. I'm sure I should point that out.

CARBAJAL: Thank you.

SMITH: Even if you're (inaudible) answering the question, we try to wrap up as close as possible to respect other members' time.

Mr. Banks is recognized for five minutes.

BANKS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General McKenzie, the original JCPOA was finalized in July of 2015. Iran tested missiles in October 2015 before the deal was even implemented in January of 2016. Directly contradict all of this directly contradicted the Obama administration's objective to change Iran's behavior for better through the deal.

Then after the implementation of the JCPOA in January 2016, Iran tested missiles again, in March of 2016. General Lloyd Austin, the then commander of CENTCOM said in a Senate hearing at the time that despite the JCPOA, quote, there are a number of things that lead me to personally believe that, you know, their behavior is not they haven't changed any course yet, end quote.

General McKenzie, six years later, do you agree with then General Austin's assessment of Iran's behavior following the implementation of the JCPOA?

MCKENZIE: With regard to ballistic missiles, cruise missiles ...

BANKS: Did change their behavior?

MCKENZIE: It is not their behavior has not changed.

BANKS: Do you think that the Islamic Republic of Iran will ever give up its revisionist intentions in the region? And if not, what does a successful counter Iran policy look like?

MCKENZIE: Well, I think you begin by Iran not possessing nuclear weapons, and that needs to be an overarching, that's our overarching goal. I think it's better for everyone, if Iran doesn't have a nuclear weapon, you should then try to find ways to bring their ballistic missiles, the other elements of their national power that they value very highly under some form of control. And you're right, they have proven extremely resistant to that up until this time.

BANKS: I appreciate that candidness. The Center for Strategic and International Studies reported on August 10, 2021, that Iran possesses the largest and most diverse missile arsenal in the Middle East and is a major hub for weapons proliferation. If some form of the JCPOA is restored, how do you expect Iran to behave regarding missile proliferation amongst partner and proxy groups?

MCKENZIE: Based on past behavior, I would expect not much modification in that behavior.

BANKS: And can you tell us specifically how CENTCOM is prepared to deal with that.

MCKENZIE: So, we work to prevent their success, their successful attacks by working with our partners for integrated air and missile defense across the (inaudible). By enhancing the capabilities of all our partners air defense, air defenses, in fact, and that's the best way to do it. I

would also argue that Iran knows that if they strike us, we're prepared to respond very powerfully if need be. So we attempt to achieve deterrence. And that has largely worked over the past couple of years.

You know, I note the attack last weekend, but let me emphasize again, that attack was actually not directed at us.

BANKS: Understood. General as one of his first foreign policy initiatives, President Biden delisted the Iran backed Houthi rebels in Yemen as a foreign terrorist -- foreign terrorist organization. But instead of de-escalating tension, the Houthis doubled their attacks on Saudi Arabia in 2021 and occupy the U.S. embassy compound (inaudible) and took the local staff hostage. In late 2021, in early 2022, the Houthis also attack UAE three times killing three people. In the way the Houthis have conducted themselves General, do you think that that the Houthis are terrorist?

MCKENZIE: I would defer to policy Ms. Baker for discussion about that the delisting decision, but I can tell you from an operational military perspective, they continue to wage war and their neighbors both Saudi Arabia and UAE and they wage irresponsible reckless war without regard for casualties.

BANKS: I understand as well that you would probably defer, as I asked: Why do you think the Iran backed Houthi is increased hostility since the Biden administration delisted them as a foreign terrorist organization?

MCKENZIE: I'm sorry. Could you say that again, please?

BANKS: Why do you think that the Iran backed Houthi is increased their hostility after the Biden administration delisted them as a foreign terrorist organization?

MCKENZIE: I think they still -- I think the Houthi still believe there's a military means to achieve their end. I don't believe they're right in that but doesn't matter what I think it's what they think.

BANKS: How does CENTCOM plan to address the Houthi behavior moving forward?

MCKENZIE: So we have worked closely with both our UAE partners in the wake of this most recent attack. We sent fifth generation fighters to UAE, we moved a ballistic missile defense capable destroyer to the vicinity of UAE. We've conducted refueling of UAE fighters that are flying combat air patrol, and we shared intelligence with UAE on that. So we've done some very discreet measurable things to help our partners in UAE.

BANKS: I got 30 seconds left. Ms. Baker, why did the Biden administration delist the Houthi his foreign terrorist organization?

BAKER: Congressman, you know, I think no one in the administration, certainly no one in the department takes lightly the threat that the Houthis pose in the region. And as General McKenzie

said, we are attempting to get after that problem. And we are providing any number of avenues of support both to the UAE and to the Saudis.

BANKS: This is outrageous. With that, I yield back.

SMITH: Thank you. Ms. Speier is recognized for five minutes.

SPEIER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General, McKenzie and Townsend we can't begin to thank you enough for your extraordinary service. But know that we are very grateful.

Let me start with the report that was just released a few days ago, detailing the significant failures in training and physical security at the U.S. cooperative security location in Kenya, where we lost a service member and two DOD contractors. It was alarming to read that there was inadequate focus on force protection, inadequate understanding of the threat, inadequate security force preparation and problems with mission command.

What has that taught us in terms of looking at other cooperative facilities in Africa as to our responsibility to harden them in terms of security?

TOWNSEND: Thanks, ma'am. Well, first, let me say we certainly regret the loss of the lives of our three Americans there at Manda Bay. We studied this situation in great detail over the last two years, I have applied the lessons learned across the African continent. All the things you mentioned that are in that report were all true, regretfully so. I think they go back -- they stem back to incorrect threat assessments. So, when commanders and leaders look at threat assessments, that's our first understanding, and that leads them down, can lead them down the wrong path.

So ...

SPEIER: So are saying now that all of our facilities in Africa have been hardened and are -- have greater protection? Or do we have some areas where we need to do more? And should you alert us to those.

TOWNSEND: All of our facilities have been improved since the attack at Manda Bay, we apply those lessons across all of them. However, we do have to continue that work. We've got to improve our foxhole every day. That work continues. And we do have requirements in that area.

SPEIER: Right. Thank you.

Ms. Baker, in the NDAA last year, an amendment that I authored to request the status of African women, excuse me, Afghan women and girls. Since the Taliban takeover was due March 1st, we haven't received it. When will we receive that?

BAKER: Congresswoman, I don't know the status of that specific report, but I would be glad to look into it and make sure we get it to you.

SPEIER: All right. Would you report back to the Committee then as to when we can expect that report?

BAKER: Yes, absolutely.

SPEIER: All right. Ms. Baker and General McKenzie, as far back as October, DOD said it would be making payments to the families of those who were killed on the August 29th drone attack. Can you tell us the status of those payments?

MCKENZIE: Ma'am those, we're moving forward with those payments. In the interagency, I can talk a little bit more about it in closed session, but CENTCOM stands ready to carry out instructions on how to conduct execute those payments once a decision is made.

SPEIER: Well, I thought we already made a decision to make payments to those families.

MCKENZIE: The modality of the payment and how that how it's actually going to be executed.

SPEIER: So, are you saying that there hasn't been any payments made to these families yet?

BAKER: Congresswoman, I just want to be a little careful about what we discuss in the public session, because we don't want to put these families at further risk. But we'd be happy to get you that information and talk about it in the closed session this afternoon. (Inaudible).

SPEIER: I just want to make sure that when we make a commitment, we deliver on it.

BAKER: We will deliver it.

SPEIER: (Inaudible) deliberate of not doing that. So, I have your word that we are going to deliver to those families.

BAKER: This has the attention of the highest of our leadership. Yes.

SPEIER: Can any of you tell us the extent of RT in Africa?

TOWNSEND: The extent of what ma'am, I didn't catch it.

SPEIER: Russia today.

TOWNSEND: All right. So I can't specifically talk about that particular media outlet. I can say this, Russia has extensive media engagement on the continent. And that is greatly facilitated by Yevgeny Prigozhin, the oligarch and his media arm in addition to you know, he has the Wagner mercenaries. But he's got a media arm that does that.

SPEIER: You know, I do think our committee has to take very seriously the impact of RT around the world. I just came back from Latin America, where not only is it pervasive, and ubiquitous, it is perceived to be objective. It is perceived to be just a legitimate TV network. And ...

SMITH: Gentlelady's time has expired. She makes an outstanding point, however, on the need to engage ...

SPEIER: I yield back.

SMITH: ... in the information warfare.

Mr. Gaetz is recognized for five minutes.

GAETZ: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I completely concur with my colleague regarding the risk that RT poses, and it seems to appear more legitimate and objective when members of Congress go on RT. And so, I associate myself with the gentlelady's comments, and perhaps she could share them with the gentleman from California who chairs the Intelligence Committee, who I've seen on RT talking about legislation, giving them credibility.

Ms. Baker ...

SPEIER: (Inaudible) yield?

GAETZ: I only have a few moments, but I'd love to chat with you about it further.

Ms. Baker, you said in response to Congresswoman Bice's questions, we've heard Israel's concerns about the JCPOA. What are they?

BAKER: Congressman, I think Israel remains concerned as do we all about Iran's malign activity in the region beyond its nuclear program. And that's something that we discuss with them regularly.

GAETZ: So their concern is a better resource to Iran, whether through sanctions relief, or cash payments, would be more capable in taking action against Israel. Does that ceramizer (ph)?

BAKER: Congressman, that is my understanding. Yes.

GAETZ: And can we learn anything about whether or not cash payments are on the table as part of a renewed JCPOA?

BAKER: Congressman, I'm not able to discuss the details of the agreement only because there is no agreement that has been reached at this point. I think there has been progress made toward an agreement. But of course, the issues that are remaining are some of the most complex. So I -- you know ...

GAETZ: I understand that in a negotiation there, you know, nothing is settled until everything is settled.

BAKER: Exactly.

GAETZ: But there are contours of an agreement as we get closer to it. And since the administration has been working on an Iran deal, I was wondering whether or not we could take off the table, infusions of cash. Because when I asked General McKenzie some years ago, whether or not the cash payments that the Obama administration permitted to Iran increase that very malign activity that Israel is concerned about, that we're concerned about, his answer was that that there was more malign activity following the last JCPOA.

BAKER: Again, Congressman, I understand the concern. I'm just not able to discuss specifics of the agreement that's being negotiated by the State Department and ...

GAETZ: So you're not in position to be able to say the cash payments are off today?

BAKER: I'm not in a position to be able to discuss the specifics of the agreement in any form.

GAETZ: General Townsend, is Vladimir Putin bringing African mercenaries to the fight in Ukraine?

TOWNSEND: I've heard those reports. We haven't seen that yet. We're watching for that very closely. However, I do believe they are bringing Wagner fighters from Africa to Ukraine.

GAETZ: And General McKenzie, have you seen Vladimir Putin successfully bring Syrian mercenaries to the fight in Ukraine?

MCKENZIE: Not yet. We watch that closely. I can't say one or two people haven't gone, but we haven't seen any systemic movement.

GAETZ: Great. I'll yield the remainder of my time to my Florida colleague, Mr. Franklin.

FRANKLIN: Thank you, Mr. Waltz.

General, in your testimony, and throughout your statements -- I'm sorry, General McKenzie. In your written testimony here today and -- and throughout the questioning, you made it clear that you consider Iran to be the biggest threat to stability in the CENTCOM AOR. During my travels throughout the region, and most recently in Israel two weeks ago, the recurring theme is the malign influence of Iran's proxies. You also spoke those in your -- in your testimony. Do you consider the IRGC to be one of the drivers and facilitators of these proxies?

MCKENZIE: The IRGC and its elite element, the Quds Force, are absolutely at the very heart of these activities.

FRANKLIN: OK, sir. It's been reported, and as recently as yesterday in the press, that the Biden administration is considering delisting the IRGC as a terror organization. I know that decision involves a lot of factors that are beyond your lane, but -- but strictly on your military advice; do you think that would be a good idea?

MCKENZIE: I'll have to -- I'll -- I'll defer on that one. I would not -- I think they certainly are very disruptive and dangerous in the region. That remains my best military advice, and we should treat them like that.

FRANKLIN: And if they are emboldened or strengthened, you think that would make them more formidable...

MCKENZIE: I think anything you do to embolden or strengthen them would have a negative effect across the region.

FRANKLIN: Sure, OK. Echoing some of my other colleagues here with respect to Israel, people we met with there were crystal clear that historically, whether it's been cash payments from the Obama administration or any activities that lead to putting money in the coffers of Iran, there's a direct correlation to the pace of intensity of attacks. When that money flows in there, is it your opinion that buying Iranian oil and lessening sanctions on Iran would lead to an increase in IRGC activity?

MCKENZIE: I think any I -- I think the Iranian economy as a whole is penetrated thoroughly by the IRGC. So, it's hard to -- it's hard to see where money flows inside the Iranian economy, and how much of it is used for legitimate reasons and how much of it is used for illegitimate reasons.

FRANKLIN: Roger that. Thank you, General. And I appreciate my colleague...

SMITH: I could just follow up on that point. So, we -- I forget exactly when, but we left the JCPOA in 2017-2018, something like that. So, we went right back in maximum sanctions. Would you say that Iranian malign activity since we left the JCPOA has increased?

MCKENZIE: I would, chairman.

SMITH: And that's the point. As you've said, the point of the JCPOA is to stop them from getting a nuclear weapon. It would appear that Iran's ability to do malign things in the region doesn't seem to be tied to the JCPOA. Because they are still incredibly active, even though we've been out of it for three years, four years now, so I just want to let members chew on that one.

Ms. Escobar is recognized for five minutes.

ESCOBAR: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I just want to piggyback a little bit on your -- the comment that you just made about the JCPOA. When you look at the evolution of Iran's malign activity, as you mentioned, we really do have to look at the withdrawal from the JCPOA instead of looking at just a narrow window; it's just like with our conversations on Afghanistan, we need to take a step back and look at the -- the broader historical movement. But anyhow, so thank you for making that point. And I just wanted to, you know, put an exclamation point on it.

Thank you so much, chairman, for this hearing and for making sure that that we have the opportunity to speak to -- to our panelists. And to our panelists, I just want to express my

gratitude to all of you for your service to our nation and for being here today to share your wisdom, and I look forward to the conversations in closed session as well.

I have the honor and privilege of representing El Paso, Texas, which is home to Fort Bliss, America's second-largest military installation and largest joint mobilization force generation installation in the army. And obviously, the regions of the world that you all are postured in have long been plagued by violence, instability, and war; in some cases, that has been furthered by us.

But as we look to the future and be especially beyond our withdrawal from Afghanistan, ahead of the challenges that we need to confront, not just today, but going forward, challenges posed by Iran, China, Russia, and the terrorist groups that they empower in the CENTCOM and AFRICOM areas of operation we've got to be strategic with our engagement and our posture in this ongoing battle, especially that battle between democracy and authoritarianism.

General McKenzie, I was just in Israel, and I had the opportunity to see for myself the warmer relations that exist between Israel and Arab states; it really is a source of great hope. And it's clear that the relationship has created some stability in the region. And I'm pleased that -- that CENTCOM under your leadership has embraced this new reality. But we know that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains a source of tremendous friction. And it's -- it's -- that -- that threat is always just over the horizon.

The fighting last May is a prime example of how that -- how the conflict in that region can very quickly escalate and become violent. Everyone there, and here, we are all concerned that the cycles of violence will only continue. But from an American national security perspective, do you believe that such rounds of violence have adversely impacted America's defense posture? And if so, is there a national security impetus for the United States to take an active role in improving the reality on the ground in order to help create the conditions needed to achieve a two-state solution? And if so, how?

MCKENZIE: Ma'am, the entry of Israel into the AOR was a significant historical event. And so, what it's done is it is sort of the operational expression of what began with the Abraham accords and other normalization activities that go forward. And so, the relationship that Israel is developing with its Arab neighbors is going to be profoundly significant in the years ahead.

Something that is an irritant to those good relationships is, of course, the -- the struggle with the Palestinians. And that's -- that's an irritant to the Arabs, and to all -- to many of them. And I think it's a significant factor; anything we could do to reduce that -- to reduce that as an irritant to those relationships would contribute to not only Israeli security, not only security across the region but ultimately our own security.

ESCOBAR: Thank you so much, and I have less than a minute left. But generally speaking, to what extent does U.S. security assistance and coordination allow our regional partners to better coordinate with each other and remove some of the regional security burdens that would otherwise fall more directly on American shoulders?

MCKENZIE: So, we have seen over the past year, year, and a half the opportunity for nations to share U.S. resources that one nation purchased, another nation had kneaded off, there are processes that we go through to allow that third -- what we call a third-party transfer. And we've seen that work successfully. The specifics I'd rather put into the closed session, but I'm prepared to talk about that.

But yes, it is -- it is something we have found valuable. I would simply tell you, we also struggle sometime -- sometimes with the United States bureaucracy when we attempt to do these moves sometimes, we're our own most significant source of friction when nations want to share things like that.

ESCOBAR: Thank you so much, General McKenzie.

I'm out of time, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

SMITH: Thank you.

The Chair recognizes Mr. Carl from Alabama.

CARL: Thank you, Mr. Chair; I appreciate it. I apologize for popping in and out. But as you will know, it's one of those days. Thank you to all of our speakers. It's -- I know it's time-consuming for you to come here and take time away. And but I appreciate you coming here. And Oorah, general, I raised a (ph) Marine myself, so I'm very proud of that.

General Townsend, you mentioned in your statement the growing Chinese influence and AVCON and their possible plans to establish a naval base on the western side of the continent, allowing the Chinese to do this project. How can we expand our naval capabilities to ensure that the Chinese do not have a dominant posture in this area?

TOWNSEND: Congressman, I would defer to the department in the Navy on how we might expand our naval capabilities there. The -- the naval capabilities that I have today are sufficient to do what AFRICOM must do. They are not essential to precluding what China does on the Atlantic coast of Africa. They will be essential if China is successful in gaining a base here; we would have to, in my view, we'd have to invest more naval presence there an activity to further protect America from a Chinese naval base on the Atlantic coast.

CARL: Thanks, sir. That's what I was after. I appreciate that. And I get -- I give my time back. That is the only question I have. Thank you.

SMITH: Thank you, Mr. Carl.

The Chair recognizes Mr. Scott from Georgia for five minutes.

SCOTT: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ma'am, gentlemen, I appreciate your service. I slipped out for a few minutes to meet with a man named David Beasley, who's the head of the World Food Programme. And I want to read to you one of his statements. We get 50 percent of our grains out of the Ukraine/Russia area; it's going to have a dramatic impact on food costs, shipping costs, oil, and fuel. This is a catastrophe on top of a catastrophe. He pointed out that Sri Lanka right now, and I'll just read the headline from Bloomberg, Shockwaves from the war in Ukraine threaten to swamp Sri Lanka.

In 2021, more than half of the grain for the U.N. World Food Programme came from Ukraine. It's a tremendous exporter of wheat, corn, sunflower oil. Russia and Ukraine combined account for 30 percent of the global wheat exports. As this invasion continues, it's more and more unlikely that Ukrainian farmers will be able to plant their crops or fertilize their crops or harvest their crops or export any of this food supply into the world. Developing countries in the Middle East and North Africa will feel the impact of this.

And my question is, have you considered the instability and unrest that will soon be taking place around the world and your respective AORs? How can we help alleviate the suffering and the instability that we believe will come from this? And what funding resources do you need to take on this challenge?

TOWNSEND: Thanks, Congressman. So, your point is exactly right about food instability, especially impacting Africa. In fact, just in the last day or so, the World Health Organization has declared a humanitarian disaster in Ethiopia as being the greatest one on the planet. So, food security or insecurity is a critical part of that on the African continent. I would say, as I said in my opening remarks, I think -- and in my written statement, I think it's imperative that we continue to fund USAID because they invest in a robust way on the African continent, it's probably one of the best investments America makes there. And I think there's going to be -- because of the point you just made, there's going to be more that's required.

MCKENZIE: Sir, I would -- I would note, two countries in particular in my AOR will be threatened one in Egypt, the others Jordan; both depend significantly on imports from -- from Ukraine, and they will face a growing food insufficiency as we go forward. I think, you know, the long-term solution is you'd like to find a regional way to actually supplant exporting food into the region. But that's a long-term solution. We are looking aggressively now for short-term solutions that will, you know, that will bring wheat and other foodstuffs in for the short term. And you're -- obviously, you're going to have to find other sources, other global sources rather than Ukraine and Russia. And that's going to be hard to do with a third of the market coming from those two areas.

This is a very pressing concern, and I appreciate you calling it out.

SCOTT: Ms. Baker?

BAKER: Congressman, I couldn't agree more with what -- what General McKenzie and Townsend have said. I would add to General McKenzie's list. Perhaps Yemen as being a country that will face an impact here. You know, what we're seeing now are the second and third-order consequences of Russia's unprovoked and illegal invasion of Ukraine. As General Townsend

said, USAID has the lead on this issue. We are strongly in support of USAID's efforts, and we'll continue to work with them in an interagency fashion.

SCOTT: I think what's happening around the world right now is because of the shortages and the anticipated shortages are that people who were receiving some are now receiving none. And a lot of people have had the assistance that we're getting through the World Food Programme cut in half. I think as many as 13 million people in Yemen actually receive some type of assistance through the World Food Programme. I just -- I can't emphasize to this committee and to the world enough, the devastation of what Vladimir Putin has done in the disruption around the world. And I think that the pain and the suffering that that individual has caused is only -- is only now beginning to be felt, and I think the world is going to -- going to be hurting for several years because of what he's done. And I just hope that we're paying attention to the potential civil unrest and instability that comes from the lack of global food supply because of what Vladimir Putin is doing.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield.

SMITH: Thank you.

Ms. Jacobs is recognized for five minutes.

JACOBS: Well, thank you so much, and thank you to our witnesses. It's great to see you all again.

I first wanted to ask you, General Townsend, in recent reporting, brought to light U.S. support to the rapid intervention battalion in Cameroon under the 127 Echo program. The rapid intervention battalion has been repeatedly implicated in human rights abuses. So, why was U.S. support to the rapid intervention battalion not blocked on human rights grounds? What steps is AFRICOM taking to ensure that any partner forces supported under Section 127 Echo have not committed gross violations of human rights? And wouldn't one way to prevent this in the future be to Subject 127 Echo to the same kinds of Leahy vetting standards we use for nearly every other security assistance program?

TOWNSEND: So, there was an Amnesty International, I think, report in 2017 that brought this to light; that -- that caused the department and AFRICOM to look closely at our support, our engagement with the rapid intervention battalion in Cameroon. In 2019, our relationship was ended with that element. In fact, we've drawn down pretty much in 2019, and by early 2020, we ended all of our engagement with Cameroon. We are starting to reengage there on a very selected basis with some, a few programs, but not with the rapid intervention battalion. And we do go through extensive vetting with all of our program's training programs on the continent to include the 127 Echo program.

JACOBS: OK, thank you.

Ms. Baker, nice to see you. Recent years have seen U.S.-trained officers in Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, Mauritania, and the Gambia overthrow national governments and military coups. Many

of these countries had issues with gross human rights violations in the past, particularly Burkina Faso and Mali, and lacked robust security sector governance and democratic progress that made this kind of challenge, frankly, predictable.

On February 4, I, along with Chairman Meeks, sent a letter to President Biden, Secretary Blinken, and Secretary Austin on our strategy in Sahel (ph) and requested that the administration evaluate its security sector assistance and other efforts over the last 15 years to assess their efficacy and areas for improvement. And I look forward to this briefing and hope we can work together on this going forward. But how have these developments impacted DOD's thinking on which Sahelian (ph) and West African militaries we provide security assistance to?

BAKER: Thank you, congressman, and thank you for the question. I should note just upfront that we do have security assistance restrictions as a result, as he said, of the of the recent coups in both Burkina Faso, Mali, and also a Guinea. So, for starters, that is in place.

As you know, we work closely with the State Department to ensure that we are vetting all security assistance partners in compliance with U.S. law. With local screening biometrics as it's required, there's always more that we can do in this space. And so, we'll look forward to getting you a briefing on what we're -- what we're working on.

JACOBS: OK, thank you. Frankly, I think some of these challenges with the folks we trade were a bit predictable. So, I want to make sure we're going beyond just the immediate vetting to make sure we're contributing to the broader democratic governance of our partner countries.

BAKER: Absolutely. And I just say, as General Townsend has said, one of our focuses in AFRICOM AOR, in particular, is that institutional capacity building that will help us we hope to move beyond these kinds of incidents.

JACOBS: Great.

And General McKenzie, the DOD has significantly undercounted civilian casualties compared to numbers provided by credible independent organizations, despite the fact that these organizations undertake interviews, site visits, and other measures that DOD does not generally have.

Additionally, recent New York Times reporting found that DOD prematurely dismissed many civilian casualty reports at the assessment phase without doing basic due diligence, like basic Internet searches or searching in Arabic instead of only in English.

And earlier this week, I, along with my colleagues, sent a letter to DOD urging it to take steps on preventing and mitigating civilian casualties moving -- moving forward, as CENTCOM implements changes and procedures for tracking, assessing, and investigating civilian harm will CENTCOM revisit the many past cases that appear to have been prematurely dismissed? And going forward, what changes do you believe need to be made?

MCKENZIE: I'll begin by saying nobody wearing the uniform of the United States is interested in killing an innocent person. We work very hard to minimize that. But the battlefield is a deadly

and dangerous place. And we have made mistakes. And yes, we have killed innocent people. And when we can -- we have tried very hard to mitigate that; as you know, the Secretary has undertaken a large, comprehensive, exhaustive, and high energy project to further shape the efforts of the department. And we're full participants in that going forward.

I will tell you, in the interim, based on various reports that have been issued, we have undertaken 10 discrete actions within U.S. central command that will support the larger effort, but we're not waiting on that to actually happen. And I will be happy to send those 10 things over so that you can examine them. But -- but -- but the Secretary is seized with this his energy as pumpable, visible, and we're moving forward on it.

JACOBS: Thank you. We appreciate the Secretary's efforts. And we'll look forward to that briefing.

Mr. Chair, I yield back.

SMITH: The gentlelady's time has expired.

Mr. Franklin is recognized for five minutes.

FRANKLIN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I had a couple more questions that I didn't quite get to before.

And again, back to General McKenzie, as Chairman Smith had noted, Iranian terror activity has been significant whether there's a JCPOA in place or not. I understand that whether it's Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, the Houthis in Yemen, the code forces in Iraq, the common denominator is the neighborhood bully. And I hate to use that expression because it's obviously a lot more significant than that. But they're the bad guys. They're the bad actor in the neighborhood. They're the ones that want to destabilize everything.

I hate to ask this -- I wouldn't normally ask this question. But because I understand your -- your place to provide advice and counsel to the administration, but -- but based on the way things unfolded in Afghanistan, and knowing now, the questions we were asking, and we're getting answers to before things are coming out that there was a lot of advice provided by the Pentagon that was not heeded by the administration.

So, before we get this -- this treaty that the administration seems really bent on getting back into -- into place, I think it's really essential that the details are discussed. Has the White House engaged you for your regional security expertise and the negotiation process of this Iran deal?

MCKENZIE: So, my -- the person I engage with is the Secretary of Defense and Policy, and have a constant dialogue with the Secretary on all issues within the CENTCOM AOR.

FRANKLIN: And I understand the Secretary has got a lot on his plate, but where he's getting his primary source of the boots on the ground feedback is going to be from you.

MCKENZIE: I think he gets it from me. I think he gets it from policy and, you know, a variety, a variety of sources.

FRANKLIN: OK, so my concern is what we're seeing on the press out there in the press of what may be coming out, delisting IRGC buying Iranian oil, those from what you've told us here would not be in alignment with your advice on what's best from a military perspective. And I don't -- I don't expect you to comment on that.

But it's either that or -- that, or they're not asking for your advice at all. And I find either of those to be very concerning. And we're going to watch very closely on how this treaty develops.

But I thank you all. And I would -- I -- I'm assuming that this will be the last time the two of you testified before us. But I want to thank you, as a former military member, for your decades of service, it's a lot of hard work and not very gratifying a lot of times, but your nation appreciates your work.

And I yield back.

SMITH: Thank you very much.

I'd just like to clarify the last answer. General McKenzie said he is speaking to Secretary Austin and that -- that's the chain of command here. The White House is not ignoring the Department of Defense's opinion on this. They are speaking with Secretary Austin, who was speaking to his people. And that's where the information goes back.

And I will -- the larger point is it's -- you know, we have civilian control the military for a reason. You know, the President is ultimately the one who has to make decisions. If we want to just do whatever the military told us, we wouldn't have civilians control the military.

You take the advice, you process it, you make the best decision you can, and that's what they're trying to do.

BAKER: And, Mr. Chairman, if I could, I do just want to clarify that both the chairman and the Secretary, I have had opportunities to provide that advice to the President and to offer their recommendations.

SMITH: OK. Thank you. I appreciate that clarification.

Mr. Gallagher is recognized for five minutes.

GALLAGHER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Baker, your testimony references the emerging concept of integrated deterrence multiple times. You said the department would continue to lean forward in strengthening multilateral security cooperation in order to strengthen integrated deterrence.

And to address threats, particularly those emanating from Iran later on, you say the integrated deterrence means creating advantages for ourselves, our partners, and our allies. While creating dilemmas for our competitors. I'd like to talk a little bit about the dilemmas you envision under integrated deterrence.

I know this is the CENTCOM hearing, but I wanted to ask quickly about Russia. Your portfolio is obviously very vast. Would it be a fair characterization of the administration's policy that sanctions are designed to deny the Russian government resources they would otherwise have available in order to punish their behavior?

BAKER: Congressman, I would say that the sanctions that the U.S. lead and that are not only U.S. own, but -- but multinational at this point are designed to impose consequences on Russia for its illegal invasion of Ukraine.

GALLAGHER: So, that's a yes to punish their behavior. And by punishing Russian behavior, are we are creating dilemmas, as you put it, or at least costs for the Russians? Right? Cost and position?

BAKER: Yeah, Congressman.

GALLAGHER: So, under the same logic, if another actor, say China, provided the Russian government with funding to help them evade sanctions, that would in a sense, create an advantage for Russia in the -- in the sense that it would mitigate some of the costs we impose via sanctions, right?

BAKER: Congressman, yes, and we're having a conversation with China about our concerns in that regard.

GALLAGHER: I think this is a very important point, not only because as we evaluate whether China increases its support to Russia, but to be clear if our adversaries have access to more resources, that creates an advantage for them. And if our adversaries have more resources, and are more capable, that creates dilemmas for ourselves and for our allies.

And I bring this all up because I think it's a self-evident point that's getting lost in the shuffle, that policies that give our enemies more resources give them an advantage, and by the administration's own admission, undermine its vision, such as it exists of integrated deterrence.

And I bring this up because, as my colleague, Mr. Luria, brought up before, we may be days before according to some days away, according to some reports, from signing a deal with Iran, which will, in any scenario, provide a massive windfall to the tune of billions of dollars to the world's primary state sponsor of terrorism. And everything else aside, indications are that this deal will provide unprecedented sanctions relief well outside the scope of its nuclear program, to the Iranian government, including from terrorism-related sanctions.

And I don't think you have to be an opponent of the original JCPOA to understand that this makes no sense. Just take the administration's own words at face value. Their strategy calls for

creating advantages for our allies and dilemmas for our adversaries. But this deal, by providing massive resources to our primary adversary in the Middle East, will create dilemmas for us and provide advantages to our foremost enemy.

And just a quick question on that point, to your knowledge, is the Central Bank of Iran still financing terrorism?

BAKER: Congressman, that's a question I'd have to defer to Treasury and others.

GALLAGHER: OK. I've asked this question in other committees have asked it to the CIA director. It's a matter of public record, the Treasury Department has put a -- it's not -- it's not -- doesn't take arcane or exquisite intelligence to -- to know the answer, but we'll take it back.

I guess since you responded to an earlier question from my colleague, Mr. Carl, I believe that the NDS is now being delayed because of the crisis in Ukraine. Is that correct?

BAKER: Congressman, I wouldn't say it's being delayed because of the crisis in Ukraine. It is -- it is in final coordination, and we hope to have it to you soon.

GALLAGHER: OK. Are you rethinking any of the assumptions underlying the NDS as a result of Ukraine? Or do you see it as a validation of integrated deterrence?

BAKER: Congressman, we believe that this strategy, in fact, took into consideration some of the behavior that we've now seen Russia exhibit and that it's resilient to what we're seeing from the Russians at this time.

GALLAGHER: So, do you believe integrated deterrence succeeded in the case of Russia, Ukraine?

BAKER: I think what you're seeing right now is integrated deterrence in action bringing together the sanctions, the allies, and the partners...

GALLAGHER: I have seven seconds. But what you're effectively saying is your entire theory of deterrence requires on a country getting invaded and pillaged in order to galvanize the west into action. And I just don't want to put our eggs in that basket.

I'm out of time.

SMITH: Thank you. I appreciate it.

I will point out we -- we had sanctioned many nations long before they invaded another country, certainly. We had sanctions against Russia; we had sanctions -- we have sanctions against Iran now. And I think the -- the central dilemma that this administration is trying to wrestle with is we also don't want Iran to get a nuclear weapon. And that's kind of the trade-off on that, that we're trying to go through.

And I have not seen any other reasonable plan other than negotiating with Iran for how we stop them from getting a nuclear weapon. Now, the details of that negotiation obviously matter: what are we giving up? What are we getting? But we can't act like for no apparent reason whatsoever, we're just giving Iran sanctions relief, so they can engage in more mischief.

No, there's a very, very, very big reason why we're engaged in these negotiations, and that's we don't want him to have a nuclear weapon. Now, you debate whether or not we're going to get there on that, but I think that's worth at least throwing in there into that conversation and discussion.

We have no further requests for time. I want to thank you all for your testimony. We'll see you in a couple of hours on the classified side. And with that, we are adjourned.

END